Happiness and Freedom in Socrates and Callicles

Kristian Urstad

Callicles holds a desire-fulfilment conception of happiness; it is something like, that is, the continual satisfaction of desires that constitutes happiness for him. He claims that leading the happy life consists in having many desires, letting them grow as strong as possible and then being able to satisfy them (e.g. 491e, 494c). For Callicles, this life of maximum pursuit of desires consists in a kind of absolute freedom, where there is very little practice of restraint; happiness consists of luxury, unrestraint, and freedom (492b-c). Socrates develops his objections to Callicles’ life of freedom by appealing to two myths once told to him by a wise man. I draw out what I think are the two primary objections and consider to what extent they might be seen to damage Callicles’ position. I conclude that Callicles’ view on freedom can adequately meet one of Socrates’ objections but not the other.

Socrates’ Myth-Rejoinders

As mentioned, Socrates’ initial response to Callicles’ “life of freedom” proposal comes in the form of two myths he heard once (493aff). The myths are introduced on the heels of a crucial discussion about temperance, an important traditional Greek virtue. Socrates has just asked Callicles whether he takes an individual “ruling himself” to mean being temperate and self-mastering over the pleasures and desires in oneself (491e), and Callicles has responded by mocking such a view; self-control or self-mastery is for stupid people, he says. He goes on to state that a man cannot be happy if he’s enslaved to anyone at all, including himself (491e). Socrates clearly takes this, and the myths which follow, with the utmost seriousness, as he begs Callicles not to let up in any way, so that it may really become clear how one ought to live (492d).

A brief description of the two myths is in order. In the first one, Socrates speaks about those uninitiated ones in Hades who carry water into a leaky jar using a leaky sieve (where the sieve is meant to be the soul). And
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because they leak, he likens the souls of fools to sieves (493b-c). In the second, he tells of two men, each of whom has many jars. The jars belonging to one of them are sound and full (one with honey, another with milk, etc.). It is also supposed that the sources of each of these things are scarce and so attainable only with much toil. Now the one man, having filled up his jars, doesn’t pour anything more into them and so he can relax. As for the other man, he too has the resources that can be attained, though with difficulty, but his jars are perforated and rotten. And so he’s forced to continually fill them, all day round, or else he suffers frustration and pain (493d-494a).

In these myths, Socrates might be said to be putting forward two very general warnings to the individual immersed in the licentious life, namely, that his desires are going to be 1) insatiable and 2) disruptive. Let us henceforth refer to these as Socrates’ Insatiability Warning and Disruption Warning respectively. In regards to the former, he connects up the desires in the person living licentiously with leaky jars which are insatiable because they can never be filled (493b). He reiterates this in the second myth calling the jars of the intemperate man leaky (494a). Pertaining to his second Disruption Warning, Socrates likens the soul (in the first myth), which is presumed to be the agent of the licentious individual’s desires, to a sieve which is unable to retain anything due to the fact that it has succumb to thoughtlessness or unreliability and forgetfulness of purpose or untrustworthiness (493c). He says that the soul with these appetites in it is susceptible to persuasion and to swaying back and forth or general instability (493a).

Let us draw out some of the implications of Socrates’ two warnings and then of Callicles’ responses to them, beginning with the Insatiability Warning. Socrates paints a picture of the licentious individual as someone in a condition who is not able to procure satisfaction of his demanding desires since they are insatiable. Since immediately upon satisfaction of his desires, they begin anew, this individual finds himself constantly running around; he cannot keep up with his desires and so is tired and frustrated and therefore unhappy (493b-d). Socrates obviously thinks Callicles’ position makes him susceptible to
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this condition. He probably judges that Callicles’ desires are too ambitious or expansive, requiring an unfeasible or overly-demanding level of external resources to sustain them. Socrates’ implicit suggestion here seems to be that, since there might be a continual element of need or lack in the life he describes, Callicles’ policy of absolute freedom of desires is not able to secure self-sufficiency, nor, as a result, happiness. It seems clear that something like this is Socrates’ suggestion since directly upon completion of the second myth he asks Callicles to consider instead a life that is “adequately supplied and satisfied with the things that are present on each occasion.” (493c) For purposes of an important future distinction, let us call Socrates’ worries here about the insatiable life the External Self-Sufficiency Criterion. That is, one will be externally self-sufficient to the extent that one can adapt one’s desires to suit external goods or conditions. To be more precise, since external conditions can make one’s well-being insecure, i.e. one will be in need and hence not self-sufficient, one must be prepared to adapt or reduce one’s desires in ways that make their satisfaction securable.

