

SOCRATES' ENCOUNTER WITH POLUS IN PLATO'S *GORGIAS*

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OF THOSE WITH WHOM SOCRATES DEBATES in the *Gorgias* Polus is the one most difficult to take seriously. Next to the other two chief characters in the dialogue Polus appears inconsequential. Gorgias is of course an eminent and renowned orator and sophist; if his reputation for great speech were not enough to deserve the earnest attention of Socrates (not to mention that of the small audience assembled), his age—he was about 80 at the time of this conversation—would have been. Callicles, though unknown apart from the vivid portrait of him in this dialogue, defends a view of “natural justice” and the successful life of hedonism which has earned him a place of some importance in the sophistic movement. Polus, by contrast, has little to commend him. He is portrayed by Plato as young, too eager, and so seemingly quite careless and naive in argument. Nor does he appear to have much of interest to say. Socrates frequently mocks him and he has found little sympathy among the commentators.

It is no part of my aim here to dispute the conventional view. I do wish to argue, however, that closer attention needs to be paid to some of the interchange between Socrates and Polus for the light it sheds on Plato's motives and tactics in designing a dialogue of this kind.¹ Generally, one might say that in this dialogue Plato wishes to establish the superiority of the life of virtue (as he understands it) over other lives. In particular he must defend the superiority of acting justly over the kind of successful hedonism and power-seeking defended by Callicles. Plato's success in making this case depends (in part at least) on showing Socrates' superiority

The following works will be cited by author's name alone: A. W. H. Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Oxford 1960); E. R. Dodds, *Plato's Gorgias* (Oxford 1959); K. J. Dover, *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle* (Oxford 1974); Terence Irwin, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford 1979); Charles H. Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*,” in J. Annas, ed., *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (Oxford 1983) 75–121; Gregory Vlastos, “Was Polus Refuted?,” *AJP* 88 (1967) 454–460.

¹Similar studies on related questions include E. L. Harrison, “Plato's Manipulation of Thrasymachus,” *Phoenix* 21 (1967) 27–39; C. N. Johnson, “Thrasymachan Justice: The Advantage of the Stronger,” *Durham University Journal* 48 (1984) 37–50; G. Klosko, “The Refutation of Callicles in Plato's *Gorgias*,” *G&R* NS 31 (1984) 126–139. What these studies argue in common is that Plato deliberately manipulated the exchanges between Socrates and various interlocutors in order to give Socrates an apparent victory that closer inspection reveals to be quite hollow. Similar also is Vlastos, who, however, believes that Plato's efforts were unconscious.

in speech and argument over others who are known as experts in speech. That is to say, the case for the just life would lose much of its persuasiveness if Socrates were not shown to be the better dialectician. Polus serves a role here. Like Euthyphro in the dialogue of that name, Polus is a preliminary to more important business; Socrates is able to warm up on him, in a manner of speaking. The ease with which Polus is broken also enables Socrates to give a dazzling display of his own eristical talents before the fateful encounter with Callicles.

But we need to ask whether the victory over Polus was fairly earned, or even whether it was a genuine victory.² There are elements in the exchange between Socrates and Polus that cause one to wonder. It is admitted: 1) that Polus concedes (in spite of himself) that his earlier views were mistaken; 2) that Callicles believes that Polus had been defeated (even if by a "verbal trick"); and 3) that Socrates appears to believe that he had made a successful argument against Polus to refute his views. Yet none of these concessions is decisive for determining whether Socrates may rightfully claim victory. Appearances may be deceiving. Socrates may have prevailed in the limited sense that his audience (including Polus himself) thinks he has won the verbal contest. But it is still possible that his victory is spurious: either he may have debated unfairly (as Callicles believed); or his own logic may be fallacious in ways that are not immediately apparent and that went unnoticed by his interlocutor and the audience; or both. These are the possibilities I wish to explore here.

POLUS VS. SOCRATES: THE VIEW OF CALLICLES

In the course of the interchange between Socrates and Polus (which is generally an attempt to discover what rhetoric is and for what it is useful) the two men turn to consider these two questions: 1) is it worse (κάκιον) to do wrong (ἀδικεῖν) or to suffer wrong (ἀδικεῖσθαι)?; and 2) is it worse to receive punishment for wrongdoing or not to receive it? (*Gorg.* 474b2–5). Polus adopts the view that it is worse to suffer wrong, and worse to be punished, and he believes this to be the view of everyone else as well. Socrates

²A "genuine victory" would seem to require both that the victory is fairly won and that it is free of fallacious reasoning. Vlastos 459 calls Socrates' a "hollow" victory. This opinion (as well as that of Dodds 30, n. 1, for whom Socrates' logic in the exchange with Polus is "transparently fallacious") must be contrasted with the view of Callicles, who accused Socrates of using "verbal tricks" to defeat his opponents. The latter did not quarrel with Socrates' logic, only with his methods; Vlastos and Dodds believe that the logic is defective in ways that are not at first obvious, and indeed, that were not perceived by Plato. Vlastos' argument, by focusing narrowly on the element of "pleasure" in Polus' definition of the "fair," is, I think, somewhat misdirected. Other criticisms of Vlastos' case are Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* 4 (Cambridge 1975) 311–312; and Kahn, especially 90–91. Adkins 266 finds Polus to represent "the muddleheadedness of ordinary values" at a time when values were undergoing transvaluation.

affirms just the opposite view: that it is worse to do wrong, worse to escape punishment, and that this is the view that everyone would adopt if properly enlightened. There follows a fairly typical elenchus, in the course of which Polus' earlier views are upset, causing him to reverse his position, at least partially.³ The Socratic argument emerges as the stronger.

There is one in the audience, however, who believes that the Socratic argument only appears stronger, but is in fact weaker, and is willing to say so. This is Callicles. He enters the discussion (481b6) by asking Chaerephon, another one present, whether Socrates is joking when he says that rhetoric is nearly useless. He suggests that Socrates has been teasing Polus. He then directs his statements to Socrates:

Tell me, Socrates, are we to take you as serious just now, or joking? For if you are serious and what you say is really true, must not the life of us human beings have been turned upside down, and must we not be doing quite the opposite, it seems, of what we ought to do?

In this query Callicles anticipates what he will go on to argue at length: that the Socratic argument has reversed the true order of things and that properly understanding the real order of things will require reversing the Socratic argument, turning Socrates on his head as it were.

