

The Unity of Plato's *Gorgias*

RHETORIC, JUSTICE,
and the PHILOSOPHIC LIFE

Andrew Stauffer

CAMBRIDGE

THE UNITY OF PLATO'S GORGIAS

This book brings out the complex unity of Plato's *Gorgias*. Through a careful analysis of the dialogue's three main sections, including Socrates' famous quarrel with his archrival Callicles, Devin Stauffer shows how the seemingly disparate themes of rhetoric, justice, and the philosophic life are woven together into a coherent whole. His interpretation of the *Gorgias* sheds new light on Plato's thought, showing that Plato and Socrates had a more favorable view of rhetoric than is usually supposed. Stauffer also challenges common assumptions concerning the character and purpose of some of Socrates' most famous claims about justice. Written as a close study of the *Gorgias*, *The Unity of Plato's Gorgias* treats broad questions concerning Plato's moral and political psychology and uncovers the view of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric that guided Plato as he wrote his dialogues.

Devin Stauffer is Assistant Professor of Government at The University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *Plato's Introduction to the Question of Justice* and coauthor and cotranslator of *Empire and the Ends of Politics: Plato's Menexenus and Pericles' Funeral Oration*.

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Of course, this line of criticism would probably be dismissed by a Gorgian rhetorician, who might respond by pointing to his success as a reason not to be troubled by his lack of an account (consider again, e.g., 456a7–c7, 459c3–5). But Socrates might respond in turn by arguing that Gorgian rhetoric is not quite as successful as its practitioners tend to think. We saw in the *Gorgias* section, at any rate, that Gorgias himself could not deny that rhetoric remains suspect in the eyes of the city. And Socrates may be pointing to the same problem near the end of his description of rhetoric when, after stressing the similarity between sophists and rhetoricians, he says that such men “don’t know what use to make of themselves, nor do other human beings know what use to make of them” (465c5–8). While the city can be charmed and beguiled by a rhetoric that entices people toward pleasure, such rhetoric, Socrates’ remark suggests, is not simply welcomed by the city, which will never lose its sense that it is being manipulated and corrupted. If this is what Socrates means by his remark, his elaboration of the remark may be intended to offer a further indication as to why there can never be complete harmony between Gorgian rhetoric and the city. For Socrates follows his remark about sophists and rhetoricians by saying that if the soul were not set over the body, but instead the body measured its own gratifications, Anaxagoras’ saying “all things mixed together” – a saying that points to a state without any fundamental distinctions – would carry much greater weight, and the division between genuine arts and phantoms would disappear (465c8–d7).¹⁰ With this cryptic statement, Socrates may be suggesting that, given the character of the human soul, especially its capacity to

10. Socrates quotes the same saying, *homou panta chrēmata*, in the *Phaedo* (72c4–5). According to Dodds, *Gorgias*, 231–2, this saying can be traced back to the opening line of a work of Anaxagoras, *homou panta chrēmata ēn*, which Anaxagoras used to describe “the chaos that existed before the intervention of *nous*,” but that “became proverbial for any state in which distinctions are obliterated, like Hegel’s ‘night in which all cows are black.’”

contemplate and judge (see 466d1), human beings inevitably draw a distinction between the pleasant and the good, and thus can never fully embrace a practice that aims to entice them towards mere pleasure. This suggestion, at any rate, would be in keeping with Socrates' more straightforward efforts to suggest to Gorgias that his rhetoric rests on an insufficient appreciation of those human concerns that run deeper than the hedonistic desires to which his rhetoric caters.

ARE RHETORICIANS POWERFUL? (466a4–468e9)

Socrates' criticism of rhetoric provokes a protest from Polus, as Socrates easily could have foreseen and surely intended. After all, if the deepest purpose of Socrates' suggestion that rhetoric lacks an account and thus does not deserve to be called an art is to point to Gorgias' failings and to shake his self-satisfaction (see especially 463a6–b1), Socrates has also made every effort to make rhetoric appear as ignoble as possible. These efforts, as he himself indicates, have been directed primarily at Polus (see especially 464e2–465a2). The protest they provoke initiates the extended quarrel between Socrates and Polus that now takes over the conversation, at first as a dispute over Socrates' suggestion that rhetoricians are lowly flatterers.

Polus objects by pointing to the esteem and power rhetoricians enjoy in the cities: Are rhetoricians really regarded as mere flatterers? Don't they have great power in the cities? Rhetoricians are so powerful, Polus argues, that, like tyrants, they kill whomever they want, seize other people's possessions, and expel from the cities whomever it seems good to them to expel (466a9–c2). Far more openly than Gorgias ever did, Polus calls attention to the capacity of rhetoric for injustice. Whereas he had earlier suggested that rhetoric is noble because it is able to gratify human beings (see 462c8–9), he now makes its capacity for serving the most tyrannical desires of the rhetorician himself the basis of its nobility.

We may assume that Socrates wished to push Polus in a direction that will cast the quarrel between them as a dispute over the

importance of justice. But especially if we make this assumption, Socrates' initial response to Polus' celebration of the tyrannical power of rhetoricians is surprising. For Socrates does not begin with the moral condemnation of the actions of Polus' rhetorician-tyrants that we are expecting at this point. Rather, he begins by simply denying that such men are truly powerful. Socrates even goes so far as to claim that rhetoricians are *the least powerful* men in any city (466b9–10, d6–8). To defend this paradoxical claim, Socrates argues that, while rhetoricians and tyrants can do what seems best to them in the cities, they do not do what they truly wish and thus they are not truly powerful (466c3–e2).

Polus is astounded and perplexed by the initial formulation of Socrates' argument. Socrates is thus forced to give a fuller explanation. He does so by beginning from a point Polus is willing to grant: true power must be good for the one who possesses it (466b6–8, e4–8). Socrates then connects this point with the crucial distinction he has drawn between “doing what seems best” and “doing what one wishes” (see 466c6–e2, 467a1–b9). As Socrates explains to Polus, the mere capacity of a man to do what seems best to him does not yet mean that he does what he wishes, for the deepest wish of anyone who acts in a given situation is not simply to perform whatever actions he performs but rather to be benefited by his actions. It follows that actions that prove harmful to oneself ought to be regarded as failures to do what one wishes that display one's folly rather than one's power (see especially 466e9–11, 467a1–10).

Since Polus continues to have difficulty grasping this argument, Socrates spells out at greater length a general view of human actions according to which every action, or at least every action that is “for the sake of something,” should be regarded as a mere means to some end that is the true object of the actor's striving.¹¹ According to the view

11. Socrates introduces the qualification that he is speaking of actions that are “for the sake of something” at 467d6–7. While he leaves open the possibility that his argument does not apply to all actions, Socrates does not call this possible limitation to Polus' attention, and he at times gives the impression

Socrates presents, whenever someone acts for the sake of something (e.g., when a man takes medicine for the sake of health, or labors for the sake of wealth), he does not act out of a wish to perform the actions themselves, but rather he acts only because he is seeking some end. This is true, according to Socrates, of all human actions that have purposes beyond the actions themselves: “whenever someone does something for the sake of something, he does not wish for the thing he does, but for that for the sake of which he does it” (467d6–e1). By this view, any particular action – be it walking, running, sailing, killing, stealing, or anything else – is neither good nor bad but rather what Socrates calls an “intermediate” (*metaxu*) that gains its value only by its service to various ends (467e1–468b1). Furthermore, the various “ends” that any given person pursues can be reduced from a multiplicity (wisdom, health, wealth, etc.) to a single end, since what each of us is really seeking through such “ends” is the good, or, as Socrates specifies it, the beneficial, that is, one’s own benefit (468b1–c5). Accordingly, actions should be judged not by any intrinsic value they might appear to possess but solely by whether they prove to be beneficial to the actor; any actions that prove harmful to the actor ought not to be regarded as actions the actor truly wished to perform or as marks of true power (468d1–e5).

