Socrates & the True Political Craft in the *Gorgias*

**DISSEPTION**

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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by

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DEDICATION

To my family
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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Socrates and the True Political Craft in the Gorgias”

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In the Apology, Socrates claims he is better off than others because he knows he does not know. This is commonly called “Socratic ignorance.” To many, Socratic ignorance is incompatible with the possession of moral knowledge. Indeed, Socrates’ behavior in the Socratic dialogues appears to support this view: he affirms his ignorance, cross-examines those who wrongly think themselves to be wise, and refutes them. It looks as if he exposes others’ ignorance because he lacks knowledge and cannot teach. In the Gorgias, however, Socrates is much different. At a vital moment in the dialogue, he declares that he is the only one of his contemporaries to take up what he calls the “true political craft.” But how is Socratic ignorance consistent with the practice of the political craft?

Unfortunately, scholars have failed to fully appreciate the importance of Socrates’ claim in the Gorgias. In this thesis, I argue that Socrates’ claim to practice the true political craft is a central claim in the work, since he believes that his style of dialectic is the craft of justice, which is one of the branches of the true political craft.
My stance, however, appears to conflict with Socrates’ theory of punishment in the *Gorgias*. In many passages, Socrates identifies justice with the expertise of the judge, not the expertise of the dialectician. I argue that Socrates maintains that dialectic *and* judicial punishment are sub-crafts of justice: each sub-craft improves the condition of another person’s soul without having to teach him or her the craft of justice.

Although I argue that Socratic ignorance is consistent with Socrates’ practice of the political craft, I do not intend to claim that the *Gorgias* is a Socratic dialogue. In my discussion of judicial punishment, I argue that Socrates commits himself to a conception of the soul that is incompatible with the “intellectualist” psychology he assumes in other Socratic dialogues. Since many believe that the *Gorgias* is a key text for central Socratic doctrines, my account should prompt us to reevaluate several prominent interpretations of Socratic philosophy.
INTRODUCTION

In one of the most striking passages of the *Gorgias*, Socrates declares that he is the only one of his contemporaries to take up what he calls “the true political craft.” Many scholars believe that this claim is a stunning reversal of Socrates’ many professions of ignorance in the Socratic dialogues.¹ How can he claim to practice the political craft in the *Gorgias*, while, in the *Apology*, he professes to know only that he knows nothing? In this thesis, I will show how Socrates’ claims to be ignorant and his claim to practice the true political craft are consistent. My account has far-reaching implications for our understanding of Socrates’ view of philosophy, as well as how we should understand the way in which the *Gorgias* stands with respect to the other Socratic dialogues. My account explains how Socrates’ practice of philosophy improves others without teaching them virtue. This discussion will culminate in an explanation of Socrates’ view that moral knowledge is a form of self-knowledge.

In chapter one, I begin with a discussion of the tension between Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge in the *Apology* and his claim to take up the political craft in the *Gorgias*. Many scholars believe that Socrates’ claims of ignorance in the *Apology* and again in the *Gorgias* gives us incontrovertible evidence that Socrates cannot mean what he says when he claims to practice the craft of caring for the soul. They interpret his claim to mean nothing more than that he attempts the political craft. I will argue that this view is mistaken for two main reasons.

¹ See appendix.
² I will use abbreviations to denote passages from any dialogue that is not the *Gorgias*. For Plato: Ap.
First, the *Gorgias* centers on the political conditions in Athens that led to the trial and execution of the historical Socrates. Plato brings Socrates’ biography to the forefront of the dialogue in order to support the overall argument of the work. So, when Socrates repeatedly refers to himself as a doctor of the soul and foreshadows his own death at the hands of the Athenians, we have good reason to read the audacious statement as sincere. Socrates’ message in the *Gorgias* is clear—he is saying, ‘I am a true statesman. I do not pander. What I say is for the good of the person I am speaking to. But many people will—and do—find hearing such things painful, which, inevitably, leads them to overlook the benefit I confer. These people become resentful and seek retaliation against me. I put myself at risk, but the benefits of philosophy far out weigh the alternative of ignorance’.

Second, I argue that Socrates’ division of the political craft into two branches—justice and legislation—shows that he can take up one craft, whilst remaining ignorant of the other. Justice corrects the soul and legislation perfects the soul. If we understand Socrates as claiming to practice justice and attempt legislation, he does not contradict his professions of ignorance. Justice and legislation are two different crafts and he believes that legislation is the more admirable because it can make people good. Justice, on the other hand, merely eradicates evil from the soul. His allusions to himself as a doctor are especially useful in this context. The doctor heals without teaching, just as Socrates corrects the soul by Socratic dialectic without having wisdom himself or without teaching this wisdom to others.

In the second chapter, I take up on objection that could be raised by the stance I take in the first chapter: if Socrates practices the craft of justice and Socratic dialectic
aims at improving the intellect of others by subjecting their sincere beliefs to rational scrutiny, does this imply that the only way to improve others is to target their intellect? Vlastos, Rowe, Scott, and Penner answer in the affirmative. I call this position “Socratic Optimism.”

Indeed, there are passages that support Socratic Optimism. First, in the *Protagoras*, Socrates commits himself to what I call “Psychological Intellectualism.” According to this view, the soul is not a complex entity; rather, it is a unified whole, lacking any non-rational powers (or “parts”) that can cause action against a person’s better judgment. On this view, we act only when we set our mind to do, since we cannot even desire an object without thinking it is good for us. If this is the true account of the soul, then the efforts of the moral educator should only focus on correcting only our beliefs about what is good—nothing more. Second, Socrates maintains that virtue is knowledge and vice is ignorance. He believes that having knowledge of what is good is both necessary and sufficient for virtue. Once one acquires moral knowledge, one will never act against it; there are no opposing non-rational desires that aim at something other than the good of the soul. This suggests that moral improvement should not target one’s character, since the non-rational side of one’s personality cannot interfere with or overcome reason. What is needed is intellectual improvement alone.