Before giving a detailed account of his own views, however, Callicles wishes to expose the secret of Polus' undoing. Polus, he believes, had been tripped up by failing to say what he really believed: he was, in Callicles' words, "ashamed to say what he thought." While holding that suffering wrong was more evil than doing it, he was too ashamed to say that suffering wrong was also more disgraceful (αἰσχρὸν).⁴ This permitted Socrates, in Callicles' view, to exploit a "conventional" sense of the

³ As is often the case in the dramatic dialogues it is difficult to know how completely the Socratic position is embraced by his interlocutors; Thrasymachus and Callicles, for example, seem anything but convinced that Socrates has seriously damaged their original views. In the case of Polus, while he often responds to Socrates' questions with simple affirmations (ναί) or even stronger forms of assent (φημί, ἀνάγκη, etc.), on two crucial occasions he replies much more ambiguously: first, when Socrates concludes that doing wrong "has been found to be more evil (κάκιον)," Polus responds "it seems so" (ἔοικε: 475d4); and again, when Socrates derives the conclusion that escaping punishment is worse, Polus says only "apparently" (φαίνεται: 478e5). On the other hand, it is hard to escape the conclusion (pace C. Kauffman, "Enactment as Argument in the *Gorgias*," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 12 [1979] 114–129, at 118–119) that Polus has fundamentally been won over, at least temporarily, by Socrates' arguments: unlike Callicles, he voices no real protest, nor even hints at any, even when his strongest convictions have been overturned.

⁴ According to Callicles, Polus was ashamed (αἰσχυνθῆναι) to admit that suffering wrong is more disgraceful (αἰσχρὸν) (482d8–e2). The idea of shame is thus repeated: Polus was ashamed, and he believed suffering wrong is shameful. Polus, however, unlike sufferers of wrong, can conceal his shame, viz., by lying to Socrates. This point is important, for it brings in to particularly sharp focus an ambiguity in Socrates' whole line of questioning here: who is meant when Socrates asks whether an act is, e.g., good,

word "disgraceful," according to which what is disgraceful "by convention" (νόμῳ) is also "worse," and so to show that Polus really believes doing wrong is also "worse," just because it is "more disgraceful." This latter belief is obviously incompatible with Polus' earlier stated view that doing wrong is *not* worse; and so he could easily be shown to have fallen into self-contradiction.

If, however, Polus had not shrunk from stating his true opinion and had openly declared that suffering wrong was also more disgraceful (even if this had meant offending conventional morality), Socrates would have had no opening, at least on this question, for attacking Polus' position. At least this is what Callicles argues. Indeed, he goes further and accuses Socrates of manipulating Polus deliberately in order to defeat him, and he suggests that this is Socrates' regular practice. In particular Callicles asserts that Socrates regularly plays on an ambiguity that surrounds all moral notions, the question whether moral values are "by nature" (φύσει) or "by convention" (νόμῳ):

And this, look you, is the clever trick you have devised for our undoing in your discussions (λόγοι): when a man states anything according to convention you slip "according to nature" into your questions; and again if he means nature, you imply convention (483a2-4).

Socrates is perceived by Callicles as a verbal trickster, one who scores cheap victories by exploiting his opponents' public scruples and by plying the trade of verbal ambiguity to his own advantage. He calls Socrates a "true demagogue" (482c4-5), implying, ironically, that he is a master of the very art of rhetoric he condemns.⁵

Callicles' opinion of Socrates' tactics in debate may of course be disputed; Socrates' own view is that if there were any fault of conduct on his part "it is not an intentional error but due to my ignorance" (488a3-4). However that may be, Callicles does appear to be correct in asserting that Polus' wrong turn in the discussion came when he agreed that doing wrong was more disgraceful. It was this concession that permitted Socrates to develop the case

beneficial, shameful, etc. Does he mean the act is, e.g. good for the *doer* of the act, the *sufferer* of it, Polus, people in general, an "impartial spectator" (as Taylor argued), the *polis* (as Dodds maintained), etc.? I agree with Kahn 90-91 that one is generally permitted to fill in these ellipses as is appropriate in each case; sometimes Socrates has in mind the spectators of actions, sometimes the actors, sometimes (as in the cases of "the pleasant" and "the painful") actors and spectators alike. Shame, however, presents a special case, as I argue below; Polus' shame (if indeed Callicles is right about him) only makes sense if his own views are involved *and* if they are different from the views of people in general—i.e., suffering wrong is more shameful *in Polus' view*, and people in general think that doing wrong is more shameful. Cf. Adkins 175 ff. for the range of meaning of αἰσχρόν in Greek thought prior to Plato. καλός, αἰσχρός, and other terms of praise and blame in non-philosophic writers are discussed by Dover 70-73.

⁵Polus holds a similar opinion—cf. 461b3; Dodds 221-222.

(examined below) that what is more disgraceful can only be so by an excess of evil, and so to show that doing wrong must also be more evil (κάκιον). What is of greater interest for our present purposes, however, is Callicles' opinion that Polus was in fact defeated. Socrates may have relied on verbal tricks and other shady verbal tactics, but in the end he was victorious. This is Callicles' view. It is also the view of many commentators (whether or not they accept Callicles' belief that Socrates used questionable tactics).⁶ Yet this is precisely the view that I believe needs to be re-examined.

WHOSE EVIL AND WHOSE DISGRACE?

A necessary preliminary to an examination of the verbal exchange itself is a proper understanding of *who* is intended in the phrases "suffering wrong is worse" and "doing wrong is more disgraceful": worse *for whom*, more disgraceful *for whom*. There is a potential difficulty here for Socrates: if the subject of the "suffering" clause is different from the subject of the "doing" clause, then the conclusion that Socrates seeks (that to do wrong is worse) will not follow from his premises. More specifically, if the statement "suffering wrong is worse" could be shown to mean "worse for the *sufferer* of wrong," and the statement "doing wrong is more disgraceful" could be shown to mean "more disgraceful for the *doer*," then Polus would not be bound to conclude that "doing wrong is worse." He could legitimately argue that Socrates has changed subjects on him, and that what is true for a sufferer is not necessarily so for a doer. If two different subjects are involved (as described above), then Polus' position would be: doing wrong may indeed be worse for the *sufferer* without qualification, but not for the *doer*. From the standpoint of the doer, doing wrong is *not* worse, even if (what is admitted by Polus) it is more disgraceful.

Some commentators have detected just this defect in Socrates' cross-examination at this point.⁷ I think they are right to point to the inevitable

⁶E.g., Dodds 11, 249; Irwin 170; A. E. Taylor, *Plato, the Man and His Work*⁴ (London 1937) 114; P. Shorey, *What Plato Said* (Chicago 1933) 140; P. Friedländer, *Plato* 2 (tr. H. Meyerhoff, Princeton 1964) 257; Adkins 266–267. Vlastos believes: 1) that Socrates did not refute Polus' *argument* (even if Polus conceded defeat); 2) that Polus was tricked by a subtle shift in Socrates' line of questioning; and 3) that Plato "misjudged" the situation, believing Socrates' "victory" to have been genuine and fairly won.