Let us now turn to the implications of the Disruption Warning in which Socrates speaks about the bad effects on the soul which have these insatiable desires in it. These effects are characterized as a kind of disruption of stability and as a general susceptibility on the part of soul to their persuasion or control (493a-c). That Socrates means something like this when he speaks of these desires and their bad effects is perhaps reinforced by his earlier explication to Callicles about what it involves for someone, not to rule others, but to rule himself. It involves being “master of himself, ruling the pleasures and desires within (en) him.” (491d-e) Both the pairing of pleasures with desires and the fact that they need to be ruled, seems to point not simply to desires in general but to an especially insistent and perhaps irrational set, such as those typically associated with large cravings or lusts. Socrates then may be rejecting Callicles’ view in part because it allows freedom to all desires, including these potentially disruptive ones. The supposition is that the licentious individual like Callicles thinks he is free in his pursuit of such desires but once he exposes himself to
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them he may become subjugated to certain internal effects largely beyond his control. This, in my estimation, is a key moment in the discussion since in warning Callicles about the disruptive powers of certain desires on the soul, Socrates might be seen to be transferring the contrast between slavery and freedom from the outer into the inner world of the agent. So, slavery or, being “inadequately supplied” is not just produced from having extravagant desires dependent on all sorts of difficult external conditions—which is what the External Self-Sufficiency Criterion cautions against—but also from the effects on the soul of certain insatiable desires. Thus it might be said that complete freedom, according to Socrates, not only involves adapting or restraining desires to suit external circumstances (i.e. External Self-Sufficiency Criterion), but also avoiding the kinds of desires productive of internal disruption. Let us call the latter then the Internal Self-Sufficiency Criterion. That is, one will be internally self-sufficient to the extent that one abstains or is free from those desires productive of subjugating effects on the soul.

We might see a paradigmatic example in Socrates regarding this connection between freedom and avoidance of certain desires due to their bad internal effects in Xenophon’s Memorabilia. Socrates, in speaking to Xenophon after hearing that Critobulus had kissed Alcibiades’ good-looking boy, says of sensual passion, “Avoid it resolutely: it is not easy to control yourself once you meddle with that sort of thing.” (1.3.8, italics added) Socrates admonishes Critobulus for his imprudence and recklessness in daring to kiss the very attractive boy. Critobulus, Socrates claims, completely undermines the kind of power this kiss will have over him—he does not realize that he will lose his freedom and become a slave and end up doing all sorts of foolish things that not even a madman would care about (1.3.9-11). Socrates’ advice to Critobulus in regards to recovering from that kiss is to take off and spend a year abroad (1.3.13). Xenophon goes on to claim that Socrates had trained himself to avoid the fairest and most attractive people (1.3.14).

It should be noted that Socrates’ intimations here concerning the persuasive effects of certain desires are quite in line with the tradition of popular
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temperance at the time.\footnote{Helen North details this tradition in her book \textit{Sophrosyne}, 1966.} Part of the reason for this emphasis on the constant exercise of restraint or abstinence in the practice of pleasures had to do with their perceived power of \textit{subjugation}; one restrained oneself so as to avoid becoming \textit{enslaved} by the strength of one’s desires and pleasures. There have been many perceived forms of this subjugation; two such forms are particularly relevant here. First, there developed, from the late sixth century onward, a group of antitheses to temperance like madness, frenzy, drunkenness, \textit{etc}. That is, pleasures were to be regarded with much caution since if one was not temperate towards pleasures, then one was susceptible, in one form or another, to “losing oneself” to, or being “overcome” by, them -which, in turn, meant a loss of freedom. Both Socrates’ reference to a soul “swaying back and forth” due to the insatiable desires in it and his warning to Critobulus about becoming a “madman” from kissing the attractive youth might be viewed as representative of this particular form of subjugation.