Rowe, Penner, and Scott go further. These Socratic Optimists believe that Socrates maintains that only philosophy can improve the intellect. They believe that it is not until Plato introduces the tripartite soul in the *Republic* that we see that moral education focuses on a fundamentally rational intellect as well as a fundamentally non-rational character. On this reading, the non-rational character must be trained long before
one takes up the rational pursuit of philosophy, a fact to which Socrates’ single-minded focus is naive. The strict Socratic Optimists believe that Plato introduces antagonistic interlocutors in the *Gorgias* to illustrate to the reader that Socratic philosophy cannot be practiced by all and that Socrates’ educational program of philosophy for all is bound to fail.

I argue against the Socratic Optimists in favor of a view I call “Socratic Pessimism.” According to this view, Socrates draws a distinction not only between the crafts of justice and legislation, but also within the craft of justice itself: between dialectic and judicial punishment. Indeed Socrates believes that the treatment of the intellect is important for moral improvement, but he does not believe this is the only way to improve an individual. I appeal to Socrates’ discussion of the benefits of corporal punishment in the *Gorgias* and to passages where he suggests that he commits himself to a sort of dualism more akin to the picture of the soul proffered in the *Phaedo*, than in the *Republic*. On this view of the soul, the normal cognitive functioning of the soul can be obstructed by the contributions of the body. Corporal punishment eradicates injustice and intemperance from the soul and restores a temporary order in the individual.

In chapter three, I discuss the sub-craft of justice, dialectic, in order to offer an account of how Socratic dialectic can improve the soul without teaching. There are two arguments that will illuminate how this can be done. In the first argument, Socrates argues that tyrants and orators almost never do what they want, since they do only what seems best. He fixes the ultimate object of a person’s desire on an ultimate objective good. If we all desire what is in fact good for us, then having knowledge of what we ultimately want in each and every action can show us what is in fact good. In another
argument in the *Gorgias*, Socrates claims that Polus and everyone else holds beliefs that they adamantly deny having. He argues that all people have true moral beliefs in their soul that contain specific moral content, such as doing injustice is worse than suffering it. If human beings want only what is really good and have latent true moral beliefs, we can see that acquiring knowledge of ourselves can give us not only self-knowledge, but moral knowledge.

My thesis seeks to deepen our understanding of the political craft in the *Gorgias* as well as the nature of Socrates’ philosophical practice. The results will show that Socrates holds views that are at odds with the traditional conception of Socratic philosophy. This should prompt us to reevaluate the place of the *Gorgias* among the Socratic dialogues.
CHAPTER 1

Socratic Ignorance & True Political Craft

I. Introduction

Socrates’ claims of ignorance throughout the Socratic dialogues are numerous and varied. He confesses that he is ignorant about the nature of virtue (M. 71a-c)\(^2\), incapable of answering fundamental questions about virtue (La. 165b6-c3), lacks adequate definitions of the virtues, and does not know anything worthwhile (Ap. 38b10-12).\(^3\) He says that he is uneducated in the care for the soul and has not discovered this knowledge on his own (La. 186e3-4). He says that if anyone refers to him as a teacher of virtue, this person is speaking slander (Ap. 33b6-8). He says it would be the greatest blessing to learn about wisdom from some wise man; unfortunately, at seventy years old, he has never met a wise man. If he were to meet someone who is truly wise, he would become the teacher’s eldest and most loyal student (Euthphr. 5a3-4).

\(^2\) I will use abbreviations to denote passages from any dialogue that is not the Gorgias. For Plato: Ap. = Apology; Char. = Charmides; Cr. = Crito; Euth. = Euthydemus; Euthphr. = Euthyphro; La. = Laches; Lys. = Lysis; Rep. = Republic; Soph. = Sophist. For Aristotle: M.M. = Magna Moralia; N.E. = Nichomachean Ethics.

\(^3\) Aside from the texts listed here, Socrates also denies having knowledge of what beauty itself at 204b in the Hippias Major and divine matters (or piety) at 16a in the Euthyphro.
Scholars are quick to notice that although Socrates disavows moral knowledge, there are several passages where he claims to know a moral truth. The most notable example is in the *Apology*, where Socrates tells us that he knows (οἶδα) it would be wrong and shameful to disobey a superior whether he is a god or a man (Ap. 29b6-c1). After he was found guilty of corruption by the Athenian jury, in the penalty phase of the trial, he says that he knows one of the punishments under consideration is evil. He asked the jury: “Am I then to choose in preference to [death] something that I know very well (εὖ οἶδα) to be an evil and assess the penalty at that?” (Ap. 37b7-c1). He said that even though many people act as if it were the worst thing imaginable, no one living knows whether death is a bad thing. Only those who think they are wise when they are ignorant could believe that death itself is the worst thing imaginable. If one does not know whether something is bad, one should not treat it as if it were the greatest evil—especially if the course of action that would avoid death is known to be evil. In the *Gorgias*, there are many passages where Socrates says that the refutations against his interlocutors shows that the conclusion is true and the negation of the thesis the interlocutor originally held is false. But the most striking self-ascription of knowledge comes about towards the end of the *Gorgias*. Here, Socrates says that he is one of the only Athenians to take up the political craft, which he says is the craft that cares for the soul.

In this chapter, I address Socrates’ relation to the political craft in the *Gorgias*. The claim sets up the puzzle of Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge in a more conspicuous way. He does not claim knowledge of a moral truth, but he appears to have knowledge of the craft of the good of the soul, which in other dialogues is simply referred to as virtue. Although many scholars overlook this passage, his claim cannot be ignored. The

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4 Guthrie (1975), 88; Brickhouse and Smith (1994).
allusions to Socrates’ trial and execution throughout the work should give us good reason to think deeply about what he is saying. Whether this changes our conception of the purpose of Socratic philosophy, and what the value of philosophy is to the wider political community. I argue in this chapter that Socrates indeed claims to take up the political craft—indeed this is one of the central points of the entire dialogue. My reading seeks to highlight not to diminish one of the ironies of the *Gorgias*: the political craft that Socrates claims to take up is to live life always aware of one’s own ignorance.