⁷Kahn 91–92; G. X. Santas, *Socrates: Philosophy in Plato's Early Dialogues* (London 1979) 236–238; see also Vlastos 458 f.; and Irwin 157. The question here is one about *for whom* doing wrong is worse; the commentators are not all in accord. I believe, as I argue below, that the only one for whom "doing wrong is worse" is relevant is an actor who is confronted with a choice between doing wrong and (in this case) suffering wrong, i.e., a potential doer/sufferer of wrong. If Polus believes that "doing wrong is worse," he is weighing the question from the standpoint of himself as the actor, the potential doer/sufferer. The question of the shamefulness of certain actions is another question, as I show more fully below.

ambiguity that creeps into the argument when the subjects of the clauses are not specified. Still, I think that from Socrates' (and Polus') standpoint there was no ambiguity; and also that there was no logical error, at least on this issue. Both men are here thinking not about how some (unspecified) audience would regard the matter of doing and suffering wrong (for whom the question of the intended subject in each case would make a difference). Rather they are here posing and answering questions about a moral choice confronting a hypothetical agent who is considering *for himself* how he should act when confronted with two opposing options.⁸ Would such a person wish rather to *do* wrong or to *suffer* wrong? The debate between Socrates and Polus comes to a weighing of the factors that such a person might consider when deciding which option to choose. Obviously, different people will decide differently. But the reference—the “for whom”—in each case is always the same person, namely, this hypothetical actor, whoever that may be.

If Polus is made the hypothetical actor, the one confronting the moral choice, his public reasoning takes the following course:

1) Suffering wrong is worse than doing it (474c5–6). To Polus this means: if I were given the choice between doing and suffering wrong, I would choose doing wrong because suffering wrong would be worse in my opinion.

2) Doing wrong is more disgraceful than suffering it (474c7–8). To Polus this means: if I were given the choice between doing and suffering wrong I would choose suffering, because doing it would be more disgraceful in my opinion. (More disgraceful because, in part, *other people* regard it this way; but it is important here not to confuse Polus' *grounds* for his view with the view itself; I believe this is the confusion that underlies the detection by some scholars of spurious reasoning here.)

1) and 2) point to different life choices for Polus, depending upon which criterion of choice he employs. If he weighs the matter from the standpoint of “worse/better,” he will choose doing wrong; if he weighs it from the standpoint of “more/less disgraceful,” he will choose suffering.⁹ This is no contradiction. It simply (and lucidly) illustrates the dilemma that often confronts moral actors: the “right” course of action is often anything but

⁸Polus asks Socrates, “Would you prefer to suffer wrong rather than do it?” (469b12); this is a question of moral choice for a potential actor (rather than one of moral, aesthetic, or utilitarian judgments to be made by a spectator). The same may be said about 474b7 (“you would, it seems, rather suffer than do wrong?”); and 475e3–6 (“no one would prefer to do wrong rather than suffer it,” etc.).

⁹I assume in this and the next sections of this essay that Callicles is correct in detecting shame in Polus and hence concealment in his public statements. I defend this procedure below, 204 f. If this assumption is correct then there is no “latent contradiction” in his position (as Kahn 95, 117), but only the obvious inconsistency, brought out by Socrates, between what he believes and what he says.

clear-cut because there are often competing factors to weigh. If it is Polus' settled conviction that "suffering wrong is worse than doing it," this can only mean that, *on balance for him*, the factors weighing in favor of doing wrong (as against suffering wrong) outbalance those weighing in favor of suffering wrong (as against doing it).

One may wonder why Polus would weigh the factors in this way. I see no difficulty here. In any scheme of evaluation, in any weighing of competing factors, if *one* of those factors happens to be the "worse" or the "better," this one will be decisive in determining moral choice. Indeed, moral choice in general is ultimately reducible to a determination of just this question. Socrates' strategy in his cross-examination of Polus is to get him to admit that "doing wrong is worse." For it is inconceivable to Socrates, Polus, and nearly anyone else that someone would willingly choose an action that is "worse," no matter what else one may say in favor of doing such an action. The "worse" in our moral choices outweighs, or perhaps better cancels out, every other consideration.

In sum, the use of the elliptical expressions "doing wrong is more disgraceful" and "suffering wrong is worse" is no crime in this context. Such expressions could have been exploited by a devious debater to his own advantage, in ways that have been described in the literature (see note 7). But I do not believe that Socrates has done this. Both he and Polus approach the question of doing and suffering wrong from the standpoint of moral choice: how should one act when confronted with a certain choice? They both tacitly assume, therefore, that the ellipsis is to be filled by the same person in both instances: the one facing the choice. There is thus no equivocation: to one facing the choice the contemplated action will either be "worse" or it will not be "worse" (for whatever reasons). If it is worse, then the moral agent will prefer the alternative; if the alternative is worse, then one will prefer the choice that is "not worse." What Socrates' cross-examination shows is that Polus had not carefully considered the implications of his own choices, not that he had been misled by a shift in the standpoint from which the choices were evaluated.

POLUS' SHAME AND THE SHAMEFULNESS OF DOING WRONG

Stripped to its bare essentials, the elenchus between Socrates and Polus appears to reduce itself to the following terms. Polus begins by affirming that it is worse (κάκιον) to be wronged than to do wrong (474c5-6).¹⁰ But he also holds (at least in his public statement) that it is more disgraceful (αἰσχίον) to do wrong than to suffer wrong (474c7-8). He thus is forced to agree that the evil (κακόν) and the disgraceful (αἰσχρόν) cannot be the same

¹⁰Polus is here not necessarily advocating injustice, as Irwin notes (155), against Adkins 266.

(474c9–d2); for if they were the same, then whatever is worse would also be more disgraceful.

Socrates then asks Polus whether the standard of what is fair (καλόν)¹¹ can be anything other than either what is good/beneficial (ἀγαθόν/ὠφέλιμον) or what is pleasant, or both.¹² Polus agrees that it must be one of these (474d3–475a4), and he compliments Socrates in these terms: “This time, Socrates, you define fairly (καλῶς . . . ὀρίζη) when you define what is fair by pleasure and good (ἡδονῇ καὶ ἀγαθῷ).” Socrates proceeds to ask whether what is disgraceful (αἰσχρόν) must not then (as a consequence of what has just preceded) be defined “by their (i.e., pleasure and good) opposites, pain (λύπη) and evil (κακῶ)” (475a4–5). In other words, if the fair is defined by pleasure and good, then the opposite of the fair, viz., the disgraceful, must be defined by the opposites of pleasure and good, viz., pain and evil. Polus agrees to this also (475a8–b2).