Socrates delivers this argument to support the conclusion that Polus’ rhetorician-tyrants, who perform all sorts of spectacular actions such as killing, stealing, and exiling their enemies, may not do what they truly wish since they may not be benefited by these actions. The “power” of such men may not be true power at all. Of course, Socrates’ argument genuinely supports only the conclusion that it is *possible* that Polus’ rhetorician-tyrants fail to do what they wish and thus lack true power. The argument does not show that this is *necessarily* the case. And Socrates acknowledges this limitation of his argument in his own formulation of the argument’s conclusion (see

that he is speaking about all human actions (see, e.g., *hekastote* at 467c6 and d3 and *pantōn* at 467d6).

especially 468d5–6, e3–5).¹² It is true that Socrates also acts, in the course of making the argument, as if the burden of proof were on Polus to show that rhetorician-tyrants who do what seems best to them also do what they wish (consider especially 466e13–467b9). But this is puzzling. Why should the burden of proof be on Polus, who thinks that it is obvious that such men do both what seems best to them and what they wish? Polus, as we have seen, has a hard time grasping Socrates' argument because he has a hard time grasping that there could ever be a divergence between these two principles; hence he remains unpersuaded by Socrates' argument even as he is forced to accept the logic of its movement (see 466e3–467b10 together with 468c2–e5). Polus' resistance, however, should not be attributed to mere obtuseness on his part. In fact, his resistance reveals the deepest limitation of Socrates' argument. For his resistance shows that Socrates' argument could never be persuasive to someone who thinks that there is rarely a significant gap between what seems best to people – that is, the objects of the most manifest human desires – and the true good that people wish for. And yet, isn't that the view of everyone who thinks that the elements of the human good are fairly obvious? Polus assumes, as many do, that it is not hard to discern what is good. Our desires direct us toward ruling in the city, enjoying wealth, and indulging in various other pleasures. Polus thinks that one could hardly make a drastic mistake in pursuing such things; the only mistakes, he assumes, come in failing to attain the objects of our desires, not in seeking them in the first place. Against such an assumption – one that Socrates will later acknowledge is far from rare (consider 472a2–b3) – Socrates' argument carries no real force. Socrates' argument leads to a dead end, and Polus' revolt at the end of the argument is hardly surprising (see 468e6–9).¹³

12. Socrates' acknowledgment of this limitation of his argument is often missed or at least not reproduced when commentators paraphrase the argument. See, e.g., Jaeger, *Paideia*, 2:135; Friedländer, *Plato*, 2:255. Better in this respect is Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory*, 117.
13. Cf. Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, 2:331–2.

But if Socrates' argument is so poorly designed for convincing Polus and its failure is so predictable, why does Socrates bother to make this argument? This question can be answered, I think, by connecting the failure of the argument with the most striking feature of the argument as a whole: its complete silence about considerations of justice. We have already observed that Socrates does not begin with a moral condemnation of Polus' rhetorician-tyrants. And not only does Socrates say nothing in his argument about the injustice of tyrannical actions, but the argument itself is remarkably amoral: it presents a view of human actions that looks at actions – even such actions as killing and stealing (see 468b4–6, d1–4) – as intrinsically neither good nor bad. All actions, or at least all actions that are “for the sake of something,” are presented as mere means that should be measured only by whether they conduce to the benefit of the actor; in themselves, they have no more value than rocks or wood (467e6–468a3).¹⁴ Given such a view of human actions, with its apparent approval of a hard-boiled concern for self-interest, it could be hard to see why one would question the wisdom of those who seek to gain enough sway in the city to do what seems best to them. Although Polus must acknowledge that it is *possible* that doing what seems best in such cases may lead to misery rather than happiness, it is not so unreasonable of him, even or precisely if he accepts the outlook of Socrates' argument, to regard this possibility as a remote one that need not be taken very seriously. To be more deeply impressed by this possibility, Polus would have to have genuine doubts that the elements of the human good are as obvious as he thinks they are. Socrates' opening argument about the power of rhetorician-tyrants can thus be understood in this way: it is meant more to reveal than truly to shake Polus' conviction that the

14. The amoral character of Socrates' argument is often obscured in accounts that too quickly merge this argument with the argument Socrates will make in the next section of the dialogue. See, e.g., Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, 138–9, “Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*,” 113–14; Friedländer, *Plato*, 2:255; Santas, *Socrates*, 223–7.

elements of the human good are obvious, and also to show that an argument that appeals only to prudence could never really shake that conviction.¹⁵

THE TURN TO JUSTICE AND THE SOCRATIC THESIS (468e6–470c3)

The failure of Socrates' argument to make any meaningful impression on Polus can help us make sense of what would otherwise be the perplexing turn the conversation now takes. On the heels of an argument that neglects and even excludes moral considerations, Socrates turns abruptly to the question of justice. His turn to the question of justice, moreover, involves a dramatic departure from the view that the worth of actions should be measured only by their service to other ends. Socrates now turns to the view that everything, so to speak, is riding on whether actions are performed justly or unjustly, that is, on the character of the actions themselves (see 468e10–469b6).

The most immediate cause of this turn is Polus' effort to reject the preceding argument by appealing to Socrates' own experience: "As if you, Socrates, would not welcome the chance to do whatever seems best to you in the city, rather than not, or feel envy if you were to see someone killing whomever it seemed good to him or depriving him of his possessions or fettering him" (468e6–9). By rebelling against Socrates' argument in this way, Polus forces Socrates to express his own view. No longer able simply to elicit Polus' views through his questioning, Socrates replies by arguing that one must consider the justice of the actions to which Polus points: if the actions are performed unjustly, they could never be enviable (468e10–469b11; consider also 470b9–c3). Socrates thus takes a position – that unjust actions are

15. For a line of argument bearing some important similarities to the one just considered, see *Second Alcibiades* 138b6–141b8. On that line of argument and Alcibiades' reaction to it, which resembles Polus' reaction here, see Bruell, *On the Socratic Education*, 40–43.

never enviable because injustice is the greatest of all evils (see especially 469b8–9) – that he will defend throughout the rest of the dialogue. Indeed, this position will play such a large role in Socrates' arguments from here on that it may be called, for the sake of simplicity, "the Socratic thesis."¹⁶

Socrates' turn to justice and to the Socratic thesis, however, cannot be explained entirely by the fact that he has now been put on the spot. It is also important that this turn occurs immediately after the failure of Socrates' preceding argument to move Polus from his conviction that the elements of the human good are obvious. For it makes sense that, in the wake of showing that an appeal to prudence carries little power to shake that conviction, Socrates would turn to justice in order to reveal that Polus' views are more complex than they seem. After all, isn't it through the concern for justice, or, in other words, through one's moral experience, that one can first be awakened to the thought that there are restrictions on the pursuit of goods such as rule, wealth, and pleasure? And isn't this thought connected to the further thought that one's truest good may lie in something beyond the enjoyment of these more obvious goods?¹⁷ Socrates' turn to justice is the best way of revealing that Polus is not as simple as his reaction to Socrates' opening argument made him seem. Furthermore, given that Polus' reaction was based on a commonly held view, Socrates can thus teach through Polus a more general lesson about the complexity of human concerns and the depth of the human attachment to justice.

16. Another reason for giving it this title is that the same "thesis," or at least a position very similar to it, plays an important role in other dialogues. See, e.g., *Crito* 48b3–49e3, *Apology* 28b3–30d5, and *Cleitophon* 407a5–e2. What I refer to as "the Socratic thesis" is sometimes referred to by other titles. For example, McKim, "Shame and Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*," 35, calls it "the Socratic Axiom"; Kahn, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," 85–86, and Santas, *Socrates*, 183–94, refer to it, as many others do, as a Socratic "paradox."