Second, and closely connected to this, there has been perceived a further set of antitheses to temperance like folly, foolishness and irrationality. The dichotomy is such that if one was not acting temperately or orderly, then one was acting foolishly or imprudently in some way. Now the \textit{Gorgias} text is somewhat ambiguous on whether Socrates is specifically trying to exploit something like a lack of rational agency or prudence in Callicles’ position, however, he does appear, at the end of each myth, to set up a kind of exclusive disjunction between the \textit{orderly} life and the unrestrained or licentious one (493c4-d2, 494a). True to the antitheses presented by this tradition, he even calls the opposite of the temperate soul a senseless one (507a). Socrates then may be unconvinced of any integration between prudent, orderly living and the largely unrestrained pursuit of desires. He seems to think that his confident interlocutor’s commitment to resoluteness of purpose and planning for achievements (e.g. 491b) will, in some sense, be distorted by his licentious pursuits. Socrates’ reference to certain disruptive effects on the soul by certain
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insistent desires perhaps goes some way in explaining this distortion. That is, he may think that these effects will at times be such as to prove obstructive to Callicles’ more longer-term purposes and well-planned life.

Callicles With Regards to Socrates’ Insatiability Warning and External Self-Sufficiency Criterion

What might Callicles’ responses be to Socrates’ Insatiability Warning and to his subsequent implicit External Self-Sufficiency Criterion? Upon first consideration, the Insatiability Warning does not really constitute pertinent counsel for Callicles since it is precisely the element of the having of appetitive needs, the pleasure of the process of satisfying a need, that Callicles ascribes positive value to. Against Socrates, Callicles does not believe that people are rightly called happy who live in a permanent state of satisfaction; his reference to stones and corpses is sufficient to show that he does not think that people who are in need of nothing live well. Instead, he is adamant that,

…living pleasantly is this –in having as much as possible flowing in. (494b)

Insatiable desires then, far from producing only misery, are –due to the continual experiential element they generate –actually a primary source of pleasure and happiness. Happiness, in other words, is not some static state in

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Irwin, Plato’s Ethics, 1995, 107, thinks Socrates exploits Callicles’ lack of rational prudence by getting him to see that the coward may be more successful in maximizing pleasure than the brave man. As I suggest, I agree that Socrates may be cautioning Callicles about something like the importance of rational prudence, however, I do not think he does this in the way Irwin proposes. Irwin’s particular interpretation is, I think, overreaching. There is nothing explicit in the text that says Callicles’ objective is to maximize pleasure, nor is there any indication that Socrates, in making Callicles admit that the coward is as good a person as the brave man, is offering cowardice as a better rational strategy than bravery. For more on this see John Cooper’s Reason and Emotion, 1999, Chap. 2, Sect. XIII.
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which all want has been banished, but a constant process, an everlasting succession of wants and satisfactions requiring the largest possible inflow.

But Socrates might very well concede to this and yet nonetheless call attention to the aspect of pain, distress or physical hardship generally thought to accompany this continually-inflowing, insatiable life. After all, Socrates does presume that the life of the intemperate man in the myth, he who tries to keep his leaky jars full, is one which requires constant work, day and night –a sort of Sisyphian existence (493c-494a). The temperate man, on the other hand, having filled up his sound jars, needs to give no further thought to them and can relax and rest easy (493e). In effect then, Socrates probably sees the intemperate man as a fool since he has no rest from the pain of what he has foolishly set as his goal in life –to be continually winning for his desires what they require.

Now, Callicles clearly appears indifferent to this element of pain or distress Socrates is appealing to. And understandably so, since this is something he himself has already clearly recognized and accepted as part and parcel of his conception of the happy life. Callicles never says anywhere the happy man is he who experiences pleasures and no pains; rather, he knows very well that his objective of ‘having as much as possible flowing in’ demands a requisite amount of accompanying pain or distress. In fact, he explicitly acknowledges this when he tells Socrates that when one has “been filled up and experiences neither joy nor pain, that’s living like a stone… ” (494b, italics added) We might see Callicles here as identifying pleasure with satisfaction and pain with desire or need, since filled up, a man experiences neither pleasure nor pain (see also 496d). At the conceptual level of desire-satisfaction then, according to Callicles, the prospect of pleasure looks to be intimately connected to the experience of pain.3 Mirrored on a large scale, that is, applied to life as a whole, what Callicles appears to be saying is that if one does not live like a stone, but