Socrates' task is now simple and straightforward. Polus has agreed that: 1) doing wrong is not worse but is more disgraceful than suffering wrong; 2) that what is more disgraceful can only be so by an excess of either pain or evil or both. Socrates now has only to ask whether doing wrong is more disgraceful by an excess of pain: “are those who do wrong more pained than those who suffer it?” (475c1–2). Polus asserts that they “are not so at all”; in other words, those who suffer wrong are more pained. If, however, the more disgraceful is not so by an excess of pain (and hence by an excess of both pain and evil) it can only be more disgraceful by an excess of evil. There is no other option available to Polus, in light of his earlier agreements.¹³ And from this it inevitably follows that “doing wrong will thus be more evil (κάκιον) than suffering it” (475c7–9). This is an obvious contradiction of Polus' earlier position. And since Polus himself would not prefer (and believes that no one else would prefer) greater evil to less evil, Socrates concludes: “Then I spoke the truth when I said that neither you nor anyone else in the world would choose to do wrong rather than to suffer it, since it really is more evil” (475e3–6).

From this summary it appears that Callicles was correct in his diagnosis of Polus' error: Polus should never have agreed that doing wrong was more disgraceful, for this is where Socrates attacked. In fact, Socrates' question

¹¹ “A blanket term of approbation”; so Dodds 249–250, who discusses its full range of application; cf. Irwin 154; Adkins 175 ff.

¹² Literally, “do you look to (ἀποβλέπων) nothing in calling (things) fine each time (other than to their use or pleasure)?” Irwin 156, rightly finds here a call for a definition.

¹³ Adkins (267) notes that Polus could have avoided falling to the Socratic elenchus here by denying that αἰσχρά—shameful things—are shameful only because of their evil or pain (or both); for when he thus limits the range of meaning of this term, he is forced to accept “evil” as definitory as soon as he rules out “pain.” Adkins believes such a maneuver by Polus here would have been warranted in view of recent shifts in meaning of terms like αἰσχρόν.

was better aimed than even Callicles may have completely understood; he was certainly not unwarranted in asserting that Socrates had "tricked" Polus.

To see why this is so, let us recall that Polus was in Callicles' view "ashamed" to say what he really thought. From this it follows that Callicles understands Polus' situation to be as follows: *he* (Polus) believes that suffering wrong is not only more evil (κάκιον) but also more disgraceful (αἰσχύν). However, he is ashamed (αἰσχύνθεις) to say what he really thinks. Therefore, he lies (in effect) and says that doing wrong is more disgraceful. That is to say, Polus' sense of shame causes him to conceal his true opinions about suffering wrong.

The idea of a "sense of shame" has important implications for sorting out Polus' difficulties with Socrates. In the realm of moral feelings (if I may put "shame" under that rubric) shame occupies a somewhat unique position: it presupposes an audience. One only feels shame in front of someone else (even if the "someone else" is one's own conscience, i.e., alter ego); shame always requires another. It is this fact which creates the need for concealing one's "real" opinions: in the absence of another, the very idea of lying or concealing makes no sense.¹⁴

Polus would be lying to conceal his real views, however, only if Callicles' conjecture about him is correct, viz., that he was ashamed. It is difficult to know whether this opinion is accurate. Polus never admits that he had been shamed by Socrates. But neither does he dispute Callicles on this point. And in Callicles' favor is the consideration that Polus, at least as this dialogue portrays him, is not altogether unlike Callicles in terms of the values he openly respects and condemns. For both men the tyrant is the most enviable of people; from here it is not far to the view that suffering wrong is more disgraceful. Similarly, it is not difficult to imagine Polus bowing to the pressure of public opinion in his public statements while secretly harboring other thoughts; such behavior appears to suit him. Polus is admittedly not a deep thinker. Callicles' opinion that he was shamed into lying does not change this assessment, but it at least brings a small measure of interest to this otherwise transparently shallow and incompetent man. I do not wish to hinge an entire argument on what can only be a conjecture;

¹⁴Put differently, "shame" is a feeling, so that the corresponding state of feeling shame, i.e., shamefulness, has a necessary reference to some person or people. "Shamefulness" may thus be contrasted with other moral notions in the *Gorgias*, such as "fair," "good," and "beneficial"; these may exist pure and simple (and for the Plato of the *Republic* they do so exist), independent of any person. In this respect "shame" is similar to "pleasure" (the second of the defining characteristics of the "fair" in the *Gorgias*); the existence of pleasure too presupposes someone who feels it. Cf. Vlastos 456-469. See also the following note.

but in what immediately follows I should at least like to trace what is entailed by the assumption that Callicles was right.

If Callicles was correct, then, in thinking that Polus was ashamed to state his true opinion, Polus' public statement that doing wrong is more disgraceful must be taken to mean: 1) that *Polus* believes that suffering wrong is more disgraceful; and 2) that Polus believes that some unspecified public, e.g. the small group assembled at Callicles' house, thinks that doing wrong is more disgraceful. There must be, in other words, a basic difference between Polus' views and those of an audience, or at least Polus must think so. It then becomes an important question why Polus would believe such a difference to exist. The answer to this question turns upon the answer to two others: why does Polus believe suffering wrong is more shameful, and why does he suppose other people hold the opposite view?

As to the latter, little need be said. Polus, like any good student of rhetoric, would necessarily wish to be well-informed about the beliefs held by a general public. It is not relevant to the issue at hand whether his assessment of public opinion on this matter is correct; it only matters that he holds the belief that others' opinions differ from his own. Nor does Polus need to know *why* people in general do not share his view, i.e., why people in general think that doing wrong is more shameful; he only needs to believe *that* people in general hold this opinion. And so he does, if Callicles' assertion about Polus' shame is correct.

To know why Polus (secretly) holds suffering wrong to be more disgraceful presents greater difficulties. The obvious reason would be that society at large, or a representative audience within that society (such as the one assembled at Callicles' house) believes suffering wrong is disgraceful.¹⁵ But this cannot be Polus' reason, simply because if it were, he himself would have felt no embarrassment in stating his true opinion openly. His own

¹⁵It would have been helpful if Socrates (or rather Plato) had attempted a systematic definition of the term αἰσχύς, exploring above all what quality (or qualities) is possessed by all αἰσχύα which causes them to be αἰσχύα. In the absence of such an investigation we are forced to fall back upon an analysis of usage in Plato and other writers. I shall note here briefly: 1) αἰσχύς is a blanket term of disapprobation in Greek writers generally (Dover 69–73), the "opposite" in meaning of καλόν (Irwin 154); 2) it is applied by writers to actions evocative of any unfavorable reaction in a likely audience (Dover 70); 3) it is often (though not invariably) applied to actions which are morally blameworthy (*ibid.*); 4) in the Socratic dialogues it often functions to restrain conduct which the actor believes will be disapproved by witnesses (e.g., *Apology* 28d8–11; 35a2–4; *Gorg.* 461b2–6; 482e1 ff.). In other words, αἰσχύς suggests prominently the idea of actions that are publicly disgraceful, disgraceful just because a public regards them this way. Other terms of moral valuation employed by Plato, such as justice, temperance, courage, and the like are found by the mature Plato to exist simply, as such, independent of human agreements or valuations. It is more difficult to see how τὸ αἰσχρὸν—shame-in-itself—could subsist in the absence of human beliefs and conventions.

opinion would have coincided with that of "the public" or any representative impartial spectator. But it is precisely because he believes his own view is *at odds* with the views of typical witnesses that he shamefully conceals what he really thinks.