I begin with a brief discussion of the *Apology* and Socrates’ distinct style of cross-examining others. I then argue that the traditional approach to the question of whether Socrates practices the political craft is mistaken. The solution I provide solves several problems that have plagued the debate over how to interpret this passage. Ultimately, I argue that Socrates regarded himself as a doctor of the soul, and this was the reason he was executed.

**II. Socratic Ignorance Contra Complete Ignorance**

The puzzle I have begun to outline in the introduction is that there are passages in the *Apology* where Socrates both disavows and avows knowledge. This puzzle arises again in the *Gorgias*: he disavows knowledge, but then declares that he takes up the political craft. Since crafts are forms of knowledge, how can Socrates both disavow and avow knowledge in the *Gorgias*?

Let us begin with a passage in the *Apology* where Socrates explains why he must practice philosophy in Athens. He tells the jury an account of his friend Chaerephon who ventured to the oracle at Delphi to ask whether there was anyone who was wiser than
Socrates. The oracle declared that no one was wiser. When Socrates heard the news, he was perplexed. He said to himself that it must have been intended as a riddle, because he knew (ζόνοιδα ἐμαντῶ) that he did not know anything “great or small” (οὔτε μέγα οὔτε σμικρῶν)(21b3-4; 22d1). He says he embarked on a mission to test the oracle, going to those who were reputed to be wise in order to learn from them. Unfortunately, everyone who had a reputation for wisdom turned out to be just as ignorant as he was. Only the craftsmen knew something and could explain their knowledge, but they incorrectly inferred that their technical expertise entailed they were wise about human virtue and happiness. After he tested many different people in the city, he concluded that he is better off than others because he was the only one who was aware of his own ignorance. No one would want to be ignorant of how to live a good life, so, he concluded, it is the most shameful sort of ignorance. Although he saw that he was ignorant, his sort of ignorance is a blameless kind: he is aware of his deficiency and trying correct the problem. People who wrongly believe themselves wise, wrong others and harm themselves. So, he reasons, the oracle must be referring to some sort of wisdom (σοφίαν τινὰ) that is particularly “human” (ανθρώπινῃ σοφίᾳ). In typical fashion, Socrates wraps himself in a paradox: he realized that he must be the wisest of mankind because he knows he is ignorant.

But Socrates also interpreted the oracle to order him to live in a certain way as well. He says that “the god ordered me, as I thought and believed, to live the life of a philosopher, to examine myself and others” (Ap. 28e5-6). Socrates’ practice of philosophy, then, has several different aims: (i) to test the oracle, (ii) to examine himself, (iii) examine others, and, ultimately, (iv) to acquire wisdom for himself. If the person he
examines does not have the wisdom he thought he had, he “shall reproach him because he attaches little importance to the most important things and greater importance to inferior things” (*Ap.* 29e7-30a2). He challenges them to reconsider their pursuit of wealth and honors and turn to the most important matters, such as truth and the best possible condition of their souls (*Ap.* 29e1-4). Thus, the elenchus appears to have two other aims: (v) rebuke those who falsely believe themselves to be wise, and (vi) exhort others to pursue truth, virtue, and the good condition of their soul.  

So, the function of the elenchus is not only to expose ignorance and increase the self-knowledge of the interlocutor. It is also to increase one’s own self-knowledge, since the elenchus tests the beliefs of others and, at the same time, one’s own beliefs.

### III. Socratic Ignorance & the Elenchus

Socrates’ disavowal of wisdom complements the dialectical style of the aporetic dialogues. The aporetic dialogues are inconclusive and exhibit the destructive and negative force of Socratic dialectic. When someone either claims to be wise or expresses a moral belief with some confidence, Socrates subjects him to a series of questions. The first set of questions aims to improve the quality of discourse in two ways. First, the questions aim to eliminate ambiguity in the interlocutor’s stated position. Second, the questions seek to identify beliefs and confirm that the interlocutor assents to each of the beliefs that are under consideration. In order to achieve both aims, Socrates insists that the interlocutor refrain from making long oratorical speeches. Such speeches impede a proper analysis of an interlocutor’s beliefs, which means that the interlocutor cannot be

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5 Fowler translation.
6 See also Benson (2000), chapter 2.
tested. He asks that his interlocutor only “say what he believes.” If the statements made by the interlocutor are inconsistent, he points out the conflict and explains why it is a problem for the position stated. The interlocutor reformulates his position and Socrates tests the interlocutor again. This process is repeated until the interlocutor reaches an impasse (απορία) and gives up. Although the aporetic dialogues point to promising ways to resolve the moral puzzle entertained in the discussion, the exchange ends with a tentative conclusion at best.

This Socratic dialectic is customarily referred to as “the elenchus” (ἔλεγχος), which is the noun form of the verb “ἐλέγχω.” The primary meaning of ἔλεγχος is “to refute,” which is adequately depicted in the Apology—he examines the beliefs of those who say they are wise and exposes their ignorance. But in other places, Socrates says that he “searches” (ἐρευνῶ, διερευνῶ), “inquires” (ζητῶ, ἐρωτῶ), “investigates” (σκοπῶ, διασκοπῶ, σκέπτομαι), “questions” (ἐρέω), and “philosophizes” (φιλοσοφῶ). The various characterizations of his activity suggest that the elenchus performs multiple functions. Indeed, not only does the elenchus aim to test the beliefs of those who believe themselves wise, but it also confers what Socrates believes to be the greatest benefit to others.

