

Christina H. Tarnopolsky

Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame.

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Every once in a long while a book comes along that the reader finds so worthwhile, down to the smallest detail, that she painstakingly devours every line and every section, even those with which she finds herself in disagreement, and ultimately closes the book with a sigh of disappointment when the journey is done and the book ends. Such a book is Christina Tarnopolsky's *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame*, which composes a skillfully nuanced study of the troublesome affect of shame, unfolded through a fresh interpretation of Plato's *Gorgias*.

Deemed by many scholars and laypersons a 'negative emotion' that should be banished from public and political discourse in a civilized society, shame at first consideration hardly seems a fitting force to be called upon to contribute to a democratic politics. But Tarnopolsky demonstrates that it is not shame *per se*, but a certain kind of shaming that has negative effects in the society. A higher level, respectful shame, she argues, implemented in a charitable way, can be a distinct value and a force against tyranny in a free and democratic society.

Working from Plato's seminal text on shame, the *Gorgias*, Tarnopolsky follows the winding path of Socrates' *elenchus* through the dialogue, as the argument progresses down a devolving path that parallels the devolving quality of interlocutor—from the good-natured, well-intended rhetorician Gorgias, to his brazen student Polus, to the intimidating Callicles, one of the Thirty Tyrants, puppets of Sparta who shamed their city, a champion of freedom, by victimizing foreigners and citizens. Tarnopolsky's reading of the *Gorgias* depends upon a rethinking of the chronological placement of the *Gorgias* within the Platonic corpus. She sees the dialogue not as an 'early Socratic/aporetic' dialogue, nor as a full-blown middle period 'doctrinal/Platonic' dialogue, but as a 'transitional' dialogue between the two periods, where Plato is still assessing the Socratic dialogical technique but is beginning to make a critical turn that permits him to offer friendly amendments to the old master's methods.

Tarnopolsky thus sees the *Gorgias* as Plato's attempt to lay bare the salubrious effects of the Socratic *elenchus* on open-minded, justice-loving, shame-sensitive individuals (like Gorgias), but also to reveal the more dangerous consequences of the *elenchus* when applied to more shameless characters (Polus and Callicles) who are less capable of self-reflection and cannot negotiate the soul-turning evolution at which the *elenchus* aims. Having carefully laid out the argument about justice and tyranny while highlighting the increasingly inflammatory effects of the *elenchus* on the devolving cast of interlocutors, Tarnopolsky then offers her interpretation of the myth at the end of the dialogue. The myth, Tarnopolsky argues, represents Plato's pictorial critique of Socrates'

harsh dialogical method: just as the afterlife judgment lays bare for all to see the failings of the curable and incurable souls, who are straightway marched off in the direction of painful punishments, so the *elenchus* lays bare the moral failings of its interlocutor-victims, leaving them no alternative route of escape from their humiliating and painful fate.

Tarnopolsky's study understands Socrates' *elenchus* as wielding a 'Socratic respectful shame' that respects the truth to the extreme extent that it is inadequately charitable to its victims, bullying them into perplexity out of a refusal to stoop to a flattering rhetoric (such as Gorgias teaches) and exposing their deficiencies and failings, without providing them with a full understanding of the standards by which they have been judged to fail, or alternative understandings of the contradictions of their lives to help them move forward from the shaming in a salutary way. Tarnopolsky sees the devolving argument, which exposes the interlocutors' increasingly tyrannical impulses, as being elicited by the *elenchus*, a perhaps predictable response to the pain and humiliation to which the interlocutors were subjected. Tarnopolsky takes the spiraling tyrannical impulses exposed in the dialogue as Plato's admission of the moral inefficacy and practical dangers of this kind of shaming display.

Finally, Tarnopolsky regards the myth at the end of the dialogue as Plato's attempt at a 'friendly reform' of the Socratic *elenchus*, which seeks truth mercilessly, by wedding it to elements of Gorgias' spectacular display of rhetoric (*epideixis*), which slavishly panders to its audience with pleasant images and the flattery of ideas they already understand and approve. The result, asserts Tarnopolsky, is a more charitable 'Platonic respectful shame' that respects not only the truth of the argument but the needs, abilities, and sensitivities of the audience.

The upshot of Tarnopolsky's study is that it turns on its ear the traditional reading of Plato as an anti-democrat. Instead, she argues, 'Platonic respectful shame might actually surpass emotions like love and compassion in its ability to promote rather than discourage democratic deliberation and a real concern for others' (193). She interprets Plato's aim in this dialogue as exposing a difficult but critical truth: that a harsh kind of shaming can have devastating effects on its audiences, driving those people who are incapable of morally benefiting from the *elenchus* to actually embrace the tyrannical life, where they will have the power to protect themselves from all sorts of pain, including the pain of the disapproving gaze of their fellows. 'Shame quickly spirals into humiliation and anger when the person who is ashamed doesn't fully accept or grasp the standards by which they are being judged' (137). A more courteous, charitable shaming, Plato's respectful shame, argues Tarnopolsky, might allow even the more dangerous characters a little more space of dignity, which ultimately might permit them existential room for the self-reflection that might bring about moral awareness and change.