Polus, then, must have some other grounds for holding that suffering wrong is shameful than that such a view is commonly held. It seems likely that his grounds are *his own* shame if he were made to suffer by another person; and, by extension, the shame that all actors choosing between doing and suffering wrong would (or at least should) feel if they chose the latter. Recall that Polus and Socrates are debating a question of moral choice for a prospective actor. I believe that it is the view-point of this actor that Polus has in mind when he privately thinks suffering wrong is more disgraceful. That is, he has in mind a potential sufferer of wrong. Polus believes that one confronting this choice between doing and suffering wrong would be repelled from choosing suffering not only because it is worse to suffer wrong, but also because it is more disgraceful, disgraceful for the one who suffers. Public opinion may condemn the doer of wrongful acts as the one disgraced; but Polus' private view is that the sufferer has been disgraced.

Polus here displays a Calliclean insight: people who suffer wrong have been disgraced in public view. Callicles tends to regard this kind of suffering as a sign of weakness, and therefore despicable, and part of Polus may share this same sort of feeling. One can go even further without violating the spirit of Callicles' (and so Polus') sentiments: even if those wronged do not *feel* disgraced, they should feel it, for they have been embarrassed by the wrongdoer. In any event, Polus would feel the disgrace, the shame, if he were the one wronged. Callicles is registering his disapprobation (and so would Polus had he the courage of his convictions): suffering wrong is disgraceful because those who are wronged are the worse, the weaker, the less noble, the less good. They are inferior in the moral calculations of Callicles and Polus. They have in fact been disgraced, and would even *feel* disgraced if they felt "by nature."

This is obviously an unpopular view, especially to be held by a professor of rhetoric in a democratic society. Conventional morality teaches pity and compassion for the sufferer of wrong, resentment for the doer. This is the "slave morality" at which Callicles openly bristles; the timorous Polus does not like to show his cards so openly. He is thus forced to lie. But in doing so he unwittingly shifts the focus from the *sufferer* of wrong (for whom Polus believes suffering wrong really is more disgraceful) to the *doer* of wrong, whose deed is more disgraceful only in the public view. Socrates has indeed forced Polus from a realm of "nature" (i.e., what really is true for the sufferer) to a realm of "convention" (i.e., what is merely believed by people in general), much as Callicles asserted.

Once Polus admitted that doing wrong is more shameful, it was only a matter of time before Socrates showed doing wrong also to be more evil, as we see from the dialogue. There is nothing particularly subtle in this part of his cross-examination. But the whole "counter-proof" depends vitally on the question about the disgracefulness of suffering wrong. None of the other questions in the series, though parallel in formal appearance with this one, points so plainly to the sufferer. "Doing wrong is better than suffering wrong" can only mean "it is better to be a doer than a sufferer of wrong"; and the same with "more beneficial" and "more useful." But Polus does not believe, in a parallel fashion, that "it is more disgraceful to be a doer of wrong than a sufferer." Unlike Callicles Polus may believe that there is *some* disgracefulness in doing wrong; he is incapable of freeing himself entirely of public opinion or of discerning the καλόν and the αἰσχρόν simply. But his real opinion is that there is *more* disgracefulness in *suffering* wrong, that the sufferer is the one really disgraced. It took a question about shame (disgracefulness)—a question whose natural associations uniquely point to the sufferer of wrong—to cause Polus to feel his own shame. This was the real cleverness of Socrates: not to exploit the ambiguity in Polus' response about shamefulfulness, but to pose the question about doing wrong in terms of shamefulfulness to begin with. It was the question more than Polus' answer that created the difficulties for him.

In view of Socrates' line of questioning of Polus, then, Callicles' anger and impatience with Polus are not surprising. Sensing trickery in Socrates' interrogation, Callicles was bound to reject the conclusion that doing wrong is more evil than suffering it. Callicles himself does not believe this, nor does he appear to think that Polus really believes this. And he certainly would reject as preposterous Socrates' contention that "no one in the world would choose to do wrong rather than suffer it" (475e4-6). The truth for Callicles is just the opposite—that doing wrong is far better, from the standpoint of self-interest, than suffering it (at least if one is also able to avoid being punished), and that anyone who would choose to suffer wrong over doing it is a fool. Socrates may have defeated Polus, but his victory is one of words only. The hard rock of reality stands as a permanent testimony to the wrong-headedness of the Socratic position. In the end what the Socratic victory over Polus signifies to Callicles is not the strength of philosophic argument but its weakness, its utter inability either to comprehend or to alter the true order of things. He urges Socrates to give up philosophic speech as something useless and even dangerous to its possessor—"an art that found a man of goodly parts and made him worse" (485e5 ff.). In making the worse argument appear the better, Socrates the better man becomes the worse.

SOPHISTRY AND ART IN SOCRATIC SPEECH

To this point, then, it seems clear: 1) that Polus was tripped up by assenting to the proposition that doing wrong is more disgraceful than suffering it, even if suffering it is worse; 2) that Callicles regards this concession as Polus' basic error, and one Callicles infers to have been a result of Polus' public scruples; and 3) that Callicles believes Socrates to have manipulated Polus by playing on his sense of shame and by exploiting an ambiguity between what is more disgraceful "by nature" and what is so "by convention." Callicles in fact takes a dim view of Socrates' manner of debating. This is not hard to understand if we recall that Socrates despises rhetoric but is according to Callicles using it. Still, Callicles is generally portrayed as a character who believes that the aim of life is to "gain the advantage" by whatever means, fair or foul, so long as one is able to do so with impunity. Here we have Socrates gaining the advantage over Polus, and yet still incurring Callicles' disgust. It seems likely that the real object of Callicles' ire is the conclusion to which Socrates works the argument—namely, that to do wrong is both more disgraceful and worse. It is still an open question, however, whether Socrates has played fair with Polus; and whether Plato has played fair with his readers.

Let us retrace the exchange between Socrates and Polus once again, more carefully this time. Polus, as we saw, begins by opposing Socrates' contention that "doing wrong is worse than suffering it, and escaping punishment worse than incurring it." Polus holds just the opposite view: suffering wrong is worse and incurring punishment is worse. Socrates then asks whether doing wrong or suffering wrong is more disgraceful; Polus answers that doing wrong is more disgraceful (while still maintaining that suffering wrong is worse). At this point Socrates says these words: "I see. You hold, apparently, that fair and good are not the same, nor evil and disgraceful" (474c9–d1).