IV. Socrates’ Disavowals in the Gorgias

The Gorgias dialogue is widely considered to be one of the last Socratic dialogues. Some consider it a “transitional” dialogue, a work that contains both Socratic and

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7 Aristotle says that Socrates used to ask questions and did not answer them, for “he used to confess that he did not know” (183b7-8).
Platonic philosophy. Throughout the dialogue he repeatedly claims that he does not have knowledge of the subject at hand. After he has refuted Callicles, he reminds him: “the things I say I certainly don’t say with any knowledge at all” (506a3). He says that he is “searching together with you so that if my opponent clearly has a point, I’ll be the first to concede it” (506a3). Before he continues, he reaffirms his ignorance:

These conclusions, at which we arrived earlier in our previous discussions are, I’d say, held down and bound by arguments of iron and adamant, even if it’s rather crude to say so. So it would seem, anyhow. And if you or someone more forceful than you won’t undo them, then anyone who says anything other than what I’m now saying cannot be speaking well. And yet for my part, my account is ever the same: I don’t know how these things are, but no one I’ve ever met, as in this case, can say anything else without being ridiculous (509a4-7)

The previous arguments about the value of justice have been “locked down” in a way his interlocutors’ arguments are not. Regardless, Socrates cautions the group present that his success in argument does not confirm that he speaks from knowledge.

V. Two Solutions: Simple & Complex Irony

Many different reasons are given to explain Socrates’ claims to be ignorant. One of the most popular ways to account for these claims is to read them as instances of irony. There are two types of irony.

The first form of irony is what I will call “simple verbal irony.” In this form of irony a speaker states the opposite of what is meant for humorous or emphatic effect. It does not involve deceit. For example, when a thunderstorm threatens a wedding reception, a groom might say to his bride, “our first wedding gift!” The groom obviously does not mean what he says—what he really means is that “the storm clouds will ruin the

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9 The main conclusions are (i) doing injustice is worse than suffering it and that (ii) the worst condition is to commit an injustice and escape punishment.
reception." Socrates is often ironic, so it has been thought that it is not too far from his personality if he says, “I am ignorant,” but what he really means is, “I am wise.” Socrates himself was aware that, despite his repeated claims to the contrary, his fellow-citizens understood him to be a wise man.

The second form of irony is what Vlastos terms “complex irony.” This form of irony differs from simple verbal irony because “what is said both is and isn’t what is meant: its surface content is meant to be true in one sense, false in another”\(^{10}\) Complex irony explains Socrates’ professions of ignorance in the following way. Although Socrates disavows knowledge, he makes an equivocal use of the word “knowledge.” He wants “to assure his hearers that in the moral domain there is not a single proposition he claims to know with certainty. But in another sense of “knowledge,” where the word refers to justified true belief—justifiable through the peculiarly Socratic method of elenctic argument—there are many propositions he does claim to know.”\(^{11}\)

**VI. Vlastos’ Socrates**

In order to understand the full scope of Vlastos’ interpretation of Socrates, we need to consider in some detail the aims of his interpretation and the evidence he relies on to support his interpretation. This section lays out the interpretation and the next section will apply Vlastos’ interpretive framework to a controversial passage in the *Gorgias*. I argue that Vlastos’ concept of complex irony accounts for part of the passage, but cannot sufficiently account for it all. As we will see, this poses a serious problem within his interpretive framework, since the *Gorgias* is an essential text for his interpretation.

\(^{10}\) Vlastos, (1991), 31.
\(^{11}\) Vlastos, (1991), 32; Grote (1865), I. 292.
A. Early-Vlastos, Grote, and Benson

Vlastos began his philosophical career interpreting the Socratic dialogues in a way that can be traced back to George Grote’s work in 1865. In many respects it is the natural reading of Socrates in the Socratic dialogues:

1. The elenchus is a method of negative cross-examination

2. Socrates is a dogmatist

Grote holds that (1) and (2) are “two unconnected operations of thought: the one does not lead to, or involve, or verify the other.”12 The negative cross-examination Socrates described in the Apology and exhibited in the aporetic dialogues is a mode of adversarial question-and-answer refutation that tests the moral beliefs of those who claim to be wise.13 The elenchus exposes ignorance by means of pointing out inconsistencies in the interlocutor’s beliefs. Socrates exposes the false conceit of knowledge of his interlocutors and helps them realize why they do not have the knowledge that they think they have. In the Apology, he claims that the practice of philosophy brings the “greatest good” to his fellow citizens and affirms that he makes the people truly happy. Although he disavows knowledge and characterizes his life as an examination of both himself and others, this does not entail that he has moral beliefs of his own.

Additional support for this interpretation can be found in the Sophist, where Plato himself appears to revisit the Socratic elenchus. In this dialogue, the protagonist, an unnamed philosopher visiting Athens from Elea, discusses the evils of ignorance and the benefits of refutation. First, the visitor divides ignorance into two types and assigns a type of teaching to counter each form. The worst form of ignorance is the conceit of

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12 Grote (1865), 292; Vlastos (1994), 18.
13 One could argue that the negative cross-examination is also displayed in Socrates’ cross-examination of Meletus.
knowledge. This sort of ignorance causes “all the mistakes we make when we think” (229c2; 4-5). “Some people”—Socrates, presumably—believe this form of ignorance is always involuntary, so “they set about to get rid of the belief in one’s own wisdom in another way” (230b1-2). Since we will return to this passage again, it will be useful to have it in full:

They cross-examine someone when he thinks he’s saying something though he’s saying nothing. Then, since his opinions will vary inconsistently, these people will easily scrutinize them. They collect his opinions together during discussion…and show that they will conflict with each other at the same time on the same subjects in relation to the same things and in the same respects. The people who are being examined see this, get angry at themselves, and become calmer towards others. They lose their inflated and rigid beliefs about themselves…The people who cleanse the soul…likewise think the soul… won’t get any advantage from learning that’s offered to it until someone shames it by refuting it, removes the opinions that interfere with learning, and exhibits it cleansed, believing that it knows only those things that it does know, nothing more (Soph., 230b4-231d4)

It seems obvious that the visitor is describing Socrates’ belief about how to improve others. The passage suggests that Plato considered the Socratic cross-examination to be a therapeutic treatment that removes the most problematic belief a person can have, that one is wise when one is not. Showing someone that their beliefs about virtue are inconsistent destroys the false conceit of knowledge.