17. Compare Bruell, *On the Socratic Education*, 42–43; see also 27–30.

Of course, if these are Socrates' aims, he has a long road ahead of him. Polus is hardly ready to acknowledge any concern for justice. His first reaction to Socrates' assertion of the Socratic thesis is disbelief that anyone could really think such a thing (see 469b8–c3). And Socrates would seem not to have made matters any easier by choosing to defend such an extreme position. Socrates chooses to defend the view, to repeat, that doing injustice is the greatest of all evils, greater, in particular, than suffering injustice. The extremism of this view is revealed most clearly by an important consequence that Socrates stresses in the present context: that one ought to pity wrongdoers. Socrates argues to Polus that, while those who kill justly should not be regarded as wretched and pitiable, those who kill unjustly should be pitied for having made themselves wretched (468e10–469b6). Socrates presents this view as a necessary conclusion from the principle that injustice is the greatest of all evils; the intransigent insistence on that principle leads to the paradoxical conclusion that wrongdoers have harmed themselves and thus deserve pity (see especially 469b7–11).¹⁸ Yet this view, paradoxical as it is, is rejected not only by Polus but by almost all people, including those of more obvious decency than Polus. Most people hardly regard pity as the fitting response to injustice. The far more typical response is anger and the desire to punish. Still, we should not conclude from this that the Socratic thesis and its consequences are so extreme as to express a simple or complete transcendence of the ordinary view. For if the ordinary response to injustice reveals a rejection of the conclusion Socrates draws and thus some doubt of the principle that leads to that conclusion, neither does it go over entirely to the other side; if it did, injustice would elicit, not anger and the desire to punish, but unambiguous admiration and the desire to emulate. Anger and the desire to punish reflect ambivalence about

18. Compare *Laws* 731c1–d3, *Apology* 25c5–26a7, *Cleitophon* 407d2–e2, *Republic* 336e2–337a2. See also Mackenzie, *Plato on Punishment*, 237–9; Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, 2:336–37.

whether the unjust are already suffering from their injustice, but that by no means amounts to a complete abandonment of the concern for justice or of the belief that justice is superior to injustice. By thinking about the difference between the “Socratic” and the ordinary response to injustice, then, we are led almost immediately to wonder whether the extremism of the Socratic thesis is not a result of its more rigorous attention to the demands of consistency even or especially where the ordinary view wavers and lacks complete clarity as to its principles.¹⁹

Yet, to repeat, Socrates’ extremism broadens the divide between himself and Polus, who rejects Socrates’ argument even more vehemently than most people would. There has been little evidence so far that Polus has any concern for justice, much less a concern strong enough to lead him to accept the Socratic thesis. To say that there has been little evidence, however, is not to say that there has been none (see again 461b3–c4) – and Socrates has only begun his discussion of justice with Polus.

POLUS’ “REFUTATION” OF SOCRATES (470c4–471e1)

The conversation now concentrates on the question of the truth of the Socratic thesis, with Socrates defending the thesis and Polus attacking it. Although Polus has already expressed his admiration of tyranny, he is willing to admit that it is not always beneficial to kill, steal, and do other such things; such actions are obviously harmful when one gets caught and punished (469c8–470a8). But if Polus grants this much, he resists, to put it mildly, Socrates’ further efforts to draw the line between beneficial and harmful actions on the basis of whether actions

19. It is worth noticing, in this connection, another difference between Socrates’ position in this section and the ordinary view: Socrates does not express any admiration or envy of those who punish justly. Although he denies that such men are wretched and pitiable, he also denies that they are enviable (469a9–b2). Here, too, he shows none of the zeal for punishing characteristic of the ordinary moral outlook and visible in Polus.

are performed justly or unjustly (see 470b9–c3). Polus is unwilling to agree, in other words, that injustice is *always* harmful to the one who does it, or that harm follows *necessarily* from the fact of injustice. Polus is so far from accepting this view that he is incredulous that anyone could hold it, and he declares that even a child could refute it (470c4–5). At Socrates' urging, Polus will go first in attempting a refutation of the Socratic thesis, after which Socrates will try to refute Polus' view that injustice often pays.

Polus' refutation – if “refutation” is the appropriate word for it – consists simply of an example taken from the political affairs of the day. To show that “many human beings who do injustice are happy,” Polus gives the example of Archelaus, a man who, as Polus reminds Socrates, has been ruling Macedonia since the death of his father Perdiccas (470d2–6).²⁰ Polus thinks that the mere mention of Archelaus' name should suffice to show that it is possible for an unjust man to be happy. But he is led to describe Archelaus' unscrupulous rise to power by what appears to him as Socrates' obstinate refusal to grant the obvious. While acknowledging that he has heard of Archelaus' exploits, Socrates refuses to pass judgment on his happiness since he has not spent time with the man (470d9–e3). To Polus' annoyed reply that by this standard Socrates would not even concede that the king of Persia is happy, Socrates affirms that that is true: “for I don't know how he stands with respect to education and justice” (470e6–7). Although Polus finds this response ridiculous and puzzling, we should pay close attention to the complexity of what Socrates says in this exchange. For one thing, Socrates' statements suggest that he regards justice as something harder to determine than we ordinarily suppose; it is not sufficient, according to Socrates, to hear of a man's actions, but one must spend time with a man to know whether or not he is just. And if this makes the Socratic thesis seem less straightforward than it first appeared, we also should note the modification in that thesis as Socrates now presents

20. Archelaus came to power in Macedonia in 413 B.C.

it: it is not only justice but also education that is essential to the virtue upon which happiness and misery depend (consider *paideias* at 470e6 in the context of 470e4–11). Might Socrates be indicating here that he thinks that there are elements of virtue other than justice, elements that might even be higher in the same way that legislation was earlier presented as a higher art than justice? In any case, this line of thought is not pursued, because Socrates quickly returns to the view that justice is the sole determinant of happiness. He says that he would regard Archelaus as unhappy “if in fact he is unjust” (compare 471a1–3 with 470e6–11).

But what about the injustice of Archelaus? Polus thinks, to repeat, that it is obvious. How could a man who has lived Archelaus’ life not be unjust? Growing ever more frustrated and incredulous, Polus delivers his longest speech of the dialogue, describing the injustices that paved Archelaus’ path to power (471a4–d2). According to Polus’ vivid account, delivered with a blend of venom and sarcasm, Archelaus had no right to the throne of Macedonia. Born of a woman who was a slave of his uncle Alcetas (Perdiccas’ brother), Archelaus “in accordance with the just” should have lived as a slave of Alcetas. While such a life, Polus says to Socrates, would have made Archelaus happy “according to your argument,” he chose instead to make himself miserable by doing “the greatest injustices.” After the death of his father, Polus reports, Archelaus began his rise to power by first eliminating his uncle and his uncle’s son, his own cousin. Deceiving these men by promising them that he would help them seize power, he got them drunk at a feast, threw them into a wagon, dragged them into the night, and slit their throats. Once Archelaus had committed these crimes, Polus continues, “he failed to notice that he was making himself most wretched,” and so, rather than repenting, he next trained his sights on his seven-year-old brother, the legitimate son of Perdiccas and the rightful heir to the throne. Not wishing to make himself happy by following the just course of rearing this young boy and then turning power over to him, he chose instead to throw him into

a well, and, after drowning him, he reported to the child's mother, the queen Cleopatra, that the boy had fallen into the well and died while chasing a goose. Since he has done all of these injustices on his way to power – injustices surpassing any done by the rest of the Macedonians – Archelaus, by Socrates' standards, should be the most miserable of all the Macedonians, not the happiest. "And perhaps," Polus concludes with a final swipe at Socrates, "there is someone among the Athenians, beginning with you, who would prefer to be anyone else among the Macedonians other than Archelaus."