Let us be clear what Socrates has done here; he has made an inference as to what Polus believes about certain approved qualities or values that have as yet remained out of account: the fair (*καλόν*) and the good (*ἀγαθόν*). To this point the entire discussion had been about terms of disapprobation, not approval, i.e., the evil (*κακόν*) and the disgraceful (*αἰσχρόν*); now we are hearing about the fair and the good. Socrates would have been warranted in holding Polus to the view that the evil (or actually, the worse) and the disgraceful (i.e., the more disgraceful) are not the same; yet he in fact asserts more, that Polus must believe that the fair and the good are not the same either. What warrants this inference? It can only be that Socrates has assumed that: 1) the evil and the disgraceful have definite opposites (viz., the good and the fair respectively); and 2) that if the evil and the disgraceful are not "the same," then the presumed opposites of

these terms of disapprobation must also be not the same. Polus needs no persuading to go along with these two premises—he agrees to both, although it should be kept in mind that neither premise is argued, though both can be questioned.¹⁶

More important is the use Socrates now proceeds to make of the new pair “fair-good.” Once Polus has agreed that the fair and the good are not the same, Socrates pursues the identity of the fair. He does this in spite of the fact that Polus was not the one to bring up “the fair”; Socrates was. Polus had only said that *doing* wrong was more *disgraceful*, yet Socrates proceeds as if he had said something quite different, something that would require an analysis of the fair.

Further, Polus now agrees to Socrates' suggestion about the identifying characteristics of the fair: when anything is fair, Socrates asks, “it must be either in view of (its) use for some purpose that (it) may serve” (κατὰ τὴν χρεῖαν . . . πρὸς ὃ ἂν ἕκαστον χρήσιμον ᾖ) or in respect of some pleasure (κατὰ ἡδονὴν τινα)” (474d6–8). Some lines later Polus continues to agree when Socrates substitutes “the beneficial” (ὠφέλεια) for “the useful” as the first of the two identifying characteristics of “the fair” (474e3–4); and still later agrees when Socrates defines “the fair” by “the beneficial or pleasant or both” (τοῦ ἢ ὠφέλιμα . . . ἢ ἡδέα ἢ ἀμφοτέρω: 474e7).

We thus see that Socrates has moved Polus from his initial position, that doing wrong is more disgraceful, to a commitment to the propositions: 1) that the fair is the opposite of the disgraceful; and 2) that the defining characteristics of the fair are “the beneficial” and “the pleasant,” or both. This detour appears no accident, and is in fact useful, if not necessary, for Socrates' next move. He now asks Polus to return to “the disgraceful” in order to learn what *its* identifying characteristics are. And again, by a “law of opposites,” so to speak, Socrates asks Polus to agree that, since the fair is defined by the beneficial or the pleasant or both, so its opposite (i.e., the disgraceful) must be defined by “their opposites, pain (λύπη) and evil (κακόν).” “That must follow,” responds Polus (475a4–5).

¹⁶One might well argue, for example, that the fair (καλόν) and the good (ἀγαθόν) are “opposites” of the disgraceful (αἰσχρόν) and the evil (κακόν) respectively only by convention, and it is by no means certain that the convention Socrates here relies upon was one universally shared among his contemporaries. Adkins, *Moral Values and Political Behavior in Ancient Greece* (New York 1972) 60 ff. has shown how terms like ἀγαθόν and καλόν came to acquire fundamentally new meanings in the 5th and 4th centuries, precisely because (in part) Socrates, Plato, and other “moralists” redefined them; on the other hand, the paired opposites employed by Plato here were thoroughly embedded in traditional Greek thought (Adkins 175 ff.; but note the important qualification in Dover 65). We shall see that even Socrates does not adhere steadfastly to the same “opposites” for moral virtues and vices, even in the course of his brief exchange with Polus. The premise that when two things are not the same their opposites must also be not the same is repeatedly refuted in the *Parmenides*.

Socrates needs only a final concession from Polus to round the circle of self-contradiction: that doing wrong cannot be more disgraceful than suffering it by reason of an excess of pain. Polus, thinking here of the body rather than the soul, agrees without difficulty that those who suffer wrong are more pained than those who do it, and therefore that doing wrong must be more disgraceful for some other reason than that it is more painful. But from his earlier agreements the only other reason in virtue of which something can be more disgraceful (in addition to being more painful) is that it is more evil (κάκιον), or that it is both more evil and more painful. The latter possibility is excluded by the conjunction "and"; if doing wrong is not more painful, then it cannot be more painful *and* anything else either. One is left with the inevitable conclusion: doing wrong must be more evil. This is the contradiction of Polus' initial position, the ultimate cause of his defeat in the contest of words with Socrates.

What is perhaps most curious about this exchange between Socrates and Polus is the seemingly unnecessary detour that Socrates takes through "the fair" and "the good" to get to the defining characteristics of "the disgraceful." We shall speculate below as to why he has done this, or more precisely, why Plato has had him do this.

Mainly our attention in this brief section of the dialogue is drawn to Socrates' employment of the doctrine of "opposites," to which we have earlier alluded. After Socrates gets Polus to admit that doing wrong is more disgraceful, he suddenly shifts focus and begins asking about the defining characteristics of the fair (καλόν), a notion accepted without question by both men as the opposite of the disgraceful. I have already suggested that this assumption may be questioned: either the disgraceful may have more than one antonym (in which case Socrates' selection of "fair" among the options needs to be justified); or the fair may not be an opposite of the disgraceful at all, in the sense that it may be inappropriate to speak of moral terms in general as having "opposites."¹⁷

¹⁷Socrates evidently believed that "each single opposite (or thing: πρᾶγμα) has but one opposite, not many" (*Prot.* 332c9-d1); and he also believed that the "one opposite" of the fair (καλόν) is the disgraceful (αἰσχρόν) (*Prot.* 332c3-5). On the other hand, others felt differently; Protagoras, for example, held that "anything in the world has some sort of resemblance to any other thing," so that the idea of opposites is to some degree a matter of convention. Black, for example, is *regarded* as the opposite of white because the points of resemblance between them are so minute (*Prot.* 331d1 ff.). Though he does not say so, Protagoras' view would seem to commit him to the proposition that any thing may have different opposites, depending upon how they are "regarded." This possibility would appear to be magnified considerably in the case of moral virtues and vices, whose identities are often anything but certain. Beyond that, Socrates does not address the significant implication of Protagoras' statement at 331d1 ff., that if all things are alike to some degree, then the very idea of "opposites" reduces itself to a limiting