This passage from The Sophist should not serve as decisive evidence for an interpretation, but it can inform us about how Plato himself conceived of Socrates and the benefits of the Socratic elenchus. What he says should give us reason to revisit the Socratic dialogues with this conception in mind. In the passage, Plato says that:

(i) The elenchus cleanses a soul because it rids it of the most destructive belief, the false conceit of knowledge

(ii) The elenchus prepares the soul for learning or education

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14 My italics. One should note that Polus, Callicles, Thrasybulus, and many others became angry at Socrates and not themselves. I will return to this issue below.
(iii) The psychological effect of the elenchus is that the interlocutor thinks he knows only what he knows.

(iv) Those who are refuted by the elenchus become angry with themselves and calmer towards others.

Socrates states a variation of (i) and implies (iii) in the *Apology*. Clearly (iv) is not always the outcome of an elenctic refutation, since the indictment against Socrates gives us clear evidence to the contrary.

In his early work, Vlastos\(^\text{15}\) formalizes the elenchus into three steps:

(V1) The interlocutor asserts a thesis, \(p\), which Socrates considers false and targets for refutation.

(V2) Socrates secures agreement to further premises, say \(q\) and \(r\) (each of which may stand for a conjunct of propositions). The agreement is *ad hoc*: Socrates argues from \(\{q, r\}\), not to them.

(V3) Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees, that \(q\) and \(r\) entail not-\(p\).\(^\text{16}\)

The interlocutor is shown to have inconsistent beliefs about virtue and so has been proven not to have the knowledge he says he has. According to V1-V3, then, the elenchus is primarily a method of moral, not intellectual, improvement.

But why does Socrates believe that refutation shows that the interlocutor lacks knowledge? The main reason comes from Socrates' assumption that moral knowledge is like craft-knowledge. Common craftsmen are experts in a specific subject matter—carpenters are experts in building structures, doctors are experts in the health of the body, and musicians are experts in the production of melody. Craftsmen possess knowledge of the goal (or product) of the craft as well as how to perform the function of that craft. The knowledge a craftsman has of his subject gives him the ability to provide a rational

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\(^{15}\) Early in his career Vlastos argued that V1-V3 were sufficient to account for the standard Socratic elenchus. Thus, I call this Vlastos “Early-Vlastos.” Later, he changed is mind and added an additional step. See below.

\(^{16}\) Vlastos (1994), 11.
account of the subject itself. If a person cannot provide a rational account of the craft he claims to possess, then that person does not possess that craft. One of the ways one fails to provide an account is to contradict oneself. Crafts are rational and thus a contradiction indicates that one does not have an understanding of the subject matter of that craft. Thus, one who claims to have wisdom, yet cannot provide an account is not wise.

Grote, Early-Vlastos, and Benson hold that the elenchus is primarily a negative cross-examination that aims to expose the deficiency of knowledge in an interlocutor that believes that he is wise. One of the benefits of the elenchus is that it can improve others by testing the consistency of the interlocutor’s beliefs. If the interlocutor is refuted by the elenchus, then he cannot have the knowledge he says he has.

B. Vlastos’ Worry

In a later work, Vlastos, however, began to doubt whether Socrates simply improved his interlocutor by pointing out contradiction in an interlocutor’s beliefs. In the Gorgias, Socrates did not only purge his interlocutor’s soul but also discovered moral truth.

Two passages in the exchange with Polus support this interpretation. First, after he reviews the outcome of the argument, he asks Polus: “hasn’t it been proved (ἀποδείκται) that what was said is true?”(479e10-11). Second, throughout the exchange, Socrates points out that Polus is using fallacious arguments—his main fault is that he repeatedly appeals to the opinion of the majority of people to disprove Socrates’ original thesis. Socrates rejects his specious reasoning and declares: “But I, a single man,
do not agree, for you do not compel me, but produce false witnesses against me, trying to banish me from my property, the truth” (ἐκβάλλειν μὲ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας καὶ τοῦ ἀληθοῦς)(472b5-7). Vlastos interprets the passages to show that there “can be no question” that Socrates believes that the inconsistency within the premise-set \( \{p, q, r\} \) proves that \( p \) is false and not \( p \) is true.\(^{20}\) The result is that the previous account of the elenches (V1-V3) cannot capture the aims of Socrates’ cross-examination of others. Vlastos contends that the “standard elenchus” must be comprised of four, not three, steps. After Socrates targets a belief, extracts further beliefs from the interlocutor, and argues (and the interlocutor agrees) that the auxiliary premises entail not-\( p \), there is one more step:

(V4) Socrates then claims that he has shown that not-\( p \) is true, \( p \) false\(^{21}\)

Vlastos argues that V1-V4 outline the steps of what he calls the “standard elenchus.” Instead of simply pointing out contradictions in his interlocutor’s beliefs, Socrates also aims to discover truth in an elenctic encounter with others. Clearly, the pursuit of truth is a central aim of his philosophical activity. And since the elenchus is his only method, it must achieve this aim.\(^{22}\) Thus, the familiar doctrines that Socrates relies on to govern his life are justified by the elenchus. This, in turn, dispels Grote’s claim that Socrates was a dogmatist.

C. The Problem of the Elenchus

Vlastos’ account of the Socrates’ standard elenchus, however, generates a serious problem for Socrates. How does Socrates establish truth from a set of beliefs that are

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\(^{20}\) Ibid., 20-21.  
\(^{21}\) Ibid., 11.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 56.
shown to be inconsistent? The assent Socrates gains for the auxiliary premises are *ad hoc* and, thus, logically insecure.\(^{23}\) Exposing inconsistencies in a belief set only shows that that belief-set is inconsistent, not that some specific belief within that belief-set is false or that the negation of that belief is true. How, then, does the elenchus yield truth, prove that the original thesis put forth by the interlocutor is false, and support Socrates’ beliefs about virtue?

