PLATO'S GORGIAS AS A VINDICATION OF SOCRATIC EDUCATION

My aim in this paper is to suggest an approach to Plato's Gorgias, focusing especially on Socrates' conversations with Gorgias and Polus, that will highlight what I believe to be the dialogue's most significant theme: the justification of the life of the educator, as lived by Socrates. This is a theme about which it is particularly appropriate for us to reflect at this historical juncture, since the educational tradition sprung from Socrates is under increasingly severe attack in the contemporary academy. It behoves both the attackers and the defenders of this tradition, I would argue, to reconsider with care the problematic and thought-provoking origins of the Western enterprise of "liberal education."

But what concern is at the core of this enterprise, giving it focus and coherence and a standard of proportion? I think we must respond, the question, "how ought one (how ought I) to live?" This means that if or insofar as liberal education in its original, authentic sense becomes a truly serious preoccupation, it is because we aren't sure we know how we ought to live and, in addition, are genuinely open to the possibility that someone else, someone wiser, may provide either a fuller answer or a deeper understanding of our predicament.

Yet what can it mean to say that we aren't sure how to live? Haven't we all been brought up to know the difference between right and wrong in our personal lives? Don't we all begin, in the university, with a pretty elaborate understanding of what our forms of government or public life are dedicated to: human rights, economic growth fostering equality of opportunity, constitutional democracy under the rule of law, world peace among legitimate representative governments? Of course. But we are also aware that precisely these principles which we revere and treasure are attended with some serious difficulties.

I mention just one sort of fundamental difficulty. Our liberal political system exists not as an end in itself, but as a means for protecting and liberating the citizenry's quest for personal or even private happiness, especially through the unchecked pursuit of economic prosperity. Yet this political system requires men and women whom we call our "public servants," from whom we ask and expect devotion to
others', to our, welfare. Especially in the realms of defense and law enforcement, this devotion entails severe risks and sometimes great sacrifices. Can our liberal-democratic principles make intelligible the admirable motives that lead someone to devote his or her personal life, privacy, chances for prosperity and leisure and comfort, to the service of others and their obtaining personal prosperity and leisure and comfort? Speaking more generally, do our basic principles afford us an adequate understanding of the relative ranking or balance between personal liberty (or liberation), and duty, responsibility, or civic virtue?

It is when we begin to become aware of the weight of these and kindred grave questions that we begin to feel the compelling need for a study of the great books that articulate the original moral understanding underlying modern democracy, and for a study of the great books that articulate the older, competing, and possibly more adequate notions that this relatively modern democracy left behind or broke away from. This quest, and especially the second aspect of it, soon leads back to Socrates.

Socrates on the Defensive

Socrates' preoccupation with the question of how one ought to live, and more particularly with the question of the proper relation between personal liberation—which Socrates argues is to be found above all in philosophic inquiry—and social or civic responsibilities, is given a special vivacity by the fact that he winds up being tried and executed as an impious corrupter of the young. If we look into Aristophanes' Clouds, the satiric drama to which Socrates refers us in the Apology, we see more concretely what sort of life Socrates was charged or slandered with seducing the young into. It is a private or socially marginal life of endless scientific and philosophic enquiry into nature, which issues in no constructive civic action, but which entails the destructive abdication from and even debunking of civic and familial faiths and responsibilities. Moreover, Socrates is portrayed as disposing of and teaching a rhetorical skill which involves not merely technical expertise, but a kind of insight into morals and psychology that allows him to confound and elude crucial conventional restraints on the pursuit of personal gain at