

A Brief Note on Shame

1. Shame (aischron)

(1) 453a. Gorgias agrees that rhetoric is the ‘agent of persuasion’ (πειθοῦς δημιουργός, peithous dēmiourgos).

(2) 454b. And he agrees that the subject matter of rhetoric is right and wrong, justice and injustice: i.e. rhetoric is about moral matters.

(3) 454a. But rhetoric is not the only means of persuasion (e.g., mathematics, education).

(4) *Shame* is another producer of persuasion. This is not itself discussed in the dialogue, but it is a means that *Plato* uses in the discussion.

(5) 461b. Polus begins his discussion with shame (461b), and this tells *us* how to understand the refutation of Gorgias, *viz.* not as a logical contradiction or conceptual incoherence.

(6) 460a. Gorgias is ‘shamed’ into making an *insincere* claim, i.e. that he teaches virtue. This is incongruent with what we learn *Meno* (95c), that Gorgias never promises to teach virtue, and even ridicules those who do. A sincere claim would hence be: ‘I teach them to speak well, and that is it—never mind virtue.’

(7) If Gorgias did not make his concession, he would admit *openly* and *in public* that he teaches rhetoric to students who aim to become politically powerful (cf. 452d), yet are ‘morally incompetent or worse’.¹

(8) This would undermine his position as a foreigner. This is underlined by three allusions to exile and hatred in his preceding speech (456d ff.).

(9) Plato’s (for now) implicit point is that *sincerity* matters for an ordered, balanced soul, for our inner psychic harmony, for the consistency of what we believe and what we do. The power of *shame* is to make people aware of inconsistencies.² This becomes more obvious in the discussions with Polus and Callicles.

(10) 463d. Socrates suggests that rhetoric is bad, and since anything bad is shameful (contemptible, ugly), it is shameful. This is followed by exploring the difference between how things *are* and what they *seem* to be (see 459e), and what *is* best of us and what we *think* is (seems) best for us. The point: rhetoric is concerned with make-believe, and so firmly on the ‘seem’ side of things. Remember: rhetoric is a kind of flattery (κολακεία, kolakeia).

(11) 466b. Polus finds power desirable: to satisfy any appetite, and to do what one wants, is the pinnacle of power. In fact, happiness (εὐδαιμονία, eudaimonia) and wrong-doing (ἀδικεῖν, adikein) often coincide (470d).

(12) 474b. Yet, Polus also believes—deep down, perhaps—that doing wrong is worse (κάκιον, kakion) than suffering wrong. Feeling shame is a sign that he confuses what is pleasant with what is good.

1 Kahn, C. (1983). Drama and Dialectic in Plato’s ‘Gorgias’. In J. Annas (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1, 75–121.

2 Moss, J. (2005). Shame, Pleasure, and the Divided Soul. In D. Sedley (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 24, 137–69.

2. Visualization: Who Says How Much and When