Vlastos believes it can achieve all of these aims, but it requires us to read Socrates as relying on an equivocal use of knowledge:

1. *Elenctic Knowledge* (Knowledge \(E\)): the truth of a proposition is justified by its elenctic viability

2. *Certain (and Infallible) Knowledge* (Knowledge \(C\)): infallible certainty of the truth of a proposition

In other words, knowledge \(E\) is to have justified true belief; knowledge \(C\) is a justified true belief where one is certain of its truth. Vlastos believes that Socrates is aware of the security gap between the moral beliefs proven in elenctic examination and their justification. Although the elenchus is mankind’s only hope to achieve knowledge, Socrates is haunted by the possibility that a belief that withstands elenctic examination, say, \(P\), is not known with certainty. Humans can only have knowledge of \(P\) with inductive support: if \(P\) has turned out to be true in a thousand elenchos, it might still turn out false in the thousand-and-first.\(^{24}\)

The distinction between two sorts of knowledge provides us with the tools to explain Socrates’ avowals and disavowals of knowledge in the *Apology*. Socrates utilizes complex irony in the *Apology* when he speaks of knowledge, so we can say that he both


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 57.
means and does not mean what he says. When he says, “I know nothing, great or small,” he does not mean, “I know nothing,” but rather, “I know nothing.” Indeed, many of his fellow citizens thought he was wise, but he was only wise. Also, when he says that virtue is knowledge, what he means is that virtue is knowledge, not knowledge. So although he lacks knowledge of necessary truths and disavows knowledge of them, he does indeed possess elenctic knowledge of moral truths, which is “fallible, provisional, and corrigible” knowledge.

VII. Socratic Politics

One should notice that Vlastos relies exclusively on the Gorgias to support his account of what he calls the standard elenchus as well as his interpretation of Socrates himself. Thus, the Gorgias plays a central role to this interpretation. There are passages, however, that threaten both Vlastos’ and Benson’s interpretation of the Socratic dialogues in the Gorgias. The first passage is where Socrates appears to claim explicitly that he practices—and thus possesses—the craft that cares for the soul. In the Protagoras, Laches, and Crito Socrates characterizes the craft that cares for the soul as virtue itself. In the Gorgias, he calls it the “political craft.” In this section, I turn to the controversial passage where Socrates appears to make this claim; then, I outline two different interpretations that attempt to reconcile the apparent difficulties posed by the passage.

A. The Context of the Passage

The second half of the Gorgias focuses on happiness. Which life is best? What

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26 Vlastos notices this textual orientation, but does not believe that this is a problem for his interpretation.
makes this sort of life happy? In his final speech, Socrates claims that the philosophical life, which he describes as an inquiry into the truth (αλήθεια σκοπῶν), is the life that makes people happy. Injustice, especially if uncorrected, ruins souls. The practice of philosophy, on the other hand, keeps the soul in a healthy condition (528d8). And since the condition of one’s soul determines whether one lives a good or evil life, a soul in a good condition is the most beneficial thing for a human being.

Socrates’ opponent Callicles, however, believes this view is woefully mistaken. He asks: “how can this be a wise thing, Socrates, the craft that took a well-favored man and made him worse, able neither to protect himself nor to rescue himself or anyone else from the gravest dangers, to be robbed of all his property by his enemies, and to live a life with absolutely no rights in his city?” (486b4-c2). Callicles assumes it is obvious to everyone that living without political status in a city is living a miserable existence. The philosopher is a de facto alien in his own city. And so he must “spend the rest of his life skulking in corners, whispering with two or three little lads, never producing any large, liberal, or meaningful utterance” (485d-e). His inability to protect himself or to take revenge on his enemies through the judicial institutions of the city will render him vulnerable to clever orators (508c6-d3). If Socrates continues to philosophize in Athens, he will see for himself the terrible fate he will suffer at the hands of his countrymen. At the climax of their discussion, Callicles openly rebukes Socrates for putting himself in such a dangerous position. Socrates himself knew he was at a disadvantage at his trial because he spoke the same in private as he did in public, using the “same kind of language” he used in the marketplace (17c7-d3). Callicles warns him that if he does not study oratory, he will most likely be indicted by an unscrupulous orator. Socrates
acknowledges that he is at risk of being unjustly put to death. He explains why it would not be surprising if he were dragged into court and put to death:

I believe that I’m one of a few Athenians—so as not to say the only one, but the only one among our contemporaries—to take up the political craft and practice the true politics. This is because the speeches I make on each occasion do not aim at gratification but at what’s best. They don’t aim at what’s pleasant. And because I’m not willing to do those clever things you recommend, I won’t know what to say in court (521c2-e3)

This passage gives us a remarkably different portrait of the self-described gadfly of the Apology. Where is the man who says he only knows that he knows nothing? Accordingly, scholars assess the passage in very distinct ways. Graham says that Socrates’ claim is a “stunning reversal of Socrates’ wonted profession of ignorance.”27 Similarly, Taylor describes it as an “exceptional” claim to possess a form of expertise—the political craft turns out to be none other than the art of philosophy. Other scholars, however, disagree. How can Socrates disavow knowledge, yet practice expert politics? Benson, Irwin, and many others believe that all we can say is that Socrates only attempts the political craft.28 Others offer a different reading. Roochnik, for instance, speculates that “perhaps Socrates’ assertion is itself a kind of reductio. After all, Socrates is anything but a political or technical man. As such, if he, of all people, attempts the political techne, perhaps it is good evidence of its being impossible.”29

C. Socrates’ Practice of Politics & Complex Irony

One of the first issues to address is why Socrates depicts himself as practicing politics at all. In the Apology Socrates denies having anything to do with the political

27 Graham (1990), 15.
29 Roochnik (1996), 192.
affairs of Athens: “It may seem strange that while I go around and give this advice [to care for virtue] privately and interfere in private affairs, I do not venture to go to the assembly and there advise the city” (*Ap. 31c4-6*). He says that his spiritual sign had prevented him from “taking part in public affairs” (*Ap. 31d4*). Moreover, he says: “I think it was quite right to prevent me. Be sure…that if I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself.” (*Ap. 31d5-7*). To be sure, in the *Gorgias* he reiterates this point: “Polus, I am not a political man.”

