

Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants. Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame.
By Christina H. Tarnopolsky. Princeton: Princeton University Press,
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Tarnopolsky wants to know when shame is appropriate, especially so that we might arbitrate disputes in contemporary politics. For answers she turns to Plato's story about Socrates, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, each of whom accuses another of capitulating to shame or shamelessness. She argues that the *Gorgias*, read as a study of Athenian democracy, articulates three types of shame.

I pass over the meandering Introduction, which overly tolerates the imprecision in contemporary 'shame'-analysis.¹ The first chapter has two goals: to claim that there are two Socrateses in the *Gorgias* (the latter critiques the former), and to disprove the interpretation that in the *Gorgias* Plato 'alleged[ly] attack[ed] all forms of emotion, rhetoric, and persuasion'. The second of the goals should hardly be controversial any longer. But the first one is highly problematic. According to Tarnopolsky, the Socrates in the first part of the dialogue is akin to the hero of the 'Socratic/Elenchic Dialogues'. This Socrates is gradually replaced by a new one, who is a mouthpiece of Plato in a way categorically different from the earlier one. Tarnopolsky says that the latter Socrates criticizes the earlier Socrates' mode of shaming and presents a new and better mode of shaming. The earlier Socrates shamed his interlocutors in a way that caused too much pain and did not offer enough help going forward. The later one offers pleasurable spectacles, memorable imagery, and beneficial models.

Tarnopolsky presents the form of shame proffered by this second Socrates, a form she calls Platonic, as one salutary for democracy. This kind of shame 'give[s] the audience a picture of the new way of life that would open up to them, if they were to transform themselves in accordance with the insights that come to light in the shaming situation' (138); it 'present[s] these radically new ideas on the basis of older, more traditional motifs... [to] meet or greet the audience on their own grounds' (139); and it 'reflects [Plato's] insight that...a certain amount of pleasure might also have its place in the curative aspects of a noble rhetoric' (140). The primary evidence for this two-Socrateses view is that the *Gorgias* is a transitional dialogue (35-38; cf. 135-136), a dialogue written between an earlier 'Socratic' period and a middle non-'Socratic' period. Her argument from scholarly consensus cites no literature later than 1992 or any literature skeptical of this dating or of dating in general (see, e.g., Nails 1995, Thesleff 1982, and their bib-

¹ This book is not up to date on the relevant philosophical literature, lacking particularly Race 1979; Archie 1984; Curtis 1989; Woolf 2000; Heath 2005; Moss 2005, 2006, 2007; Bensen Cain 2008; and Futter 2009. Explaining the later absences may be that though the book's official publication date was May 2010, the McGill website lists the manuscript as being accepted by Princeton University Press in 2006.

liographies). The argument that *Gorgias* has an ‘earlier’ Socrates depends on two considerations. The first is that the *Gorgias* is a direct rather than a narrated dialogue; the second is that there is a ‘significant amount of elenctic exchange’.² The argument that *Gorgias* has a ‘later’ Socrates, one who ‘espouses’ Plato’s beliefs that the earlier Socrates would either not have believed or not have espoused, depends on a broader set of considerations about its similarities to so-called ‘middle period’ dialogues. Unfortunately, it is not clear what Tarnopolsky means by ‘espouses’, since it is not obvious that Socrates asserts much at all in the *Gorgias* (cf. Peterson 2011). She admits that when Socrates introduces what could be taken as doctrine, he disclaims authority, and this ‘suggests that Plato is explicitly signaling to the reader that these are new doctrines that were not held by the historical Socrates’. It would seem plausible to conclude that they are not held by the character Socrates either, and therefore not asserted by Plato—who is choosing to write about his character Socrates.

But these doubts about Tarnopolsky’s dating are moot. The dialogue’s transitional status is irrelevant unless the transition happened, not just over some period of Plato’s career, but in the middle of Plato’s writing of the dialogue. As far as I can tell, Tarnopolsky assumes that Plato wrote the first part of the dialogue in the time of his life during which he wrote about a historical Socrates, and wrote the second part at a time in his life when he did not do so (and did not revise the first half after making this radical departure). This is an implausible and unsubstantiated assumption. So Tarnopolsky has not established the existence of two Socrateses. This does not undermine her remaining claims about, for example, Platonic shame, since aspects of them can be attributed to the character Socrates, and thereby to Plato. But it limits how much Tarnopolsky can learn from this dialogue about Socrates. By dividing Socrates’ actions into two distinct and contentious quantities, Tarnopolsky cannot see what a practice that involves all of those actions might amount to. Neither of the two Socrateses may be as useful a model as the one that Plato actually depicts.

