

Study Guide on Plato's *Gorgias* (Part I: 447a – 481b)

What is oratory? What is oratory (or “rhetoric”) about? What kind of persuasion is it? (454c¹)

- What account of oratory does Gorgias give (453a)?
- How does Socrates respond to it (453b ff.)?
- How does Gorgias answer this response (454b)?

Why does Socrates claim that oratory is “supernatural” (456a)? Does he mean that it is superhuman? Does he mean that it is marvelous?

Gorgias claims that oratory “encompasses and subordinates to itself just about everything that can be accomplished” (456a-b). Does he give sufficient evidence for this? Is the orator truly more powerful than the doctor?

Consider the claim that orators should use oratory justly, but the teacher cannot be blamed if they do not (457a–c). Is this a sufficient reply to those who criticize teachers of oratory on the grounds of enabling injustice to be done?

Why does Socrates claim that Gorgias’ position is inconsistent (457e)?

Socrates issues a string of questions about the orator at 459d–e. What is his purpose here?

Why is it necessary to know the just and unjust? Why does the orator need this knowledge (460a)? Why is the orator “incapable of using oratory unjustly and of being willing to do what’s unjust” (461a–b)?

Analyze Socrates’ view of oratory. What does he seem to think it is? Consider:

- He denies that it is an art on account of what it is ordered to.
- Oratory as a knack for producing gratification and pleasure (462c).
- No account of the cause (465a).

At 473a, Polus exclaims, “What an absurd position you’re trying to maintain, Socrates!”

- What is the position, and why does Polus think it absurd?
- How does Socrates try to prove that his argument is not absurd?

At 475c, why does Polus concede that it’s worse to do what is shameful than to suffer what is shameful? Once he admits this, how does Socrates proceed?

¹ John M. Cooper, editor. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997.



Why does Socrates need to establish the principle that “in whatever way the thing acting upon something acts upon it, the thing acted upon is acted upon in just that way” (476d)?



Study Guide on Plato's *Gorgias* (Part II: 481b – 527e)

What is the crux of Callicles' position? Where does he begin? Trace the argument that he gives for his position.

Are law and nature opposed (483a–b¹)? What exactly does this claim mean? What is “natural” (483d, 488b ff.)?

Beginning with the distinction between natural and conventional justice, trace out the argument that virtue is pleasure.

- Why is that distinction a good starting point for the argument?
- What exactly is meant by “natural justice”?

For Callicles, what is the ultimate good (492a–e)?

Why does the dialogue end in the way that it does (527a ff.)? What is Socrates doing? Does the ending undercut the entire philosophic account?

Is Socrates trying to convince Callicles? If not, then what is he trying to do? Consider:

- “I’m not really persuaded by you . . . ” (513c–d).
- Why does Socrates keep going?

Does Socrates still need to unfold his position?

Is Callicles the principal audience?

Is oratory the central issue at stake? Review the following:

- Socrates practices true political art (521d).
- The unjust soul is the ultimate of all bad things (522e).
- Oratory is supposed to be used to support what is just (503a, 508c).
- Of prime importance is *the way to live* (500c).

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Augustine’s *Confessions*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

¹ John M. Cooper, editor. *Plato: Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co, 1997.