However that may be, there is something else, still more devious, to be noticed about Socrates' employment of the idea of opposites in this section. We have noted that the opposite of disgraceful is agreed to be fair; and further, that the defining characteristics of the fair are said to be either: 1) the useful/beneficial/good; or 2) the pleasant; or 3) both of these. What is remarkable here is the first in the series, particularly the fact that useful, beneficial, and good are used interchangeably, as virtual synonyms. Thus, for example, when Socrates first substitutes "beneficial" for "useful" (at 474e3) Polus makes no protest, but on the contrary proceeds as though Socrates had merely repeated himself. Or again, when "good" is substituted for "beneficial" (475a3-4), by Polus this time, Socrates expresses no surprise that a new criterion of "the fair" had thereby been introduced.¹⁸ Indeed, almost in his very next question to Polus (475a7) Socrates returns to the standard of "beneficial" in place of "the good," again without comment from either man that a change had been made. And again at 477a1 "the good" and "the fair" are explicitly equated.¹⁹

Now, if it were in fact the case that "good" and "beneficial" and "useful" were easily interchangeable terms, none of them carrying any nuance or connotation not carried by the others, then this playing fast and loose with different terms would be no cause for concern, either on the part of the interlocutors or on ours. But it seems anything but certain that these terms may so easily be interchanged.²⁰ For one thing, Polus himself had stated explicitly, toward the beginning of the exchange under discussion, that "the fair and the good are not the same" (474c9-d1). If they are not the same, then substituting one for the other later on as though they are the same is a dubious strategy of debate. In accepting these substitutions Polus may fall short of affirming that the "fair" and the "good" are the

case of the idea of "unlikeness," namely, when the unlikeness is so great as to overshadow to a great degree the similarity. But if this is so, then every "thing" will have countless "opposites," or more precisely, none at all.

¹⁸Cf. Gorg. 468 b-c, where "good" and "beneficial" are freely substituted for each other by both men.

¹⁹Dodds (249) and Irwin (154) both note that *ὠφέλιμον* is itself ambiguous: it may refer either to what is beneficial to the agent or what is so to the community. They disagree, however, about Polus' meaning; for Irwin, Polus means that the fair is more beneficial to the agent, for Dodds that it is more beneficial to the community (as though Plato were playing with the homonymy Polus = polis). The latter believes that it is just this ambiguity that tripped Polus up.

²⁰Pace Vlastos who argues that there is "no skullduggery" in the substitution of "good" for "useful" since "both terms can be used with (the same) sense and, anyhow, the outcome is unaffected by the substitution" (455, n. 2); so also Kahn 89, citing Vlastos. I agree with the former thought—both terms *can* be used with the same sense—but they *may* be used differently as well, which qualifies the latter thought, as I try to show.

same; but their meanings begin to merge to such a considerable extent that one starts to wonder why he had ever said they were *not* the same.²¹

There is an additional piece of evidence that warrants questioning Socrates' manner in handling Polus. I stated earlier that when he turned from "the disgraceful" to "the fair" Socrates made an unnecessary detour. I also stated that it was a useful detour in terms of Socrates' ultimate aim, namely to show that doing wrong must be more evil as well as more disgraceful. The reason that it was useful is just this: it permitted him to use the doctrine of opposites to get to "the evil" in his argument. Without the "useful=beneficial=good" equation, Socrates' smuggling of "evil" into the definition of "disgraceful" would have been much more obviously questionable than it otherwise is.

To show this, let us suppose that Polus had assented only to the statement that fair things are fair either in view of their use or in view of some pleasure they bring, or both; but to nothing else. In that case, if Socrates were then to turn to the opposite of "fair," viz., "disgraceful," and had tried to define it by the opposites of those characteristics according to which fair things are fair, he would have had to say: disgraceful things are disgraceful in view of their *counterproductiveness* (assuming that this is the contrary of "useful") or some pain, or both. Or again, if Polus had agreed that fair things are fair in view of some *benefit* they provide, then Socrates, in defining disgraceful by fair's opposite, would have had to say: disgraceful things are disgraceful in view of their harm (βλάβη).²² Agreement to either of these statements may have been somewhat embarrassing to Polus. He

²¹Cf. Dodds (251), who, however, finds the substitution "Socratic" (citing other evidence). The basic argument of the *Cratylus*, that there is one and only one correct name for each "thing," would seem to be at odds with the frequent substitutions that occur in the *Gorgias*. The "lawgiver" is in the *Cratylus* the one who understands how properly to assign names to things: "Then, my dear friend," says Socrates, "must not the lawgiver also know how to embody in the sounds and syllables that name which is fitted by nature for each object?" (389d4 ff.; cf. 390d8 ff.). It is hard to know how committed to this doctrine the Socrates of the *Gorgias* was; for example, in the *Protagoras* (probably close in time of writing to the *Gorgias*), Socrates appears to affirm that "justice" and "holiness" are either "the same thing" or "extremely alike" (331a6-b9). In any case, a merging of the meanings of moral concepts is necessary to Socrates' refutation of Polus, even though Polus could have objected on grounds that Socrates could not legitimately dispute.

²²Kahn (89) argues that for Socrates and Polus alike "evil" and "harmful" are interchangeable (citing *Gorgias* 477e3 f.). But again, one must distinguish between overlapping and identical meanings. If Polus had said only that doing wrong is more *harmful* (the usual opposite of "beneficial" in the *Gorgias* and elsewhere: e.g., *Gorg.* 511e9 ff., 499d1 ff.; *Meno* 77d2), Polus could have escaped self-contradiction by arguing that the harmful is not always, but only sometimes, worse. Also, "doing wrong is more harmful" does not make the moral point "one should not do wrong" nearly as forcefully as "doing wrong is more evil."

may not have wished to be heard saying that doing wrong is more *counterproductive* or more *harmful* than suffering it; but at least he would not have been caught in what is ultimately a much greater embarrassment, self-contradiction.

Forced self-contradiction, the most notorious weapon in Socrates' verbal arsenal, is brought about in the case of Polus only when Polus agrees to the final substitution, "good" in the place of "beneficial." Poor Polus brings the trouble on himself by offering the substitution on his own authority, without prompting from Socrates. For when he does this, it indeed seems warranted on Socrates' part to talk about the opposite of fair's defining characteristic (i.e., the good) as being "evil" (κακόν), which thereby becomes the defining characteristic of disgraceful. Polus can hardly deny this. When he admits that it must be so, Socrates has moved into check-mate.

CONCLUSIONS

One might applaud Plato for his superb characterization of Polus. He is shown to be young and brash, an over-eager disciple of the great Gorgias, and somewhat careless in the finer points of logic and argumentation. His attempted ridicule of Socrates only underscores his unwarranted arrogance and finds a fitting conclusion in his own public humiliation at Socrates' hands.²³ One wonders, though, whether the portrait is not overdone. Polus may have been young, lacking the experience of a Gorgias or the shrewd instincts of a Callicles. But he was not a neophyte. He had been trained by Gorgias, he had published a work on rhetoric himself, and his criticism of Socrates' interrogation of Gorgias shows that he was not blind to nuance and ambiguity in the language of debate. He was no Socrates, and it is scarcely surprising that Socrates should have made quick work of him. But at the same time it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that Plato may have exaggerated somewhat his level of incompetence in order to serve a larger purpose.