The second chapter reconstructs Socrates’ exchanges with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, each of which elicits shame. The reconstructions challenge the view that shame plays the same role in each exchange. They also question the assumption that shame has only two possible effects, forcing a person either to admit what he believes or to dissemble to save face. Polus says—and Tarnopolsky seems to agree, though acknowledging that we do not know for sure—that Gorgias contradicted himself because of his sense of shame. From concern for his reputation, Gorgias asserts what he does not in fact believe. This insincerity prevents Gorgias from contributing to the argument. But he stays with the conversation, later asking clarifying questions and encouraging Callicles’ participation. Tarnopolsky concludes that Gorgias experiences a salutary form of shame. It is not very clear what she means; presumably it is that the feeling of shame causes

² Thesleff 2003’s claim that *Gorgias* was originally written in narrated form and only later rewritten in direct form makes judgments based on formal structure relatively valueless.

the insincere speaking, which causes the self-contradiction, which causes the opening of Gorgias' mind. But Tarnopolsky treats this exchange too briefly to establish how we know 'shame' itself has caused the benefit, or whether Gorgias really had spoken insincerely about his teacherly beliefs, and why.³ She has shown instead that personality determines the usefulness of Socratic conversations.

Whereas Gorgias deals with Socrates' questions by dissembling, Tarnopolsky argues that Polus reveals his most deeply-held beliefs. Thus, being refuted leads him into 'genuine perplexity' and dynamic self-discovery (66-67). Callicles says that Socrates succeeds in this refutation by shaming Polus into accepting a logically unacceptable argument. Tarnopolsky looks into Callicles' contention by focusing on three of Socrates' purportedly fallacious maneuvers, choosing them from the literature of the last several decades. Her reading is clever, suggesting why Socrates reasons with Polus in the way he does. It does not, however, decide whether Socrates in fact has argued invalidly.

It is worth noting that only here in the book does Tarnopolsky observe that the fine (*to kalon*) and the good (*to agathon*) are the opposites of the shameful and the bad. Concerns about attractiveness and gratification—in the context of cosmetics, pastries, and the tyrannical power that appeals to Polus—are at the heart of the *Gorgias*'s inquiry. Given the argumentative rigor and fruitful results of recent works on *to kalon*, one would expect scholars of its opposite to rely or model their analyses on it (see especially Nehamas 2007, Barney 2010b, Riegel 2011). But Tarnopolsky, unfortunately as with most other authors on shame, does not.

The section on Callicles' shame is the book's most rewarding section because it deals with a sequence of attempted refutations. Tarnopolsky again does not decide whether Socrates argues illicitly. Her interest instead is to show that Callicles, like Gorgias and Polus before him, benefits from being shamed. Socrates' first attempt to undermine Callicles' hedonism, the leaky jar-asceticism gambit, does not work. Since 'Callicles does not honor ascetics, ...he will not feel ashamed to learn that his hedonistic thesis is inconsistent with such a life' (80). Since, however, he does honor 'courageous warriors and political leaders', Socrates next tries to show the incompatibility between those lives and the shameful life hedonism entails. But this second attempt fails as well. Callicles cannot acknowledge defeat because, although he would feel ashamed to claim that the catamite lives well, he would feel just as ashamed to lose in discussion to Socrates (this section would be richer if it engaged Woolf 2000). Callicles withdraws his hedonist thesis only once he sees that it would require him to acknowledge that 'cowards are actually better individuals than courageous men' (83). Presumably seeing this point causes him to feel shame, and he wants to stop talking. This reveals what might cause other Athenians to feel shame, and thus to

³ Doyle 2010 decides that Gorgias doesn't really even know what he thinks here, and so can't be called insincere or sincere; Barney 2010a, with a careful analysis of Gorgias' argument, comes to a similar conclusion.

what they are committed.