Polus' account of the life of Archelaus is meant to establish beyond a shadow of a doubt that Archelaus is an unjust man, one whose life even Socrates would have to grant is enviable. Yet, despite Polus' intentions, perhaps the most significant thing about the speech is what it reveals about Polus' own views. It is striking how adamant and unquestioning Polus is about the injustice of Archelaus. Is it really as clear as Polus insists that Archelaus should be regarded as the paradigm of an unjust man? Archelaus' lineage, after all, was not that of a typical slave. Nor does Polus provide any evidence to prove a set of accusations that would be hard to verify. Thucydides' report of Archelaus' accession, by contrast, makes no mention of the crimes described by Polus but focuses instead on the great benefits that Archelaus brought to Macedonia.²¹ Polus says nothing about the character of Archelaus' rule after his rise to power.²² And only by an unquestioning application of the standards of legal justice, one that refuses to consider the complex circumstances on which a case to exculpate

21. See Thucydides 2.100.

22. See Saxonhouse, "An Unspoken Theme in Plato's *Gorgias*," 147: "Polus ignores those activities of Archelaus which strengthened the status of Macedonia *vis-à-vis* the cities of Greece, his success in expanding Macedonian trade, in increasing Macedonia's allies, and in Hellenizing the barbarian state." As part of his effort at Hellenizing the barbarian state, Archelaus played host to a number of the leading lights of Athenian intellectual life, including Euripides and Agathon (Dodds, *Gorgias*, 241).

Archelaus might be mounted, can Polus claim without further argument that Archelaus is clearly unjust (consider especially 471a4–8 and c1–4).²³

That Polus does not entertain any doubts about Archelaus' guilt, but instead describes his actions with so much emphasis on their wickedness, should prompt us to raise a surprising question about Polus' attitude towards Archelaus. Is it free of anger or indignation? Doesn't Polus reveal that he is disturbed by the spectacle of such blatant and successful injustice? Against this suggestion, one might object that Polus clearly envies Archelaus, and, since he says as much himself, to attribute indignation to him is to ignore the explicit meaning of his speech. Yet this objection is not as powerful as it might seem, because envy is not necessarily inconsistent with indignation and may even be a necessary precondition of it (consider again 468e6–469c2). Indeed, it reveals something of the complexity of Polus – and of indignation itself – that Archelaus is both the hero and the villain of Polus' speech. To be sure, it is more obvious that Archelaus is the hero. But his role as the villain is brought out most simply by the vehemence of Polus' insistence on his injustice.²⁴

23. It is worth noticing that even in Polus' own description of Archelaus' plot against his uncle and cousin, Polus speaks of Archelaus using the ruse that he was intending to "give back" rule of Macedonia (see 471b2). Although it may be true that Perdiccas had taken the throne from Alcetas (see 471b2–3), the indication that the throne at least in some sense belonged to Archelaus even before the actions described by Polus suggests that the situation in the wake of Perdiccas' death was more complicated – and Archelaus' claim to the throne possibly more legitimate – than Polus suggests by insisting that justice clearly demanded that Archelaus live as a slave of Alcetas. On Polus' simplification of a possibly more complicated situation, see also Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 44.
24. We should recall here the zeal for punishing that Polus displayed earlier in his conversation with Socrates (see again 468e6–469a10). Nichols, "The Rhetoric of Justice in Plato's *Gorgias*," 139, also suggests that Polus displays "anger at the apparent prosperity of the unjust"; he describes Polus' account of Archelaus as "a prosecutor's speech of accusation overlaid with the cynical intellectual's bitter revelation of the rewards for injustice." See

Yet Socrates, as we have seen, is unwilling to concede to Polus that Archelaus is unjust. Once Polus has completed his speech, Socrates makes an important remark that reaffirms the position he took before the speech. After striking back at Polus by scoffing at his speech, Socrates tells Polus that he agrees with him "on none of the things that you are saying" (471d8–9). This remark refers most directly to Polus' claim that the life of Archelaus shows that an unjust man can be happy (consider 471d7–8). But if the remark is taken strictly ("on *none* of the things," *ouden*), it extends also to the more basic claim that Archelaus is obviously an unjust man. For the burden of Polus' speech was at least as much to establish the injustice of Archelaus as to emphasize his happiness. Socrates, then, distances himself once again from Polus' position on the issue of Archelaus' injustice. And by doing so, Socrates also points to the question that would have to be raised in order to settle this issue. To settle the issue of Archelaus' injustice, one would ultimately have to raise the more fundamental question, "What is justice?" Does justice always consist, for instance, in obedience to the law, or are its demands sometimes more complicated? However, if Socrates' remark points to the need to raise this question, it stops short of raising it explicitly. In fact, we can see here a crucial limit of the discussion between Socrates and Polus. While Socrates and Polus have been arguing and will continue to argue about the goodness of justice, nowhere do they examine what would seem to be the prior question of what justice is.²⁵ Since this is a violation of Socrates' own principle of dialectics – namely, that one must say what something is before praising or blaming it (see 448d8–e4) – we must

also Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 44; Saxonhouse, "An Unspoken Theme in Plato's *Gorgias*," 146–7. For contrasting interpretations, which stress only Polus' admiration of Archelaus and his attraction to injustice, see Voegelin, *Plato*, 26–28, and Santas, *Socrates*, 238–9.

25. Compare *Republic* 354a12–c3. Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 6, makes a similar observation, calling attention to a limit not just of Socrates' conversation with Polus but of the dialogue as a whole. See also Newell, *Ruling Passion*, 38; Santas, *Socrates*, 219–20.

conclude that Socrates' discussion of justice with Polus is not a dialectical examination of justice in the fullest or deepest sense of Socratic dialectics. To state this another way, although the discussion proceeds for the most part through conversational exchanges, the purpose of these exchanges is not to reveal the true character of justice, but rather to accomplish something more limited.

SOCRATES' "REFUTATION" OF POLUS (471e2–481b5)

That Socrates does not engage Polus in an examination of the fundamental question, "What is justice?" does not mean that his aim in speaking with him is an unimportant one. Socrates' primary aim, I have suggested, is to reveal that Polus' concerns are more complex than they initially seem and, through this, to show something more general about the depth of the human concern for justice. Our confidence in attributing this aim to Socrates should be strengthened by the speech he now delivers – a speech that includes both a promise to bring out Polus' agreement with his position and an important statement on the views most people hold about justice.

These features of Socrates' speech emerge in the course of his discussion of the speech's main theme. Serving as a bridge between Polus' attempt at refutation and his own, Socrates' speech is a reflection on the difference between Polus' method of refutation and the one he will soon employ. According to Socrates, Polus has been following the method typical of those who argue in law courts, since such men make their cases by bringing in as many witnesses as they can to support their side (471e2–472a2). Now, the "witnesses" to whom Socrates is referring in the case of Polus are presumably all of the Athenians, who Polus insisted would choose the life of Archelaus over that of any other Macedonian (see again 471c8–d1). But if this is fairly straightforward, much more surprising is the step Socrates takes next. He grants and even bolsters Polus' point by affirming that all Athenians and foreigners, "except a few," would say the same things as Polus and could serve as his witnesses. Socrates even provides names, including

some of the most respected names in Athens: his list, which spans the Athenian political spectrum, includes Nicias and his brothers as well as "the whole house of Pericles" (472a2–b3).²⁶ Socrates' acknowledgment that these men could be brought as witnesses by Polus is surprising because it suggests that the human concern for justice is in fact not so deep; it suggests that even decent men – including the most pious – have grave doubts about whether injustice is always the worst path. In other words, Socrates seems to place himself, as an advocate of the Socratic thesis, in a minority, not to say in a minority of one (consider 472b3–4, c1–2).²⁷ And yet his speech is not as simple as this suggests. For although Socrates grants that these "witnesses" could be brought to testify in support of Polus' view that the unjust are sometimes happy, he also says that, in offering this testimony, they would be "false witnesses" (see 472a1–2, b4–6). By this, Socrates means more than that they would be wrong; he also means that they would be lying or giving their support to a claim they do not really believe.²⁸ Socrates thus seems – puzzlingly – to move within the same speech between conceding and denying that most people agree with Polus rather than with him. It is possible, however, to make sense of this wavering. For