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3 Socrates, in fact, conceives of pleasure in just this way, that is, as remedial, as assuaging a pain, or filling a lack, in the first of three arguments he presents to Callicles starting at 495c3. Callicles agrees fully with Socrates’ conception there –a further indication he himself holds to this view of pleasure.
instead, like himself, opts for a life full of desires, then, within that life, one cannot have pleasure without pain, that they will be present in perhaps somewhat equal proportions. This sort of mix is constitutive of the ideal Calliclean life –that is, where one is continually replenishing, and not simply replenished, where one is constantly emptying and filling, and not simply filled. Socrates’ calling attention to the presence of pain then is no real cause for concern according to Callicles and, in and of itself, constitutes no real objection to his conception of the happy life. That is, the mere fact that Callicles’ large appetitive life may be laborious and somewhat difficult to satisfy is in itself no argument against having it.

However, perhaps it might constitute an objection if Socrates means to be raising it on hedonistic grounds. That is, it might be part of Socrates’ point here to try to show Callicles how his remedial conception of pleasure is wrapped up with counter-balancing pain. That is, Socrates may think that in order to maximize his pleasure, Callicles has to maximize the pain or distress which the pleasure is to remedy. But this counter-balancing pain or distress for a hedonist is of course bad. So, Socrates might be implying, the position Callicles appears to hold is a jumbled or self-defeating one.

Yet, although Callicles holds a desire-satisfaction conception of pleasure, where he seems to identify pain with need or lack and pleasure with satisfaction, he shows absolutely no concern about the admixture of pain affecting the net hedonic magnitude of the pleasure overall. Of course, one need not be sensitive to the antecedent pain of each particular desire in order to be a hedonist concerned with maximizing pleasure considered over one’s life as a whole. But even here, that is, at the more long-term level, Callicles –against the more popular interpretation of him\(^4\)– never says anywhere that his conception of happiness is that the more pleasures a man experiences and the fewer pains, the

\(^4\) Santas’ description is representative of this interpretation: “(Callicles’) conception of happiness is that the happy man is he who experiences pleasures and no pains, and that the more pleasures a man experiences and the more intensely and frequently he experiences them, and the fewer pains, the happier he is.” (Socrates, 1979, 257)
happier he is. Callicles, that is, never indicates that he is in any way concerned with keeping down the pains in proportion to the pleasures. Moreover, if he were some kind of maximizing hedonist we might perhaps expect him to say something similar to what the Athenian does in the *Laws* about matters of choice. There, in a description of a life closely resembling Callicles’, the Athenian says that when faced with a choice of two situations, both in which pleasures and pains come frequently and with great intensity, one must weigh them and choose the one, however little it may be, with pleasure predominating (733c). Yet, again, Callicles never talks like this. Now of course nothing here is incompatible with Callicles holding a hedonist position. Certainly the presence of pains, or a large quantity of them, or the accumulation of great, severe pains, are all consistent with a maximizing hedonism provided that the intent is for an overall surplus of pleasure over pain. However, the only point here is that this sort of pleasure-maximizing is never made pronounced by Callicles; there is no sign of any attention being paid to Bentham-like variables such as the intensity and duration of pleasures nor is there anything suggesting a maximizing model’s usual accompanying weighing and measuring. And this, combined with the possibility that the happy life for him may be one which comes somewhat close to having roughly the same proportion of pain as pleasure, might suggest to us that is not pleasure *per se*, but something much broader and vaguer that stands as the ultimate ideal for Callicles. One, that is, which takes as its primary end the cultivation of a life in which there is an everlasting succession of wants and satisfactions, where no further discriminations are made.

In any case, perhaps Socrates’ point about the insatiable man in the myth is not that he must be forced to experience some pain or distress or even counter-balancing amounts of it, but that the hard life he chooses for himself will inevitably cause him to have his desires frustrated, and so he will not be self-sufficient and thus happy. In other words, the man in the myth will not be living the kind of life where, as Socrates says, he will find himself “adequately supplied” so as to keep his desires satisfied.
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However, there seems to be little reason for thinking that this kind of life would pose any real legitimate threat to the invulnerability of the Calliclean figure’s happiness. There is little reason, that is, for thinking that the Calliclean individual could not, through his planning, resolution, bravery and execution, succeed in keeping his desires satisfied and feeling little frustration. And if this is the case, and he is able to procure the external resources necessary for his continually-occurring large and extravagant desires, Callicles seems to quite adequately meet Socrates’ External Self-Sufficiency Criterion. The notable difference would be that in his case, the fulfilment of this criterion would not involve lowering desires to the conditions available for satisfying them –like it perhaps does for Socrates, but by being able to successfully acquire and keep atop of the resources necessary for securing and satisfying numerous and large desires.

