

## Refuting Polus (466–481)

### 1. Genuine and Spurious Expertise (463d–465d)<sup>1</sup>

		Mind (politikē)		Body (sōmatos therapeias)	
		<i>regulative</i>	<i>corrective</i>	<i>regulative</i>	<i>corrective</i>
true or genuine technē; real being	good state, leads to physical and mental health	legislative (nomothetikē)	justice (dikaiosunē)	exercise (gumnastikē)	medicine (iatrikē)
spurious pseudo- technē, appearance, simulacrum; 'fake' being	merely apparent 'good' state; forms of <i>flattery</i> (kolakeia), see 464c–d	sophistry (sophistikē)	<b>rhetoric</b> (rhetorikē)	cosmetics (kommōtikē)	cookery (opsopoiikē)

### 2. Refuting Polus in Four Stages

*First Paradox.* Rhetors are the least powerful members of society. (466b–468e)

- 1.1 Power is a good thing (agathon) for its possessor.
- 1.2 Rhetoric lacks logos (465a), and hence its aim cannot be our welfare (i.e. what is best for us: to beltiston).
- 1.3 Rhetors do not know what *is* best for them.
- 1.4 Rhetors only do what *seems* best for them. (This follows on from the flattery discussion; see table above.)
- 1.5 There is a difference between doing what one wants and doing what seems best (for one to do). (For those who know, these two things coincide—this is real power.)
- 1.6 Things are either good (agathon), bad (kakon), or indifferent (metaxu [= in between], adiaphora). We avoid what is bad, choose or seek what is good, and use indifferents as a means for good.
- 1.7 Everyone does things in pursuit of good.
- 1.8 We *want* (boulesthai) good things because they are in our interest (ōphelima). Only the good *is* best for us.
- 1.9 Actions that produce harm do not reflect one's will: agents only do what seems best or beneficial, but they do not want these actions.
- 1.10 Power is doing what one wants.
- 1.11 Rhetors lack power.

<sup>1</sup> See also Dodds, E. R. (1959). *Plato 'Gorgias'*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (pp. 226–7).

*Second Paradox.* Doing wrong (adikein) is worse than being wronged (adikeisthai)<sup>2</sup>, or doing injustice is worse than suffering injustice. (469b–475e)

- 2.1 *Polus' thesis:* suffering injustice is worse than doing injustice.
- 2.2 *Polus' concession*—without which Socrates could not establish an inconsistency, and hence could not shame Polus: doing injustice (adikein) is more shameful (aischion) than suffering injustice. This seems consistent with public opinion, which is crucial for Polus: he repeatedly appeals to the majority—recall too that Gorgias' definition of rhetoric critically involves an audience or a crowd. See also the *important meta-discussion* about two kinds of refutation 471d–472d, which actually interrupts the argument for this paradox.
- 2.3 All admirable or beautiful (kalon) things are so because they are either beneficial (ōphelimon) or pleasant (hēdu) or both. Pleasure and utility ground judgements of the admirable: if  $x$  is admirable, then  $x$  is either useful or pleasant (or both). If  $a$  is more admirable than  $b$ , then  $a$  exceeds  $b$  in pleasure and utility or both.
- 2.4 This is generalised from examples: beautiful bodies, shapes and colours, voices and music, laws and practices, fields of study.
- 2.5 *Polus' shift:* Socrates links the kalon with pleasure and utility (chrēsimon) or benefit (ōphelimon); Polus introduces the good (agathon), and this gets the parallels going between good–admirable and bad–shameful.
- 2.6 The shameful (aischron) is the opposite of the admirable or honourable (kalon). The criteria for judging the shameful and the admirable will be opposites too: something is shameful because of the opposites of pleasure and benefit, i.e. pain (lupē) and badness (kakon). If  $a$  is more shameful than  $b$ , then  $a$  exceeds  $b$  in pain or badness or both.
- 2.7 Given that doing wrong is more shameful than being wronged (2.2), doing wrong exceeds suffering wrong in pain and badness or both.
- 2.8 *Polus' assertion:* doing wrong is not more painful than being wronged.
- 2.9 Doing wrong thus cannot exceed being wronged in *both* pain and badness.
- 2.10 Doing wrong exceeds being wronged in *badness*. That is, doing wrong is worse (kakion) than being wronged.<sup>3</sup> (Note that some examples really are over the top; we can easily think of actions such as intentionally lying.)

The logic of the above argument is widely regarded as dodgy: we need to disentangle logic and drama. (It is unlikely Plato could have overlooked its formal implausibility.) Here are some suggestions to think about.

- *Kahn.* Socrates works with claims provided by Polus (e.g., the superficial analysis of kalon), who is a lightweight. The logic of the argument seems

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2 This is not only the passive, but also the so-called 'middle' voice (a peculiarity in ancient Greek), which then means to wrong oneself, to do oneself an injustice.

3 Kahn, C. (1983). Drama and Dialectic in Plato's 'Gorgias'. In J. Annas (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 1, 75–121; see also Tarnopolsky, C. H. (2010). *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (pp. 68–9).



