Abstract: In this article, I argue that, in showing inconsistency of beliefs, Socratic elenchus is showing incompatibility of the desires those beliefs express. This thesis explains Socrates’ claim that, in refuting Callicles, he is also restraining his desires. The beliefs in question are about the best kind of life to lead; such beliefs express the second order desire to lead a life in which certain sorts of first order desires are satisfied. Socrates’ elenchus shows that Callicles is caught between two incompatible second order desires: a desire to lead of life of enormous pleasure and a desire to lead a life in which his love of honor is satisfied. Socrates does not succeed with Callicles because the way out of this dilemma depends on a type of desire not found in the moral psychology of the Gorgias, i.e., a desire whose satisfaction is pleasure unmixed with pain, described in Republic 583c-585e and Philebus 50e-52b.

Keywords: elenchus; consistency; belief; moral psychology; desire; pleasure.

Gregory Vlastos has given us an account of elenchus that continues to prove fruitful. If we see Socratic refutation through the lens of deductive logic, its shortcomings are evident. Refutation can achieve only so much; it shows the interlocutor an inconsistency in his beliefs. However, inconsistency by itself cannot show which of two inconsistent beliefs is true—if indeed either is true. This result is the one we seem to find in the Gorgias; Socrates leads Callicles to the point of recognizing an inconsistency in his set of beliefs. It is clear which of the two beliefs Socrates thinks is true — and thus which Callicles ought to accept and which he ought to reject. However, Calicles does not follow suit; he continues to resist the conclusion that Socrates holds out as the correct one. If Vlastos’ analysis is correct, Callicles is in an intellectual bind. He has recognized an inconsistency in his beliefs but he has no way to resolve it. Nothing in Socrates’ elenchus points to which of the two incompatible beliefs is true—if indeed either is true.¹ However, as we shall see, Callicles’ problem is not entirely a skeptical quandary—an inability to arrive at a further set of premises that will settle the issue by showing which of the two inconsistent beliefs is true. Rather, Callicles is invested in both beliefs and does not want to give up either. These beliefs embody his