26. On Socrates' selection of figures from the different political factions in Athens, see Dodds, *Gorgias*, 244; Nichols, *Gorgias and Phaedrus*, 57n. Nicias was, in the words of Dodds, "an old-fashioned conservative"; "the house of Pericles" refers to the leaders of the democrats. Socrates also mentions Aristocrates, a member of the oligarchic party.
27. Compare *Republic* 619b7–d3, *Laws* 660d11–662a8. Socrates stresses the piety of some of the figures mentioned in the present passage by speaking of the offerings to the gods brought by Nicias and his brothers and by Aristocrates (see 472a5–b1). By stressing their piety in this context, Socrates leads one to wonder whether the very hope for divine support for justice is not itself an indication of doubts about the intrinsic goodness of justice. On this question, consider Adeimantus' complaint about the typical praises of justice in his speech in Book Two of the *Republic* (362e1–367e5).
28. This stronger meaning is suggested by Socrates' use of the word *pseudomarturas* (false witnesses or perjurers) and is confirmed by a remark Socrates will make shortly after this speech (see 474b2–5). Cf. Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, 76–80.

it can be understood as a reflection of a wavering within the souls of the people Socrates is talking about, that is, within the souls of nearly everyone. In other words, Socrates is suggesting that nearly everyone is of two minds about justice: if beneath ordinary decency there lurk great doubts about whether it is always wise to be just, there also lurks, beneath those doubts, a deeper belief in the goodness of justice.

Yet, if such dividedness about justice is so common as to be nearly universal, it is far from obvious. Unless given some display or demonstration, Socrates' suggestions in his speech on Polus' witnesses cannot be taken for more than assertions. But Socrates does promise to give a display of the dividedness about justice to which he points in at least one case. Socrates explains that his form of refutation, unlike the courtroom-style rhetoric of Polus, aims to make a witness out of his very opponent; and in the present instance, this means that he will try to show that even Polus himself can be brought to agree with the Socratic thesis (see 472b6–c6, 472e4–473a3, and 474a5–b8). Socrates thus stresses that his method is directed at convincing a single individual: his interlocutor. But he also calls attention to the broader significance of what he aims to show in Polus' case and suggests that this case should not be seen as unusual. Socrates indicates the broader significance of his coming refutation of Polus in a statement that initially seems to point in the opposite direction. Denying that he knows how to convince large bodies of people, and admitting that he does not even speak with the many, Socrates says that he will direct his refutation at Polus alone (473e6–474b5). Yet, if Polus is his sole concern, why does Socrates even raise here the issue of the many? One reason he does so is to call attention to an important limit on what he can accomplish: Socrates' one-on-one refutations are not political in the sense that they cannot reach large crowds or influence the many (consider in particular 473e6–474b1). Another reason that Socrates raises the issue of the many, however, is to urge his audience – and we should think here especially of Gorgias – to reflect on the broader implications of his coming refutation of Polus. For Socrates not only denies that he speaks with the many, but he also goes out of his way

to make a point about what they believe. Reaffirming what he had suggested by calling Polus' witnesses "false witnesses," Socrates concludes his statement about the many by telling Polus: "For I suppose that I and you *and the rest of humanity* believe that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, and not paying the just penalty worse than paying it" (474b2–5, emphasis added; see also the repetition at 474b8, and consider 475d1–3).²⁹

This last statement completes the prelude to Socrates' refutation of Polus. In it, we can also see that Socrates has expanded the position he is defending. No longer arguing only that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, Socrates has expanded his thesis to include the claim that those who do injustice are better off if they pay the penalty than if they escape unpunished. Socrates went out of his way to make this addition in the interlude between his speech on Polus' witnesses and his statement about the many (472d6–473e3). After reconfirming Polus' view that it is possible for an unjust man to be happy, and reasserting his own position that that is impossible, Socrates asked Polus about punishment: "Will the man who does injustice be happy even if he receives the just penalty and punishment?" Polus' predictable reply – "not at all, since in that case he would be most miserable" – merely

29. For a similar interpretation of the significance of Socrates' statement about the many, see McKim, "Shame and Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*," 36–37. McKim shares my emphasis on Socrates' effort to reveal the character of the human concern for justice. But he presents that concern, in my view, as simpler than it is by suggesting that, deep down, "we are sure" that the harm injustice does to the soul "far outweigh[s]" any material gains it may bring (47–48). Also, he goes too far in suggesting that Plato believed that "Socratic morality is grounded so deeply within us that its truth is beyond argument" (48). Socrates will go on to make arguments for "Socratic morality," both against Polus and against Callicles; McKim downplays too much the importance of the question of whether Socrates' arguments are sound. My analysis also should be compared with Brickhouse and Smith, *Plato's Socrates*, 74–82. Although Brickhouse and Smith, too, emphasize Socrates' effort to reveal what people really believe about justice, their analysis is closer to McKim's than to mine.

reconfirmed a position he took earlier (compare 472d1–9 with 470a1–8). By eliciting this reply, however, Socrates enabled himself to respond by asserting the opposed view that unpunished injustice makes one even more miserable than injustice that receives its due punishment (472e4–7). Of course, by extending his position in this way, Socrates would seem to have made his task in convincing Polus all the more difficult – and this at the very moment that he is promising to try to win Polus over to his position (see 473a2–3, 474b2–c3). For his part, Polus can hardly believe his ears: Does Socrates really think that an unjust man who gets caught, tortured on the rack, castrated, burned, and is forced to watch his family suffer as he endures further torments, is a happier man than the one who gets away with his crimes and becomes a tyrant (473b12–d2)? Polus is so incredulous that he breaks into laughter at Socrates' claims. He expresses his amused curiosity to hear how Socrates will defend his ludicrous position (see 473e2–5, 474c2–3).

Yet, for all this, Polus *is* swayed by Socrates' refutation. He is led to accept, at least in some manner, the very position he mocks so contemptuously. To understand this remarkable result, and also to judge the true extent of Socrates' success in convincing Polus, we must turn first to the beginning of the argument by which Socrates refutes Polus and try to follow the argument in detail.

Socrates' argument, which marks a kind of new beginning to the conversation between Socrates and Polus (consider *hōsper an ei ex archēs* at 474c4), begins from a set of questions intended to bring out Polus' views on justice, benefit, and nobility. Socrates succeeds in getting Polus to acknowledge that while he regards doing injustice as *better* than suffering it, he also regards it as *more shameful*. Socrates accomplishes this in the crucial opening exchange of the argument:

SOCRATES: Tell me . . . which do you believe to be worse, doing injustice or suffering it?

POLUS: Suffering it – at least that is what I think.

SOCRATES: But what about this? Which is more shameful, doing injustice or suffering it? Answer!

POLUS: Doing it.

SOCRATES: So, then, is it also worse, if indeed it is more shameful?

