

to do evil to others.² Would it be rational of him to let other people such as Socrates know this about himself?

Suppose, for example, a vicious tyrant told Polus he could choose between killing another person or having his own big toe cut off (to modify an example from Parfit, 2011:207). Unless Polus had a fanatical commitment to honesty, it would be self-defeating of Polus to say to anyone who could be that other person that, were such a situation to arise, he would choose to save his own big toe. Such a revelation would ensure that those other people never knowingly placed themselves in a situation where their welfare depended on Polus putting himself even at a minor risk. As a consequence, given that it is highly likely that some of the most important of Polus' goals will depend on other people placing themselves in such a situation, then Polus' honesty would have guaranteed that these goals would not be met. It would be a practical paradox to make public that one was the kind of person who valued himself so highly in comparison to others that he would do a major evil to others to avoid a minor evil to himself.

To avoid this paradox, Polus would need to give others the impression that he and they were of equal value. As such, he can admit that he would save his own life in preference to the life of another because his life has the same value as that of the other, but only if he could do so by fair means. He could admit, for example, that he would swim as fast as he could to be the first person to the only lifebuoy in a shipwreck but not that, were someone else to beat him to the lifebuoy, that he would pull out a knife and stab that person to death. This would be to reveal that his claims to regard other people as of equal worth with himself were entirely insincere. By contrast, were he to declare that he would intentionally let someone else (his wife, say) beat him to the lifebuoy because he valued that person more than himself, this would not generate a practical paradox.

Corruption and happiness

This brings us to the most outrageous of Socrates' claims, namely, his claim that, when an enemy of ours injures a third party, we should connive with that enemy to ensure that he avoids punishment, helping him to live a long life in the unhindered enjoyment of his ill-gotten gains. What Socrates is getting at here is that he, himself, is the kind of person who would find the corruption of the soul that the evil-doer undergoes as far worse than being punished and redeemed, even if the punishment was death, that he sees the punishment as the cure for a bad condition. What we have here is a particular use of the word "real" or "really". The really moral man, the one that it is in Polus's interests as a rational agent to give the impression to other people that he is, is a man who would be made totally miserable by not redeeming himself. It would be a worse punishment to him than the cleansing punishment of justice.

² Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting further discussion of this issue.

Osama bin Laden uses the word “real” in his term “real Muslim” in exactly the same way. What end of Polus’s would be served by his saying to Socrates that he would not be miserable in this way, that he would, in fact, revel in the opportunity to enjoy his ill-gotten gains forever? In a situation where he has more or less equal power with Socrates, where he will often need Socrates’ cooperation or, at least, not his active hostility, it would be counter-productive of him to cause Socrates to think he was an unscrupulous and ruthless exploiter of others who would not be ashamed of the harm he caused them. His interests would be best served by convincing Socrates that he was a truly moral person, and one step towards convincing Socrates of this would be to say that he regarded the corruption of his soul as a worse punishment than any he could be justly dealt, no matter how serious, even death.

It should be noted, however, that, while this is what it is rational for him to *say* about himself, if he is to avoid being seen as an egoist, he does not need to draw the more extreme conclusion that Socrates does, nor does rationality require him to believe what he says. Moreover, he can admit that it is a descriptive truth that there are people whose happiness is in no way diminished by the evil of their acts and the corruption of their moral nature. No obvious irrationality is involved in his admitting that not everybody is a true moral agent like Socrates and himself. Consequently, he can reject as a travesty of justice Socrates’ proposal that our enemy is most effectively punished merely by allowing the malignancy in his soul free rein.

Now, this proposal of Socrates makes sense if we accept his controversial view that people only commit evil acts out of ignorance. It certainly would be rational to say to someone who accused you of an undeniable crime that you did not realise at the time the wrongness of what you were doing. This indicates a current recognition of its wrongness and implies a resolution not to repeat it now that you know it is wrong. As such, it reassures your listeners about your status as a moral agent. However, rationality does not require you to agree that all other people who act wrongly have done so out of ignorance. Once again, there is an important difference between, on the one hand, what actions, performed either by yourself or other people, it is rational for you to prescribe publicly and, on the other hand, what it is rational for you to offer as a description of what other people endorse without thereby endorsing it yourself.

Gorgias and shame

An emotion that plays an especially important role in the *Gorgias* is shame (Tarnopolsky, 2010). As it happens, much of what is explained in terms of shame in the *Gorgias* can be seen as an outcome of the kind of rational restrictions on what one can say that I have highlighted in this paper.