In order to be tripped up by Socrates on the particular question of doing or suffering wrong, it was necessary for Polus to agree to the following points: 1) that moral virtues or qualities (e.g., the good, the fair, the just) have specific opposites, one or more than one opposite for each moral quality (e.g., the evil, the disgraceful, the unjust); 2) that the defining characteristics of moral qualities (e.g., the useful, the beneficial) have corresponding opposites (e.g., the counterproductive, the harmful); 3) that, whereas "the

²³W. R. M. Lamb (*Plato: Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias* [Cambridge, Mass. 1925] 255) writes, for example: "Polus is immature and headstrong, easily trapped in argument, and in danger of going astray through thoughtless vanity rather than any decided inclination"; cf. Kahn 94; and E. Méron, *Les idées morales des interlocuteurs de Socrate* (Paris 1979) 65 f.

fair" has four defining characteristics (the useful, the beneficial, the good, the pleasant), its opposite "the disgraceful" has only two defining characteristics (the evil, the painful); and 4) that "the fair" and "the disgraceful" have some bearing on the question of whether doing or suffering wrong is worse.

Had Polus contested any one of these four points Socrates' case against him would not merely have been much more difficult; it would have been fruitless. He may have trapped Polus into making certain embarrassing statements, but he could not have forced a self-contradiction. Yet I have attempted to show above that Polus' concession on each point is gratuitous. Some of the points are merely controversial—e.g., that moral virtues have indisputable definite opposites. This point, even though debatable, may have been the conventional view of Polus, Socrates, and everyone else present, so that one cannot be too harsh with Polus for failing to call it into question here.²⁴ But other admissions are not only unearned by Socrates, but even unexpected in view of Polus' earlier statements (e.g., that "the good" is interchangeable with "the beneficial," after he had just admitted that "the fair and the good are not the same"; or that the opposite of "the beneficial" is "the evil" [κακόν] rather than "the harmful"). Finally, there are agreements made by Socrates (at least implicitly) that are somewhat uncharacteristic of him and at odds with his customary views (e.g., that "the useful" and "the beneficial" and "the good" may be used interchangeably).

All of this evidence suggests strongly that more is involved in Socrates' interchange with Polus than simply the latter's incompetence in speech. Socrates has debated skillfully; but he has been debating with a stacked deck, so to speak. Polus makes every conceivable wrong play; he has not been cleverly maneuvered into a trap, as we are led to believe by Callicles, but has rather walked into it of his own volition with his eyes wide open. At each juncture, where he should be objecting usually on the plainest of grounds, he either passively submits, or worse, supplies Socrates with just the unsought concession that rounds out the latter's case. Socrates for his part is more than simply sly; he is at once extremely prescient and slightly disingenuous. When he shifts the focus of the debate from "the disgraceful" to the "fair" he seems to know in advance how Polus will stumble: though serving no necessary logical purpose, the move served well an eristical one, at least from Socrates' viewpoint. And of course Socrates' victory is made considerably easier when Socrates allows to stand admissions from Polus that he presumably would not accept as valid.²⁵

²⁴What is true of Socrates, Polus, and the others may not have been quite so true of Plato himself, as I believe must be inferred from the questions he has Protagoras raise in the *Protagoras*; see above, n. 14.

²⁵Socrates must be permitted, of course, to tailor his arguments to the sort of character he is debating; he likes to win his victories on his opponent's home turf, so to speak. This no doubt explains why he relied in his interrogation of Polus on the rather

It is perhaps impossible to draw any certain conclusions from the sort of evidence presented here. But at a minimum one ought not to discount the possibility that Plato's hand is as much at work as Socrates' in the reconstruction of the exchange between Socrates and Polus (see above, note 1). If we assume that Plato's ultimate object in the *Gorgias* is to deal a serious blow to Callicles, or to what Callicles represents—and the dialogue does appear to build to this crescendo—then it is not especially important whether he has Socrates score a victory over Polus' point of view. More important to defeat a skilled practitioner of rhetoric than a not-so-skilled student (or even an aged teacher) of it.

Far more at issue, or so it seems to me, are rival forms of speech, specifically philosophy and rhetoric, each making extremely important claims upon the political community. Plato wishes, among other things, to discredit the claims of rhetoric and to vindicate those of philosophy. Callicles is contemptuous of philosophy, at least in old men; he urges Socrates to put it aside and busy himself with things that matter (485e1 ff.). Socrates for his part devotes considerable attention in this dialogue to an explicit criticism of rhetoric: he calls it a form of flattery (*κολακεία*) and likens it to the skill of a pastry cook. So far the two sides of the dispute are parallel, and not altogether uneven; Callicles is not unskilled in speech, nor is Socrates naive in rhetoric. Had the two men merely exchanged insults about the other's art the outcome of the dialogue would have been inconclusive. Indeed, it is hard to escape noting that Callicles himself appears anything but convinced by Socrates' "proofs" of the superiority of the just life.

But Plato has inserted something more into the confrontation between the philosopher and the orator that has a decided influence on how the audience and reader interpret the outcome of that debate: preliminary eristic bouts between the philosopher and men renowned for their expertise in rhetoric. Socrates betters both Gorgias and Polus in speech, or appears to at any rate. One cannot make too much of the victory over Gorgias: he is old, unaccustomed to the style of questioning that Socrates employs, and already worn out from a lengthy display earlier in the day of his great talent. But such excuses do not exist for Polus: he is young, energetic, an

un-moral ideas of "pleasure" and "pain" when trying to establish the *moral* superiority of the just life. Socrates goes to where Polus lives, and Polus lives amidst ideas and concerns about acts that hurt and that feel good *physically* (see, for example, Polus' praise of the tyrant Archelaus at 471a1 ff.). But for Socrates, it should be noted, there is a difference between pain (*λύπη*) and harm (*βλάβη*), by which harm has to do with moral harm or damage to the soul—and is so to be more feared—and pain with sensations that are unpleasant physically but not particularly to be dreaded. For Socrates, only harm would be a factor in moral calculations of right and wrong, even if he allows Polus to dwell on the physical aspect in the cross-examination. Such strategies may not be quite unfair, but one wonders about the strength of conclusions that are built upon premises in which Socrates himself does not believe: is he committed to such conclusions, and are we?

able disciple of the master. A clear victory over him by Socrates cannot but leave the impression, psychologically (though admittedly not logically), that philosophy is indeed the better of rhetoric. A contrived victory of this sort would appear to be particularly useful if the outcome of the more serious contest, that between Socrates and Callicles, is anything less than a decisive and unequivocal victory for either man.

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