POLUS: Far from it. (474c4–9)

Polus' view, as it emerges from this exchange, grants the shamefulness of doing injustice without yet conceding – “far from it” – that this speaks decisively to the question of whether injustice is beneficial or harmful. His view thus implies a divide between the shameful and the bad, on the one hand, and between the noble and the good, on the other (see 474c9–d2).³⁰ And it is on this divide that Socrates trains his sights. Having directed Polus' attention to considerations of nobility – that is, to a standard for which Polus himself has already displayed a concern (see again, e.g., 448c8–9, 462c8–9, 463d3) – Socrates turns to an analysis of “the noble” (*to kalon*) or of the character of all noble or beautiful things (*ta panta kala*).³¹

Socrates asks Polus whether all noble things are not seen as such because one “looks away” to something beyond the noble thing itself. He gives the examples of noble bodies, colors, shapes, sounds, and practices. Do you call these things noble, he asks, “looking away to nothing”? “For example, don't you say that noble bodies [*ta sōmata ta kala*] are noble either in reference to some use, that is, with a view to something for which they are useful, or in reference to some pleasure, if they make those who behold them delight in the beholding?”

30. Compare *Laws* 661d6–662a8, 689a1–c3, *Republic* 348a8–e9.

31. The crucial Greek term *kalos* has a broad meaning that no English term fully captures. “Noble-beautiful” might be the best translation, if it were not so awkward. In my treatment of Socrates' argument, I will translate *kalos* as “noble” since the purpose of Socrates' argument is to apply his analysis of *to kalon* to the case of justice. It better captures the moral significance of the term to speak of the nobility of justice than of its beauty. But it is important to bear in mind the range of the term Socrates is analyzing, especially since his analysis will traverse all of that range.

Or do you have anything beyond these things to say about the nobility of the body?" (474d3–e1). When Polus says that he does not have anything beyond use or pleasure to account for the nobility of bodies, Socrates then applies this view to all other noble things, replacing the term "use" with "benefit" such that nobility appears to rest either on pleasure or on benefit or on a combination of the two. He mentions again the examples of shapes, colors, and sounds, and then turns to laws and practices: "Also indeed for things pertaining to laws and practices, that is, the noble ones, surely there isn't anything beyond these – namely, their being either beneficial or pleasant or both" (474e1–7). Socrates' final example is the nobility of learnings or sciences, which Polus readily agrees should be understood along the same lines (475a1–2).

Socrates' analysis leads to the view that the noble must always be understood in terms of pleasure or benefit, and the shameful always in terms of pain or harm. According to this view, whenever one of two things is nobler than the other, its greater nobility must be explained by the greater pleasure it brings or the greater benefit, or by both; and, similarly, the greater shamefulness of one of two things must be due to the greater pain it brings or the greater harm, or to both (475a5–b2). It is at this point that Socrates reminds Polus of his position regarding doing injustice and suffering it. For while Polus has argued that suffering injustice is worse than doing it, he has also conceded that doing injustice is more shameful. But that concession now means – given the analysis of the noble and the shameful that Polus has accepted – that doing injustice must exceed suffering injustice either in pain or in harm or in both (475b5–8). Yet it can hardly be claimed that those who do injustice endure more pain than those who suffer it; and if doing injustice does not exceed in pain, it obviously cannot exceed both in pain and in harm (475b8–c5). There remains only one alternative: doing injustice must exceed suffering injustice in harm (475c6–8). Yet what exceeds in harm is more harmful – that is to say, *worse* – than what it exceeds, and no one would choose for himself what is worse

rather than what is better (475d4–e3). Polus, then, did not know what he was saying when he claimed that suffering injustice is worse than doing it and when he attributed this view to the vast majority of human beings. For it turns out that Socrates was right to claim that “neither I nor you nor any other human being would prefer to do injustice than to suffer it,” since “it proves to be worse” (475e3–6).

Socrates' argument is a remarkable display of his powers. That is not to say, however, that there are no objections that could be raised against it. The most important problems concern the central claim of the argument that the nobility of noble things can be understood only by “looking away” (*apoblepōn*) to some pleasure or some benefit, or to both. For while it may be true that nobility cannot be understood without “looking away” to something (see again 474d3–5), one could object to the view that it has to be pleasure or benefit or a combination of these to which one looks. Couldn't one argue that, when we regard something as noble, we are looking precisely to its nobility itself, a quality that has a being of its own that is not reducible to pleasure or benefit? Or, alternatively, even if one grants that it is necessary to look to pleasure or benefit, doesn't that still leave open the question of *whose* pleasure and benefit must be served? In Socrates' own first example – the nobility of bodies – the pleasure mentioned was said to belong to those *beholding* the noble bodies, not to those *possessing* them (see 474d8–9). Couldn't one suggest something similar about noble men and their actions, that is, that they come to be regarded as noble because of the pleasure and benefit they bring to *others*?³² Or, to

32. This is the objection most frequently discussed by other commentators, especially after it was raised in a well-known article by Gregory Vlastos. See Vlastos, “Was Polus Refuted?” 454–60. Vlastos's article should be compared with a number of other accounts, which vary in the extent of their agreement with Vlastos. See Mackenzie, *Plato on Punishment*, 241–4; Kahn, “Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*,” 88–92; Santas, *Socrates*, 233–40; Irwin, *Gorgias*, 157–8; McKim, “Shame and Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*,” 241–4. See also Vlastos's restatement of his argument in *Socrates, Ironist*

approach the issue in another way, one might ask whether the nobility of things such as bodies, colors, shapes, and sounds really provides a good model for understanding the nobility of human beings and their actions. Socrates exploits the range of the term “noble” (*kalos*) by suggesting that it means the same thing regardless of what it modifies; and he makes his case easier by turning to practices and laws, and then to doing and suffering injustice, only after first establishing a certain view of “nobility” through the examples of bodies, colors, shapes, and sounds. But doesn’t the nobility of human beings and their actions have a special character that makes it more resistant to explanation in terms of benefit or pleasure?³³

These objections are sufficient to cast doubt on Socrates’ argument. But Polus does not raise any of them. He goes along with the argument. And we can understand why he does not object by considering the character of the objections just raised. For they have the tenor of what one might call moral objections to Socrates’ analysis of nobility in terms of pleasure and benefit. That is, they are objections to what one

and Moral Philosopher, 139–48. Earlier interpretations tend to be less critical of Socrates’ argument. See, e.g., Friedländer, *Plato*, 2:256–7; Taylor, *Plato*, 113–14; Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility*, 267. Although Vlastos is right to criticize such interpretations for their unquestioning acceptance of Socrates’ argument, he goes too far in suggesting that no one before him had raised any doubts about the soundness of Socrates’ argument (“Was Polus Refuted?” 454). See Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, 2:334–5; Dodds, *Gorgias*, 249.

33. See note 31 above on the range of the term *kalos*. While I explain in note 31 my reason for translating *kalos* as “noble,” the inability of any single English term to capture the range of *kalos* can be seen in the strangeness of referring to such things as bodies, colors, shapes, and sounds as “noble.” It would have been more appropriate to use the term “beautiful” in those cases, although shifting between two terms would have created inconsistency and obscured the crucial fact that the term is the same in Greek. Oddly, the difficulty of finding a single English term to apply to all of Socrates’ examples can help one to see the dubiousness of his procedure. It is no accident that “practices” comes last on Socrates’ initial list of examples; the order of that initial list sets up the order or movement of the argument (see 474d3–4).

could well take to be an analysis that tarnishes nobility by reducing it to the pleasant and the beneficial.³⁴ Such an analysis, however, would be appealing to Polus, who is eager to present himself as a tough-minded realist (consider especially 475a2–4). Yet, if Polus' acceptance of Socrates' analysis of the noble is not hard to explain, his acceptance of the argument as a whole is much more surprising. More specifically, what is most surprising is that even after Polus agrees to the view of nobility and shameful things that makes pleasure or benefit the basis of nobility, and pain or harm the basis of shameful things, he does not retract his agreement that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. In other words, one would have expected Polus to revise his understanding of what belongs to the classes of the noble and shameful things once he has accepted a view of these classes that insists upon a necessary connection between nobility and pleasure or benefit, and between shameful things and pain or harm (consider 475a2–c9 together with 474c7–d2). Such a revision would have allowed him to accept Socrates' hard-boiled view of nobility while easily escaping Socrates' conclusion about the goodness of justice. But Polus never makes this simple revision.³⁵