- secondary: what is more relevant is the tension between his admiration for successful tyrants and the official disapproval of wrongdoing; the tension between heroic and civic excellence. Polus is ashamed to deny a popular (natural?) view that is inconsistent with his own values (e.g., ‘might is right’).
- *Tarnopolsky*. Polus becomes perplexed about his own views—he cautiously agrees with Socrates towards the end, while exclaiming how alien (atopa) the new view is. The ambivalence of the perspective (for whom is *a* beneficial or harmful: the agent or the the spectator?) is actually the point: for Socrates only the agent’s perspective counts; for Polus, only the audience’s perspective counts. With this ‘inner’/‘outer’ tension, shame cannot get a hold on Polus. Socrates aims to raise awareness of the agent’s (inner) perspective. This is most visible in the allusion to health (psychic hygiene *vs.* poneria [= moral wickedness, iniquity] 477b).
  - *McKim*.<sup>4</sup> Socrates aims to make Polus see that he actually disbelieves that suffering injustice is worse (to the sufferer) than doing wrong is to the agent. In the glaring view of the public, Polus caves in to the ‘one-on-one shaming pressure’ of the discussion—hence the extensive remarks about witnesses.
  - *Moss*.<sup>5</sup> Polus cannot reconcile two views: doing wrong is more pleasant than being wronged—yet it is also more shameful. Deep down, Polus accepts that justice is better than injustice (see 474b); yet this belief is inaccessible to him. Polus thinks that the power to do wrong desirable because it is a means to satisfy one’s appetites: he confuses pleasure with (moral) goodness—see Socrates surprise at 474c–d that the bad is not the shameful. Socrates hopes that Polus is repelled by the shame associated with doing injustice, and thus re-connects badness with shame: for what *feels* shameful seems bad and what feels pleasurable seems good.
  - *Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi*.<sup>6</sup> The argument does not fail; it is incomplete but propaedeutic: claims 2.3 and 2.6 in particular will be developed in more detail in the discussion with Callicles. Contextualized, there is no equivocation of the perspective: Socrates consistently claims that doing wrong is harmful for the agent. The discussion builds up towards 504d–e, where Callicles (finally, and fleetingly) agrees with Socrates on the true rhetorical expertise, and of course the final myth.

*Third Paradox*. Doing wrong without being punished is worse than doing wrong and being punished. (476a–479e)

3.1 Justice is admirable (kalon).

3.2 *Action–Passion Principle*. An object *a* (the patient) is affected (paschein) in the way which reflects how *b* (the agent) acts (poiein). (A knife that cuts

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4 McKim, R. (1988). Shame and Truth in Plato’s ‘Gorgias’. In C. L. Griswold (ed.), *Platonic Writings/Platonic Readings* (pp. 34–48). New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall Inc.

5 Moss, J. (2005). Shame, Pleasure, and the Divided Soul. In D. Sedley (ed.), *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, 24, 137–70.

6 Sermamoglou-Soulmaidi, G. (2017). The Refutation of Polus in Plato’s ‘Gorgias’ Revisited. *Apeiron*, 50, 277–310.

deep makes an apple being cut deeply, say.) Instance: *b* gives punishment; *a* is given punishment (ho dikēn didous) = is punished.

- 3.3 Someone who is punished justly ‘suffers’ an admirable act.
- 3.4 Just punishment is good (agathon), i.e. either pleasant or beneficial (see 2.3).
- 3.5 Just punishment is beneficial (not pleasurable), in the sense that the one who is given justice (= punished) escapes mental badness (kakia), i.e. his or her mind becomes better.
- 3.6 Worst states: financially, poverty; physically, sickness etc.; mentally, injustice, ignorance, cowardice and the like (vice, ponēria).
- 3.7 Immorality is the worst of all, and the most shameful. Wind back to 2.6: what is most shameful causes maximal pain (lupē or harm (blabē) or both.
- 3.8 Immorality is not more painful than hunger etc.
- 3.9 Immorality is more harmful—actually it is most harmful; and what causes most harm (given 3.2) is most bad = the worst thing there is, *viz.* injustice, self-indulgence, ignorance, etc.
- 3.10 Commerce ends poverty; medicine ends illness; justice ends vice (ponēria).
- 3.11 Justice is most admirable (kalliston) as it ends the most miserable state.
- 3.12 It is not most pleasurable, but it is most beneficial: receiving justice makes people just.
- 3.13 It is worse to remain in a miserable state than to be freed from it—through punishment.
- 3.14 Someone who escapes punishment remain in the worst state. The worst thing there is is to do wrong without receiving justice (= being punished).

Overall, the argumentative idea is this: (a) Psychic iniquity (poneria), such as injustice or self-indulgence, is the worst state one can be in. (b) One gets out of a bad state only through expertise (technē). (c) Rhetoric is not an expertise (but only a knack or the shadow of a part of statesmanship (see 463d); rhetors are incompetent at imparting knowledge for they lack it. (d) So, rhetoric or rhetors cannot get one out of a bad state, such as psychic iniquity. (e) In fact, the point of rhetoric is to *keep* people in a bad state—ignorant and immoral, but flattered.

*Fourth Paradox.* Rhetoric is useful in two ways: to secure punishment for oneself and one’s friends in the case of wrong-doing (adikein); and to secure and one’s wrong-doing foes escape punishment (480a–481b). This passage emphasizes Socrates’ point that begins the discussion with Polus: that rhetoric is shameful (463d). The passage is also very ironical: Polus finds it ‘atopa’—out of place, absurd; and so the stage is set for Callicles to take over.