Consider the case of Gorgias himself. Socrates’ discussion with Gorgias is a preliminary to his argument with Polus about when a person can properly be said to have power. Gorgias, in effect, is boasting that oratory is a good thing because the orator is a man with a particularly useful kind of power, namely, the power to bend people

to his will with his oratory. Saying that it is a good thing amounts to saying that it is something you endorse, that you would pursue. However, it is not a rational move to announce to people on whom you might use this power that you endorse your using it in a way that is indifferent to its effects on them, that you think exploiting them in this way would be a good thing. Socrates picks up on this, getting Gorgias to admit that he would only use his power of oratory for morally acceptable purposes. Socrates plays on the fact that Gorgias would be ashamed to have people think that he would exploit them for his own selfish advantage. To avoid this shame, Gorgias finds himself, in effect, admitting that oratory gives the orator a power that, as a good man, he will rarely use. In fact, Socrates can only think of one use for it, and that is the bizarre case we came across earlier, of persuading people not to bring their enemies to justice.

By the end of the argument, his rationality requires Gorgias to say, even if he doesn't believe it, that the power he attributes to oratory is one that he will rarely use, and a power that is rarely used hardly counts as a power at all. For all practical purposes, Socrates' argument has led Gorgias to withdraw his original assertion. However, this withdrawal should not be seen as a demonstration by Socrates that oratory does not possess the power that Gorgias first claimed it had. Clearly it does, if all that is taken into consideration is a purely descriptive account of power. Instead, what Socrates has done is to get Gorgias to withdraw his initial endorsement of this power, his contention that it was a good thing. But just because a particular power is not a good thing, it doesn't follow that it stops being a power, although Socrates often seems to think that this kind of conclusion does follow.

Callicles and pleasure

What, then, of Callicles? Callicles thinks that happiness is constituted by luxury and excess and licence. In order to be happy, therefore, to live as he ought, "a man should encourage his appetites to be as strong as possible instead of repressing them, and by means of his courage and intelligence to satisfy them in all their intensity by providing them with whatever they happen to desire" (492). As we noted earlier, all the parties in the *Gorgias* see his own personal happiness as the rational thing for a man to pursue. As a consequence, they regard happiness as the good, where the good is that which they would endorse as worthy of pursuit. So, if the happy life is the life of pleasure, and Callicles says that happiness is the good, then Callicles is committed to endorsing any form of life that gives the person who lives it a maximum indulgence in what they enjoy. As Socrates cunningly reveals, Callicles is not prepared to do anything of the kind. Socrates says to him, "Take the life of a catamite; is not that dreadful and shameful and wretched? Or will you dare say that such people are happy provided that they have an abundant supply of what they want?" Callicles's response clearly indicates that he regards the life of a catamite as shameful and not something he thinks is to be pursued or endorsed i.e. good. None of this shows that, at the purely descriptive level, the life of a catamite cannot be a happy one but Socrates is not operating at the

descriptive level. For him, and for Callicles, a speaker should not say that a life is a happy one unless he would regard it as a good one, and he should not regard it as a good one unless he can endorse it and commend its pursuit. Callicles cannot commend the pursuit of the way of life of a catamite because he finds it a shameful life so he is pushed into agreeing with Socrates that it is not the case that all pleasures, regardless of their nature, are good.

Even if he hadn't regarded the life of a catamite as shameful, Callicles is in trouble trying to convince his listeners that there is no distinction between good and bad pleasures. Why would it be rational of Socrates, or anyone else, to accept that a way of life that took pleasure in their pain, or that could only prosper by the thwarting of their goals or purposes, was one that they should endorse?

Conclusion

What we have seen in our discussion of the *Gorgias* is that rational, autonomous, competent agents will find it rational to publicly endorse certain kinds of action and character when they engage in argument in a consensual argument situation. It seems that this would still be so even if there were no descriptive moral truths, for example, even if no error was involved in not believing that people were equally valuable as ends in themselves. Socrates himself seems to recognise the limits of what argument alone can achieve when he resorts to the myths of the leaky soul (493) and the naked judgement (523) to make the moral life as attractive as possible. In the situation of a tyrant like Archelaus and his subjects, what it will be rational for those with superior power to say publicly will differ from what it is rational for those with inferior power to say. Unlike scientific or historical truths, truths about what it is rational to endorse are relative to the powers of the parties engaged in the argument, as well as to the values that motivate them. Rationality in itself does not seem to require us to value other rational, autonomous, competent agents, including ourselves, as equally worthwhile ends in themselves. However, for those of us who see each other as parties to a consensual argument situation (and I assume that this includes you and me) then it would be a pragmatic practical paradox for any of us to tell the others that we do not consider them equally worthwhile ends in themselves. If this so, then, as I believe I have shown, we will also endorse almost all of the conclusions that Socrates urges upon us in the *Gorgias*.

Bibliography

Dilman, 1979

Ilham Dilman, *Morality and the Inner Life: A Study in Plato's "Gorgias"*. London: Macmillan.

Fisk, 2005

Robert Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation*. New York: Alfred A Knopf.

Krook, 1959

Dorothea Krook, *Three Traditions of Moral Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Parfit, 2011

Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plato, 1960

Plato, *Gorgias*. Translated with an introduction by W. Hamilton. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Rawls, 2001

John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belnap Press.

Tarnopolsky, 2010

Christina H. Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts and Tyrants: Plato's "Gorgias" and the Politics of Shame*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.