34. See, e.g., the protest of Kahn, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," 93–94, against "Socrates' reliance on a superficial analysis of *to kalon*," which "has the effect of *reducing the moral sense* [of the term]" (the emphasis is Kahn's). See also Friedländer, *Plato*, 2:256–7.
35. Polus' failure to object to Socrates' argument is not given sufficient attention by those who emphasize the weaknesses of the argument. See, e.g., Vlastos, "Was Polus Refuted?" 454–60, *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 139–48; Mackenzie, *Plato on Punishment*, 241–4; Santas, *Socrates*, 233–40. Although McKim goes too far, in my view, in the other direction by downplaying too much the "logical" problems with Socrates' argument, his analysis has the virtue of stressing the "dramatic" significance of Polus' agreement and what it reveals about Polus' concerns (see especially "Shame and Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*," 46–47). Kahn, "Drama and Dialectic in Plato's *Gorgias*," 94–95 also discusses Polus' agreement, but he explains it merely as the result of his deference and attachment to "public opinion." My own analysis will differ in important ways from McKim's, but it is closer to McKim's than to Kahn's.

Perhaps Polus missed his opportunity out of mere slowness. Yet, even if he is not the sharpest of all interlocutors, neither is Polus a fool. The more plausible explanation is that Polus' failure to deny the shamefulness of doing injustice reflects an *unwillingness* to deny it, an unwillingness that stems from the fact that he *truly believes* that doing injustice is shameful. And perhaps we should not be so surprised that he stands by this belief even when it entails accepting the view that injustice must be harmful. After all, didn't Polus earlier display a sense of indignation at Archelaus and his "successful" injustice?³⁶ Insofar as Polus is angered by injustice and finds it shameful – that is, insofar as he disapproves of it – wouldn't he at least yearn for it also to be harmful? If so, then Socrates' argument allows Polus to accept a view that he already on some level wants to accept and thus in some sense already does accept. In other words, Socrates' argument *does succeed* in revealing in Polus a buried concern for justice. To repeat, Polus' commitment to the view that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it, a commitment that does not falter when Socrates suggests that it implies an acceptance of the goodness of justice, is at least some indication that Polus does in fact care about justice. Socrates has thus kept his promise to bring out Polus' attachment to justice.³⁷

We must be careful, though, not to overstate the extent of Socrates' success. The most that can reasonably be said is that Socrates has shown that Polus does in fact have a concern for justice and that he can be brought to acknowledge that concern by the right kind of argument. But does such an argument carry the power to move Polus away from his attraction to injustice and his doubts about the goodness of justice? Socrates himself poses this same question in another form through an

36. See again 470d5–471d2; recall also his earlier anger at Socrates at 461b3–c4.

37. Compare McKim, "Shame and Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*," 44–47. My argument in the present paragraph is similar to McKim's. The next paragraph, however, will bring out my disagreement with McKim who, in my view, presents Socrates' success as more complete than it is.

analogy he offers as he is stating the conclusion of his argument. By urging Polus to "submit nobly to the argument just as to a doctor" (475d6–7), Socrates uses an analogy that recalls his earlier schema of arts and thus leads to the suggestion that his argument should be seen as an example of that art – "justice" – which seeks to return the soul to a state of basic health. Yet, aside from remembering that such an art was not presented as the highest (a designation that was given to "legislation"), we must ask about the power of this medical art of the soul. If Polus' soul is ailing because he is drawn to injustice out of doubts about the goodness of justice, how much of a cure does Socrates' argument really offer?³⁸

To be sure, Socrates has some success with Polus. But the limits of that success become increasingly visible as Socrates goes on to make a further argument, taking up the second main issue over which he and Polus are divided: the issue of punishment. Socrates' further argument, in which he contends that unjust men are better off if they receive punishment than if they escape unpunished, is an extension of the argument we have just considered. It relies for its crucial premises on agreements reached in the prior argument (see especially 476e3–477a2), and it completes Socrates' refutation of Polus' position and his defense of the Socratic thesis in its fullest form (see especially 479c8–e6). Most important for our present purposes, however, is Polus' response. Although Polus goes along with even the most radical claims that Socrates puts forward in this argument, he does so with something considerably less than full conviction. Polus' reservations are conveyed most clearly by the frequency with which he replies to Socrates' questions asking for his affirmation of various steps with phrases such as "it appears so" or "it is likely" (see, e.g., 477a3, e2, e6, 478b2, e2, e5, 479a4, d1–3, d6, e9; and even in the prior argument, see 475c7, d4, e2–3, e6). It is true that there are also moments when Polus' responses reconfirm the concern for justice revealed by Socrates' earlier argument (see, e.g., 478b3–5, 476b1–3, e3–4). But these moments are fairly rare,

38. Cf. Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 50–51.

and so little did even Socrates' prior argument stick that at a crucial juncture Polus has to be reminded of its central principle (see 477c4–5). One gets the sense that Polus is willing to go along with Socrates' argument – to the extent that he is willing – more because he is committed to following out a line of reasoning to its conclusion than because he is genuinely persuaded (see especially 475e2–3, 480e1–2).³⁹

There are, as it turns out, good reasons not to be persuaded by Socrates' argument about punishment. Without going into the details of this intricate and lengthy argument, it is possible to give a brief summary of its main steps.⁴⁰ Socrates' argument begins with a defense of the principle that whenever an action occurs, the one who "suffers" that action has an experience, in his suffering, of the same sort or quality as the experience of the doer, in his doing. Thus, for instance, if a hard and swift striking occurs, the one who is struck is struck hard and swiftly, just as the striker strikes hard and swiftly (476b7–c3). The purpose of establishing this principle is that it enables Socrates to argue that just punishment involves not only the performing of a just action by the punisher, but also the suffering of one by the person who is punished (476d5–e3). This, in turn, enables Socrates to return to the agreements already reached in the preceding argument. By recalling those agreements, he can get Polus to concede that just things are noble things and hence also good things, and, therefore, that the recipient of punishment, as a sufferer of just things, must suffer or experience good things (476e2–477a4). Of course, Socrates' reliance here on the earlier

39. Contrast McKim, "Shame and Truth in Plato's *Gorgias*," 46–47. For evaluations of the extent of Socrates' success with Polus closer to my own, see Kastely, "In Defense of Plato's *Gorgias*," 97, 106; Arieti, "Plato's Philosophic *Antiope*," 205; Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 50–51.

40. For a more thorough analysis of this argument and its weaknesses, see Mackenzie, *Plato on Punishment*, 180–4. Compare also Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 53–57; Santas, *Socrates*, 240–6; Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, 2:336.

agreements depends on the assumptions that *all* just things are noble and, as noble, good for *everyone involved*, assumptions that one might well question in the case of punishment (see 476b1–2 together with 476e2–477a4).⁴¹ But the more important difficulties with Socrates' argument arise as he goes on to try to articulate the great benefit that one receives from being punished. Socrates argues that punishment improves the unjust soul by releasing it from the evils that plague it. And he argues that, just as poverty is the evil of possessions, and sickness is the evil of the body, the evil of the soul is injustice. Or, rather, Socrates argues this in some places, whereas in others he presents injustice as just one of a set of evils of the soul that also includes intemperance, cowardice, and ignorance.⁴² Socrates' mention of these other evils or vices raises several questions about his argument. Does punishment release one from *all* of the evils of the soul? Or does it release one from only *one* of them? And for that matter, how exactly does it release one from *any* of them? If it is extremely hard to see how punishment might release one, for example, from ignorance, it is not obvious how it releases one even from injustice. Yet Socrates' argument depends decisively on the view that punishment releases one from "a great harm and an amazing evil," because only if that is true would an unjust man be better off seeking out punishment despite the undeniable pain it entails (see 477d1–e6). Socrates, however, does not make a complete and convincing case that punishment cures the soul of injustice. Nor does he answer the prior question of exactly why injustice is such "a great harm and an amazing evil" to have in the soul in the first place.⁴³

41. It is worth recalling, in this connection, Socrates' own earlier unwillingness to express any admiration or envy for punishers (see again 469a4–b2). See also *Laws* 860b1–7.
42. Compare the formulations at 477b6–8, c2, c3–4, c9–d1, d4–5, e4–6, 478b1, and d6–7; for a similar wavering in the case of the body, compare 477b3–5, c2, and e8.
43. On this last point, see Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy*, 51; Grote, *Plato, and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, 2:336–8.