Callicles With Regards to Socrates’ Disruption Warning and Internal Self-Sufficiency Criterion

Socrates’ Disruption Warning and his subsequent implicit Internal Self-Sufficiency Criterion poses much more of a threat, I think, to Callicles’ position of absolute freedom than do his concerns about insatiability. To see why this is so we need first to get a better sense of how Callicles conceives of the notion of freedom he boasts of. As mentioned earlier, it is, to some extent, presupposed by Callicles that anyone who restrains themselves from what they want is in that sense a slave and therefore not really in complete control of getting what they want. For him, the freedom to pursue whatever desires one has just is to have that full control. Callicles views his largely unrestrained life as one

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5 Hobbes might be seen to lay out a similar sort of position. That is, he seems to recommend a policy of trying to gain and establish ever more power, so as to combat likely future dangers and liabilities to one’s satisfactions of one’s desires (see Leviathan, Chap. 11).
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predominantly maintained by such qualities as strength and courage and a kind of cunning intelligence (and probably also by a certain degree of external resources); he thinks he can get whatever he desires by simply enforcing himself in the ways suggested by these qualities. In effect, Callicles' freedom is a sort of bully's freedom. It is entirely representative of the more popular Greek concept of freedom, eleutheria, defined largely as control over others. The tyrant is typical of this, that is, as most free (eleutheros), for "eleutheria is manifested in ruling over others and in not submitting to the rule of others oneself." (Adkins, 1972)

In fact, freedom construed in this way is one of the central themes of the Gorgias dialogue. Not too far from the start, for example, when he is asked by Socrates what great good his craft is responsible for, Gorgias replies, "It is in reality the greatest good, Socrates, and is responsible for freedom for a man himself, and at the same time for rule over others in the city." (452d)

A further sign that Callicles is thinking along these lines is the blatant confusion he shows at Socrates' question concerning whether or not the superior man ought not only rule over others but also rule over himself, that is, those desires within him (491d). He three times asks Socrates what he means by this question, which is not surprising if, like suggested, it is only this more popular notion of freedom he has in mind.

Now, such a conception is, in one sense, no doubt sufficient to block Socrates' appeals to potential enslavement; since he has these strong, extroverted and exploitive qualities (and conceding the relative security of certain external resources), the Calliclean strong man will likely not find himself subjugated or

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6 Note that Callicles’ examples of natural right at 483d, all involve dominance by brute strength, though it is probably more accurate to understand strength overall for him in terms of some kind of political ingenuity or wisdom. For example, at 489c6 he explicitly denies it is strength he means by those who are superior and more powerful, and instead, he suggests later at 491c6 that “wisdom of ruling” is what he really intended all along.

7 Note, “freedom, if sufficiently aided, is both virtue and happiness.” (492c3-6)

8 Moral Values and Political Behaviour in Ancient Greece, 1972, 68, see also, 112. For allusions and references to the tyrant in Callicles' discussion see, among others, 483d ff. and 492b.
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even deterred too often. However, there is another sense in which Socrates' objections could be seen to hit their mark. This sense does not so much concern the external control that Callicles might be said to possess over others and the environment, but the internal control that he possesses over himself and his particular desires. In what sense is Callicles internally free from the effects of the pleasures and satisfactions involved in his excessive living? What are the inner resources by which his largely unrestrained life is maintained? Callicles' freedom, in this case, would not be said to be jeopardized by virtue of being dependent on others or on the external objects of his desires, but by the potentially subjugating effects (e.g. madness, irrationality) of certain insistent desires and pleasures in his soul. Of course he may believe he is free in pursuing such desires, but the supposition here is that, without the internal resources, the infection of his soul and disruption of his agency has already begun. Some years earlier, Democritus had insisted upon the important unification or symbiosis between certain external virtues or strengths and internal ones:

The brave man is superior not only to his enemies but also to pleasure. Some men are master of cities but slave to women.