Athenian society already practices a form of Socratic shame, Tarnopolsky claims in chapter 3. Its institution of *parrhēsia*, speaking frankly to authorities despite the risk of harm, involves a hope those authorities will feel ashamed. Socrates engages in a sort of *parrhēsia* when he aims to get his interlocutors to see the shameful tyrannical image they project for themselves. Plato's interest in Socratic shame, then, reveals his commitment both to democratic procedure and to good democratic character. Since many people have already argued that Plato critiques democracy immanently, as a willing participant, the value of Tarnopolsky's contribution would depend on further insight into the puzzles of *parrhēsia* in democratic activity. But this section offers no new insights on *parrhēsia*. It rehashes the standard sources—Foucault, Monoson, Saxonhouse—and mentions no instances of *parrhēsia* outside Plato, or indeed outside *Gorgias*, and does not even treat systematically the six instances in the *Gorgias*.⁴ It leaves some crucial work undone. The justification for *parrhēsia* is that one says what one sincerely believes, ignoring the consequences. But to make sense of the esteem the institution garners, one must be able to answer the following: Why should the *parrhēsiastēs* have confidence in her pleadings? How can she differentiate herself from ignorant complainers or cynical sycophants? How does she learn the most effective way to address her chosen authority? The chapter ends with a definition of 'flattering shame', the worst of the three forms of shame Tarnopolsky takes the *Gorgias* to thematize. It is the desire to avoid a bad reputation at all costs. Its price is the failure to benefit others, given the pain and revenge such benefiting may involve. The paradoxicality of the term Tarnopolsky uses here, 'flattering shame', is explained: it 'does not refer to the occurrent emotion produced in the audience or experienced by the orator, but rather to the disposition or sense of shame that reciprocally motivates both the audience and orator to avoid ever saying anything that might be painful to their respective audience, even when this involves the truth' (106).

Having articulated the bad kind of shame, Tarnopolsky proceeds in chapter 4 to assess her two other kinds of shame. The middling variety, 'Socratic respectful shame', is dialogical, critical, and dialectic. Its vehicle is always the elenchus. It brings out an interlocutor's inabilities and inconsistent beliefs, is painful, and has the goal of rectifying his perspective. The best variety, Platonic shame, treated as the outcome of Plato's long reflections on the weaknesses of the Socratic model, is—surprisingly enough—monological, non-critical, and image-dependent. Its vehicle is often traditional myth-telling. It gives a pleasing vision of a possible post-shamed self (116).⁵ The myth puts into imagistic form the doctrinal outcome

⁴ It ignores Markovits 2008, a very useful source, especially 48-61 (on the range of modes of democratic accountability), 65-73 (on *parrhēsia* itself), and 74-80 (on problems with the right of *parrhēsia*); Roberts 1982, on other democratic institutions, like *dokimasia* and *euthunai*, which Tarnopolsky mentions, potentially connected to shame; and the collection of papers in Sluiter and Rosen 2004. See now also Foucault 2011.

⁵ The argument for the positive effect of images depends on citations to Danielle Allen's 'Envi-

of Socrates' elenctic arguments, in particular about the kind of life one ought to live.

The Socratic elenchus is too weak, Tarnopolsky argues: it lacks 'the power to fully cure and turn many souls' (125-126). She gives four reasons for her indictment. First, limitations in an interlocutor's soul prevent proper uptake of Socrates' refutative treatment. Second, whereas the elenchus shows people their contradictions, it does not show them how to change their lives or provide a new ideal. Third, the elenchus is too harsh. Fourth, the elenchus is not memorable. Her four-pronged attack does not survive inspection.

Tarnopolsky's first complaint is that Socrates cannot get everyone into a contradiction that adequately stuns and reforms them. Put more precisely, Plato does not depict Socrates only succeeding in getting his interlocutors into such contradictions. But should we not think that Socrates' influence and enduring appeal come from the fact that he neither forces nor manipulates people into talking with him and undergoing examination? He relies on standard conversational means when he endeavors to get his interlocutors into the right state. Maybe it is a false hope to expect total conversions from talk alone. A further problem with Tarnopolsky's complaint is evidentiary. Plato does not depict everything that happens: we do not see the aftermath of Socrates' interactions. It would be a surprising method that gets people to change their worldviews in the brief duration of the part of a conversation depicted in a dialogue.⁶ That later fifth-century Athenian history records the wayward deeds of Socrates' interlocutors undercuts Socrates' method only if one assumes that Socrates succeeds only when he puts people permanently on the path of justice.

The second complaint is that Socratic refutation provides no alternative way to live. This view is false, as is clear from three considerations. In his philanthropy and curiosity Socrates embodies ideals worthy of emulation. Those partaking in Socratic conversation find that they already have an ideal within, and it is precisely that ideal that Socrates always asks them about and on which he builds the necessity for continued philosophizing. Finally, the engagement itself provides the ideal: listening, reason-providing, effort, and stamina.

The third complaint is that Socrates' treatment, his 'absolute negativity' (139), is too harsh. Tarnopolsky claims that Socrates does not care adequately for Callicles. In general, her complaint seriously underplays what Socrates is about. He is not 'absolutely negative', given the range of questions, speeches, and quips he makes in every Platonic dialogue. That Socrates speaks only harshly is disproved by the same texts. He maintains conversations, piques his interlocutors' interests,

sioning the Body of the Condemned: The Power of Platonic Symbols'; it is rather less convincing in this book than it is in Allen's 2011.