Yet, at 521d, he says that even though he has had little acquaintance with the political institutions of the city, he has been actively engaged in the political affairs of the city all along. How can we account for these claims?

Vlastos argues that Socrates is using the phrase “doing politics” in a “willfully idiosyncratic sense.” Socrates is saying that although he does not do politics in the commonly accepted sense of the word, he does so in a way that would improve the moral character of the people who live in the city. Socrates is once again relying on complex irony to make his point against Callicles. He stayed out of politics to do politics. He avoided the city centers to philosophize, to rouse his fellow citizens like a gadfly, and to prod his fellow citizens to care for virtue. In this sense, he does what politicians ought to do: improve the souls of the citizens. We could add to Vlastos’ account that this is the reason why Socrates says in the *Apology* that he confers on the citizens what he believes to be the “greatest good.” So, Socrates does not simply attempt to practice the political craft, he practices it and was condemned by the Athenians for this reason.

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VIII. The Political Craft: A Closer Look

So far we have considered the problem of Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge and claim to take up the political craft in the Gorgias. One possible approach is to interpret the claims as evidence of Socratic irony. One reading is that Socrates is using simple irony, he claims to be ignorant, but he really does have knowledge. Another reading is Vlastos’ complex irony reading. On this view, Socrates does politics, but not in the way the Athenians practice it—he does true politics. Vlastos, unfortunately, does not explain how Socrates could claim knowledge of the political craft and yet claim to be ignorant. I turn to this issue in this section.

After clearly defining Socrates’ conception of the conditions for craft knowledge, I will argue that the political craft as so conceived is entirely compatible with Vlastos’ claims about the use of complex irony. I then examine Socrates’ assessment of popular Athenian statesmen in his discussion with Callicles, and argue that when we take seriously Socrates’ claims throughout the dialogue we see that Vlastos’ account faces challenges.

A. The General Nature of Craft

Brickhouse and Smith outline seven conditions of a craft. They take Socrates to hold that a craft has the following seven conditions: (1) rationality and regularity (503e1-504a5); (2) teachability and learnability (460b1-5; 514a-b3; La. 185b1-4; Pr. 319b5-c8); (3) explicability (465a2-6; 500e4-501b1); (4) inerrancy (Euphr. 4e4-5a2); (5) uniqueness (Ap. 24e4-25c1; Crito 47a2-48c6); (6) distinctness of subject matter (452a7-d4; Ion

Craftsmen do nothing at random and act according to the end set by that craft. This makes the actions of the craftsman orderly and rational. A craft is teachable, and a craftsman can teach it to others. The craftsman is able to explain what he does. This means that each act is part of a sequence of acts that contribute to the overall goal of that craft. Cutting leather can be done by almost anyone, but only the bridle-maker cuts leather in a way that produces a bridle. The craftsman also does not make mistakes when making a judgment about the subject of that craft. Non-experts cannot make proper judgments about the subject of that craft, and often fail to achieve the end of the craft. Moreover, the craftsman has knowledge of a distinct subject. Forms of knowledge are distinguished by their subject matter.

B. The Political Craft

In order to understand the political craft, we will need to identify the object, aim, and method of the craft. I consider each in turn.

(i) Object. The object of the political craft is the soul. The soul is an entity that is subject to a good and bad condition. In many ways the soul is analogous to the body, and Socrates treats it as such throughout the Gorgias. Both the soul and the body can be in a bad condition, yet appear to be in a good condition. Presumably, the soul or the body can likewise be in a good condition, yet appear to be in a bad condition. Only the craft of each entity can determine whether it is in a good or bad condition in reality.

(ii) Aim. The aim of the political craft is the good condition of the soul. This craft has two branches: justice (ἡ πολιτική) and legislation (ἡ νομοθετική). Socrates does not

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specify the function of each of these sub-crafts, but we can infer from the analogies he uses the following: justice aims at correcting a soul that is in a poor condition, and legislation aims at maintaining the good condition of the soul.

(iii) Rational Method. Crafts that care for an object are rational in that the craftsman can provide an account (λογός) of the procedures of a craft and how these procedures improve the condition of its object. Now, although Socrates calls attention to the importance of the political craft in treating and perfecting the souls of the citizens, he does not explicitly explain its methods. What are the methods of the political craft and how do these procedures improve a soul?

There are several ways in which we can piece together an account of the methods of the craft of the soul. For now, I will briefly consider the analogy Socrates draws between the craft that cares for the body and the craft that cares for the soul. With respect to the body, medicine can explain the procedures it applies to the body as well as account for how these procedures bring about health or sickness. Gymnastics explains why certain exercises and activities bring about strength or weakness. With respect to the soul, justice can explain how its procedures cause a soul to go from a bad to a good condition (presumably from a condition of psychic illness to a condition of psychic health); and legislation can explain how its procedures maintain a soul in a good condition (presumably a form a condition of psychic health to a condition of psychic strength and beauty). Although the analogy does not give us a clear picture of the methods of the political craft, the analogy gives us a rough picture of the most basic function of each branch of the political craft. This picture will be refined as we move on.
C. Double-Complex Irony?

One response available to Vlastos would be to apply the same solution he used to explain Socrates’ disavowal and avowal of knowledge in the other Socratic dialogues. He might say that Socrates does not mean that he has the knowledge of the soul that is analogous to the knowledge of medicine and gymnastics, but a less strict form of knowledge. So we could read 521d as an instance of what we could call “double-complex irony.” On this reading, Socrates denies that he practices Athenian politics, affirms that he practices the true political craft, but denies that he practices the true political craft.