(B214)

Callicles is clear on, and unashamedly confident about, the successful execution of these external qualities, but completely silent in showing any concern (let alone awareness) for the psychological element in this connection. But it seems he would need to say something here in order to deal adequately with Socrates' doubts about the viability of control and self-sufficiency in a life of mass indulgence filled with all sorts of (potentially) internally-subjugating pleasures. This is not to say Callicles is not right in challenging Socrates' conception of happiness as one where, like stones and corpses, nothing is needed and therefore there are no unsatisfied desires. That is, it is an entirely legitimate point to question Socrates' implicit inference from self-sufficiency and happiness to asceticism or a life of desire-restraint. However, it is not clear Callicles has thought his position fully through; apart from courage and planning, he remains
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silent in offering up any further conditions for the preservation of his life of “absolute freedom” of desires. In this respect then he has not really shown that he is able to meet Socrates’ Internal Self-Sufficiency Criterion.

Some Final Remarks

What is the significance of Callicles’ apparent silence with regards to Socrates’ Disruption Warning and Internal Self-Sufficiency Criterion? The matter is perhaps not so straightforward. On the one hand, Callicles probably senses that there is something to what Socrates has cautioned him about. After all, evasiveness, sullenness or simply dismissal or silence seem, throughout their discussion, to be some of Callicles’ characteristic ways out of dealing with Socrates’ more poignant objections to his views (e.g. 494d, 501d, 505c). Thus Callicles’ lack of response to (what I have taken to be) the cautionary message in Socrates’ myths might very well be seen as a signal on Callicles’ part that Socrates has hit upon a particular soft spot in his outlook.

On the other hand, there is also a sense in which Callicles does not really seem to be affected or persuaded by Socrates’ myth-rejoinders, and his silence is due to just this –lack of conviction. This is somewhat understandable since Socrates never really expresses his objections through arguments, but instead, by means of images. We might speculate as to why Plato has Socrates do it this way. Perhaps we are to understand Socrates as appealing to Callicles on his own ground, that is, as someone who is not guided by intellect alone, and who himself employs images to express certain doctrines (e.g. 492e). A more probable explanation however is that Plato himself, during the writing of the Gorgias, has not yet worked out this issue in great argumentative and substantive detail; or, if he has, thinks it requires too much of a detailed discussion of complex psychological matters to include in this dialogue. If this is right, then perhaps Plato intends the cautionary message in the myths (and Callicles’ silence with respect to it) as a kind of intimation only, signaling to the reader that a more full-scaled treatment of the issue is to come in a later work.
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This work is almost certainly the Republic. After all, the indications given by Plato in the Gorgias point in the direction that Callicles is to become a brazen tyrant, and in Book IX of the Republic, Plato has Socrates spend significant time describing the state of the tyrannical man. He speaks of the tyrant as someone who is “badly governed on the inside,” (579c) with a soul “full of slavery and unfreedom,” (577d) due to the acceptance or intrusion of certain insistent desires and pleasures, and powerful erotic drives (e.g. 571b ff., 572e ff.). In effect, these desires and pleasure infect the tyrant by filling him with a kind of internal madness (573b). All this surely recalls Socrates’ Disruption Warning to Callicles in the Gorgias. However, unlike the Gorgias, in the Republic Plato does have Socrates enter into an extremely detailed discussion of complex psychological material. The upshot of all this, as every reader of Plato knows, is the development of the tripartite and harmonious soul. This development surely picks up on or answers to, and provides a strong foundation for, the Internal Self-Sufficiency Criterion (e.g. in the healthy and well-developed soul the rational part feeds the appetitive part so it will be neither in want nor in surfeit and disturb the rational part with its excesses) (Rep. 571d-572a). Had Callicles also been privy to Socrates’ discussion later in the Republic perhaps he would have taken Socrates’ counsel and recommendation a bit more seriously.

University of Oslo, Norway

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9 See Aristotle’s Politics, Bk. 5, Chap.8, for a number of instances of rulers or princes being brought down by certain of their own passions and excesses.
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Bibliography