The last of these problems with Socrates' argument is the most significant, because it reveals the largest gap in the argument and the deepest reason for Polus' reluctance to embrace it fully. To appreciate the importance of this gap, though, we must first give due weight to Socrates' argument and be careful not to be too dismissive of it. Since it culminates in strange claims such as that the best way to get revenge against an enemy is to help him escape the benefits of being punished (see 480e5–481b1), it is tempting to regard this argument as simply ridiculous and "ironic."⁴⁴ But there are several reasons why that temptation should be resisted. Socrates' argument sketches out what may be called, with some justification, a Socratic theory of punishment. According to this theory, punishment improves the unjust soul by releasing it from the evils that plague it. Perhaps most important in this connection is that Socrates makes no mention of what are commonly thought to be the two most important aims of punishment: deterrence and retribution. In fact, it is Socrates' silence about these aims, as much as anything else, that makes his argument seem so strange and unrealistic. Yet, strange as it is, Socrates' argument captures something that may at times be hard to discern but is no less present in our beliefs about punishment than the concern to deter future crimes and to get revenge for past ones. Don't we also believe that punishment can rehabilitate the unjust soul or provide the path to redemption? While not always on the surface, it is not entirely foreign to the ordinary outlook on punishment to believe that the suffering involved in punishment is a suffering that purifies and restores. And if that belief is at odds with the belief that punishment should also cause deserved harm, that tension reveals not so much a flaw in Socrates' presentation as a kind of quandary in our beliefs about punishment – a quandary that consists in our belief that punishment should be at once something harmful and something beneficial. Socrates' "theory of punishment," then, can have the virtue of awakening us to this quandary and calling attention to the hopes buried even in

44. See Dodds, *Gorgias*, 257–9; Thompson, *Gorgias*, 70.

our convictions about punishment. Indeed, the evidence for Socrates' argument, such as it is, consists precisely in the willingness of people to grant the premises that lead to the extreme conclusions that Socrates draws out.⁴⁵

Yet, while Socrates' argument may have the power to awaken thought, its power to convince is more limited. To return to Polus, although he grants the crucial premise (see again 476e2–477a4), he goes along with the argument half-heartedly at best. Socrates' argument may succeed in revealing convictions he never realized he had, but Polus' reluctance to embrace the argument raises doubts about whether his views have been permanently transformed. His reluctance itself, furthermore, can be seen as related to the question of punishment and its restorative power. That is, not only is Polus reluctant to accept Socrates' argument about punishment, but his reluctance itself can be seen as a reluctance to welcome a kind of punishment that he is receiving. After all, isn't the refutation to which Socrates subjects Polus a kind of punishment in its own right? We have already considered Socrates' comparison of his earlier argument to a doctor. And it is surely no mere coincidence that the analogy of the medical art also plays a prominent role in his argument about punishment. Indeed, Socrates draws out this analogy at length, comparing the effect of punishment on the soul to the effect of medical treatments on the body (see 477e7–479c6). Socrates' emphasis on this analogy, especially when taken together with the earlier analogy between his own argument and a doctor, encourages us to regard his refutation of Polus as an act of punishment for the benefit of Polus' soul. Yet, even more pointedly than before, this line of thought compels us to ask whether Polus has been given more than a temporary remedy. Certainly, it would be overly optimistic to expect the transformation in his views to endure for long. Moreover, if Polus should rebel against the position to which he has been led, as he surely will, his rebellion would not be entirely unjustified. For Socrates has appealed to and relied on Polus' attachment

45. Compare *Republic* 335b2–d13.

to justice to try to restore his commitment to justice, but he has not backed up these efforts with a truly convincing defense of the goodness of justice. We cannot avoid the conclusion, it seems, that the problem lies not just with Polus as the recipient of punishment but also with Socrates as the deliverer of it. Socrates appears to be like a doctor who is better at diagnosing an illness and indicating the need for treatment than he is at providing a genuine cure.

If Socrates' refutation of Polus can be seen as an act of punishment, it also can be seen as an act of rhetoric, although not of the kind of rhetoric that Socrates criticized earlier. At the end of his conversation with Polus, Socrates returns to the issue of rhetoric and makes a suggestion about the proper uses of rhetoric. He argues that rhetoric should not be used to make defense speeches in cases of one's own injustices or those of one's family, friends, or fatherland; rather, it should be used to accuse oneself and one's family and friends of any injustices that merit punishment (480a6–d7). In other words, Socrates rejects the most common but morally questionable use of rhetoric and replaces it with a novel and just use. Now, Socrates surely intends his concluding remarks about rhetoric for the ears of Gorgias as much as for those of Polus. And we may thus say that he ends his conversation with Polus by suggesting to Gorgias a better and more just use for his powers. Rather than using rhetoric as a tool of exploitation, Gorgias ought to use it to help himself and others by accusing himself and those close to him whenever they stray from the path of justice. Such a suggestion, furthermore, is in keeping with what Socrates has done before Gorgias' eyes with Polus. Socrates has brought out Polus' temptation toward injustice, and then he also has shown that, despite this temptation, Polus has a buried concern for justice that could provide the ground for reform. If Socrates has been unable to fully complete that reform, might that be a job for Gorgias? Has Socrates been preparing Gorgias for a new task by revealing to him the true concerns and needs of men such as Polus?

These questions must remain open questions for now. For we are left at the end of Socrates' conversation with Polus still wondering precisely what Socrates is after. And while the suggestion conveyed by these questions is a plausible one, a couple of considerations should make us hesitant to take it as the last word. One reason for doubt is Socrates' limited success with Polus, which we have been forced to acknowledge. Would it be possible for Gorgias to do better? Even if Socrates can show Gorgias the complexity of Polus' concerns, could even the master rhetorician provide a cure for Polus' sickness? Beyond this, it is also worth noticing that Socrates' concluding statement on rhetoric offers an incomplete enumeration of the uses to which rhetoric might be put. Socrates rejects the use of rhetoric for self-defense when one is in the wrong, and he embraces its use for self-accusation in the same situation. But what about self-defense when one is *not* in the wrong, that is, when one is unjustly accused? Didn't our earlier thoughts about Socrates' interest in rhetoric lead us in that direction? It is true that Socrates' silence about this use of rhetoric can be explained by the fact that he is defending the position that justice should always be one's foremost concern. It would not be in keeping with the spirit of this position to express a concern for self-protection, and Socrates stresses more than once that his statement about rhetoric is governed by the position he is taking about justice (see 480a1–4, b3, and e3). Yet Socrates' silence about self-protection is not complete, since he adds, in a surprising remark, that one must take care not to suffer injustice at the hands of one's enemies (see 480e6–7). And the very connection between the issue of self-protection and Socrates' position on justice leaves us at this point with unresolved questions. What might Socrates' evaluation of the uses of rhetoric be if his position concerning justice should prove to be questionable? Would there be a stronger case for a rhetoric of self-defense? And what might such rhetoric look like?