⁶ Four times in the book Tarnopolsky quotes Callicles saying that Socrates' reasoning would 'literally turn their worldview upside down (481c; 68, 118, 137, 168); on the four occasions the 'literally' is absurd and does not translate anything from the Greek; but more importantly, we need not think that accepting an inversion of a worldview would take simply being convinced once by Socrates' arguments.

asks easy and even gratifying questions, suggests answers that his respondents want readily to accept, and identifies and praises what his audience-members care about most deeply so that they build their future practices on their hopes for the identities they already accept. Nicias says that he finds Socratic examination not unpleasant (*La.* 187e8-188c1); plenty of interlocutors, far from running away from Socrates, beseech him to talk with them again.

Tarnopolsky's fourth complaint about 'Socratic respectful shaming' is that its results are shorter-lived than those of imagistic shaming. This is unconvincing. The narrative dialogues—retold by someone after the event—suggest that elenctic conversations are memorable, especially given Socrates' quirky analogies, inferences, and zingers. One would expect that the shameful feeling of self-contradiction or *aporia*, even if not the individual argumentative steps, would be easy enough to remember. Present-day teachers and students remember passages adequately to discuss them in classes.

Aside from the insufficient evidence for Tarnopolsky's charge against a specifically 'Socratic' approach to shame, the charge is also hermeneutically impoverishing. It prevents us from looking hard enough at the salutary effects of Socrates' conversational style, a style which might itself include image-making. It prevents us from thinking that Plato might be presenting Socrates as combining a range of activities. It is not as though Socrates ornaments his purely negative approach with some positive appurtenances, but rather what it is for Socrates to engage in conversation with people is to do all these things.

There are two more problems with Tarnopolsky's charge and reform. It never becomes clear how Platonic shaming is a way to get people to feel *shame*. Tarnopolsky speaks of Platonic shame as a way to give people a way to think about themselves. But that has been the problem with educating people to philosophy the whole time; and if education is the same as shaming, then 'shaming' here is being used in a much broader way than it is in the contemporary discussions Tarnopolsky hopes to influence. The other problem is that it is hard to see why Plato would introduce a new pattern of shaming without explicitly overturning an old one.

The fifth chapter concerns statements about the social relevance of shame made by Michael Warner and Jean Bethke Elshtain. The upshot is the salutary self-knowledge won by good forms of shame. The final chapter argues that 'no emotion can simply be classified as 'positive' or 'negative' for democratic politics or legal judgments' (178), mostly by working through Antonio Damasio's *Descartes' Error* (1994) and Martha Nussbaum's *Hiding from Humanity* (2004).

For all the narrative, political, and existential insight Plato provides, Tarnopolsky does not explain why we should not simply take the line that Aristotle takes in *Nicomachean Ethics* iv 9. Aristotle's view seems to be that if an experience of shame really is responding to one's recognition of having done something disgraceful, then it is better than nothing. He would presumably accept the existence of an excessive shame-prone-ness relative to the mean. This would involve being overly disposed to feeling shame, or feeling shame about inappropriate things or

at inappropriate times. The instances of shame resulting from being extremely shame-prone would trouble us in the same way that instances of cowardice or prodigality do. We could also make sense of the ambiguity when we evaluate the shame an adult feels: good, on the one hand, that he recognizes the disgrace; bad, on the other hand, that he did what led to such disgrace.

Is ancient philosophy needed at all for contemporary interventions? I suspect it is helpful, but a stronger argument should be put forth. After all, an excellent new study, *In Defense of Shame* (2012), clarifies much of the structure of and rhetoric around shame without appeal to either Plato or Aristotle. It focuses on inconsistencies in the psychological, sociological, and philosophical literature about the attitudes, actions, and beliefs consequent to occurrent experiences of shame; the benefits and troubles associated with people with clinically-measured high propensities to feel shame; and the sorts of self-appraisal causally linked to moments of shame initiated by a range of factors. The authors defend the following definition of shame: ‘In shame, we apprehend a trait or an action of ours that we take to exemplify the polar opposite of a self-relevant value [i.e., a value that we take to impose a practical demand on us] as indicating our incapacity to exemplify this...value even to a minimal degree’ (102). Shame is good when our apprehension of our incapacity motivates us to improve ourselves. Shame is bad when we are wrong about what we should value, wrong about how our actions reflect our abilities, or wrong about what we should do in response to our perceived moral poverty. Shame considered as humiliation or stigmatization is bad in whatever respects humiliation or stigmatization is bad.

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