Tarnopolsky cites three reasons why the Socratic shaming *elenchus* sometimes fails: 1) 'limitations of the interlocutor's own soul'; 2) 'limitations of the shaming *elenchus*' (i.e., it can expose the contradictions of a person's life but does not heal them); and 3) 'the insufficiency of time' (125-6). The question is why the *elenchus* fails in some

cases and not in others; one is tempted to retort that the failure to reach some interlocutors can be fully explained by reasons '1' and '3', and that reason '2' seems to add nothing substantive to our understanding, arguing that the *elenchus* does not always work because it does not always work. Yet Tarnopolsky's entire thesis in this book relies upon reason '2' alone.

Moreover, Tarnopolsky's interpretation of the *Gorgias* myth reads 'the image of the naked, solitary and dead souls of the *Gorgias* myth' as Plato's amendment to the Socratic method, depicting in colorful imagery what the painful shaming experience of the *logos* could not teach. This interpretation offers an interesting twist to traditional interpretations of the Platonic use of myth, which understand Plato's reversion to myth at the collapse of a lengthy argument, as Plato's confirmation that truth is elusive, the property of the gods alone, and not easily captured in discourse. Myths are traditionally seen as Plato's admission that 'pictures speak louder than words', and thus the shadowy, enigmatic messages, fleshed out in mythological imagery, function as do the music and gymnastics applied to the philosopher-guardians of the *Republic*; they seductively work a magic that reshapes the soul to a higher level of harmony than rhetoric and argument can achieve.

The boundaries of shame in any society both articulate and reconfirm the shared values of that society; these boundaries are constantly under construction and undergoing renegotiation among the society's members. The capacity for shame lies within the interlocutor. It is only possible to feel shame over one's misconduct or one's contradictory views, where the society's lessons of propriety have already been internalized. Without the capacity for shame, one becomes as the democratic citizens in Plato's critique of the polity in *Republic* Book XIII: a shameless lover of freedom whose extreme promotion of liberty decays into sheer license to do as one likes, and finally into licentiousness, where no unsavory act elicits shame. Some people fall into bad habits simply out of a lack of self-awareness; these can be helped by the revelatory powers of the *elenchus* which 'empty out' one's illusions and expose one's moral contradictions. But others, farther down the path of licentiousness, are freer individuals, cut loose from the bonds of propriety that keep decent citizens restrained. These latter souls cannot be shamed into changing their ways. Whether this is a failing of the *elenchus* or a failure of the soul to internalize decency, remains to be decided.

Tarnopolsky's fine study fleshes out the pitfalls of the fragile emotion of shame, but she also reveals the value of a certain kind of charitable, delicate shame for democratic intercourse. Shame can provide the very means for societies to renegotiate their boundaries of propriety. What is satisfying about Tarnopolsky's study is that it goes beyond mere abstract philosophical exegesis, which is generally deemed useless for interpreting or curing modern injustices. Tarnopolsky brings home to modern politics the far-reaching implications of an appropriate shame, by tying her discourse to shameful events in the world (Abu Ghraib scandal), which involved elements of shameless shaming (humiliation tortures) of helpless individuals (prisoners deprived of legal rights), conducted in the course of an ostensibly moral mission (the War on Terror). This connection grants serious practical implications for her philosophical study, undermining

the traditional criticism against philosophers, *viz.* that they are arid thinkers disconnected from the realities of the world.

Abu Ghraib was only one instance among countless other atrocities that continue to be conducted daily by the armies of powerful nations as they pursue their interests around the globe. Given the fact that the massive global outcry on the eve of the American invasion of Iraq (2003) failed to prevent that atrocity or avert the subsequent occupation, I suspect that political reality bears out the truth of the *Gorgias*: public discourses of shame, whether painful or charitable, have little purchase on the consciences of tyrannical actors, wedded to, indeed often hell-bent on, their own unique interpretations of justice. A rigid commitment to the truth, such as was insisted upon by Socrates, may not alter the behavior of outright tyrants, too far gone down the path of licentiousness to worry about the retributions of an afterlife. But it is doubtful that gentler forms of shaming would be any more successful in reaching the souls of truly unjust persons. This, I believe, is the critical message of the *Gorgias*. I submit that a charitable shame, replete with seductive images and flattering discourse, would have no more purchase on these tyrants' souls than the relentlessly truth-seeking Socratic *elenchus*. Indeed, the *elenchus* has little power to change such tyrants, because it is unlikely to incite any real shame in them, though it may elicit anger and violent reprisals. Shame can only reach souls that have internalized their society's codes of decency. Tarnopolsky blames the uncharitable Socratic *elenchus* for its failure to reach all tyrants, but I am skeptical whether any discourse, however charitable, can persuade those who lack a commitment to decency to change their tyrannical ways.

This book will be an excellent addition to any philosopher's library, worthy as a graduate level text on ancient philosophy, and valuable for those readers interested in nuanced studies of the effects of the emotions in human societies and in politics. Regardless of whether the reader agrees with the twists and turns of Tarnopolsky's arguments, the journey will be well worth taking.

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