One might think that Socrates is saying that although the political craft is a form of knowledge, it is not the sort of knowledge that is similar to what we understand to be a craft. It cannot be transferred from one person to another like medicine or shoemaking. So, Socrates could deny that he practices Athenian politics, deny that he practices the political craft-\(C\), but assert that he practices the political craft-\(E\). He could maintain that he practices the only political craft that is available to human beings—a craft that is based on propositions that are elenctically viable.

Indeed, Vlastos has something like this in mind when he says that Socrates both disavows and avows teaching virtue. He says:

In the conventional sense, where to “teach” is simply to transfer knowledge from a teacher’s to a learner’s mind, Socrates means what he says: that sort of teaching he does not do. But in the sense which he would give to “teaching”—engaging would-be learners in elenctic argument to make them aware of their own ignorance and enable them to discover for themselves the truth the teacher had held back—in that sense of “teaching” Socrates would want to say that he is a teacher; his dialogue with his fellows is meant to have; and does have, the effect of evoking and assisting their own effort at moral improvement.\(^{34}\)

\(^{34}\) Vlastos (1991), 32.
So, Vlastos might argue that true politics makes others virtuous if we understand the product of the political craft to be virtue-\( E \), not as virtue-\( C \).

**IX. Socrates’ Condemnation of Athenian Politicians**

The previous section outlined Socrates’ conception of the political craft. The political craft aims at what is best for the soul and does what it does according to an account of how each of its procedures improves it. The political craft corrects injustice in the soul in a way that is analogous to the way a doctor brings about health in the body; it also maintains the soul in a way that is analogous to the way a gymnastics instructor brings about strength and beauty in the body. Vlastos claims that we should understand Socrates to deny that he practices Athenian politics and practice the political craft. I suggested that he could argue that Socrates’ claim to practice the political craft is an instance of double-complex irony. On this reading, Socrates denies that he practices Athenian politics, denies that he practices the true political craft-\( C \), yet affirms that he practices the true political craft-\( E \). I will turn now to consider the passages where Socrates appears to conceive of the political craft not as political craft-\( E \), but political craft-\( C \). Although this is one way to read the *Gorgias*, there are three passages that conflict with this reading. This section will consider each in turn.

**A. Teachers of Virtue are Responsible for the Errors of their Students**

The first problem is that Socrates appears to conceive of justice, the sub-craft of the soul, as having results that are more akin to the transfer model of teaching from which Vlastos intends to distance Socrates. Consider the refutation of Gorgias. Gorgias is a
teacher of oratory and in the discussion with Socrates tries to distance himself from the unjust deeds of his students. He says that he teaches oratory with the intention that it not be used unjustly. If a student manages to use oratory for unjust ends, Gorgias cannot be held responsible for this behavior (457a1-4). Socrates wonders whether Gorgias believes that he should \textit{teach} his students justice if they come to him to learn oratory, but lack knowledge of justice. Gorgias concedes that “if [the student] really doesn’t have this knowledge, he’ll learn these things from me as well” (460a4). Socrates believes this is a problematic admission, since those who know justice only do and want to do what is just. These qualities follow from the notion that the possession of a specific sort of knowledge makes one a particular sort of person. One who learns medicine, for example, is a doctor and anyone who learns carpentry is a carpenter. In accordance with reasoning, anyone who learns justice must be, by virtue of that knowledge, a just man.

B. \textit{A Politician Who Fails to Improve Others is not a True Politician}

There is a second passage where Socrates appears to claim that political craft achieves its results by a transfer-model of teaching. Later in the \textit{Gorgias}, Socrates criticizes the popular Athenian statesmen that Callicles refers to as paradigmatic rulers. He argues that:

1. True statesman practice the political craft (513e2-514a3; 517a1-3)

2. The political craft improves the psychic condition of citizens by making them just and temperate (478d;504d-e; 515d3-10; 516b-c; 517e1-2)

3. Those who have virtuous souls never commit injustice (460b12)

4. After Pericles, Miltiades, Themistocles, and Cimon ruled in Athens, the people unjustly turned on them (515d8-e7; 516d2-e14)
5. Those who do unjust things have unjust souls (507a6-b5)

6. Therefore, after Pericles, Miltiades, Themistocles, and Cimon ruled in Athens, they did not reliably make the souls of the Athenian people just.

7. So, Pericles, Miltiades, Themistocles, and Cimon were not true politicians

Socrates believes that these men failed to be true politicians; they actively satisfied the appetites of the citizens without any regard to justice and self-control (518e3-5). They stuffed the city with tributes, dockyards, walls, harbors and “other such trash” (519a2-4). Their actions made the Athenian citizens more wild and, therefore, worse. Thus, Socrates takes the injustice of the citizenry as evidence that they did not practice the political craft and are responsible for the behavior of the citizens.

C. The Failure of Sophists to Improve Others

Socrates applies this same criticism to sophists. Sophists advertise that they can teach others to be virtuous, but also accuse their past students of treating them unjustly:

what could be a more illogical business than this statement, that people who’ve become good and just, whose injustice has been removed by their teacher and who have come to possess justice, should wrong him—something they can’t do (519c6-d4)?

Socrates does not believe that sophists have any ground for complaint; sophists are

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35 My reconstruction of the argument is similar to but importantly different from Shaw’s (2011) construction. I disagree with his account of Socrates’ argument in two regards.

First, Shaw limits Socrates’ argument to Pericles. The argument in this section, however, applies to all of the statesmen that Callicles mentions as examples of “good statesmen.”

Second, Shaw appears to hold that Socrates believes that Pericles only “gave speeches” in Athens (194). However, Socrates holds that statesmen use persuasion (πείθοντες) and constraint (βιαζόμενοι) (517b7). I take this to mean that the statesmen did (or were expected to do) more than simply give speeches. Therefore, I interpret the activities of the statesmen as “rule,” not “speeches.” Further support for this reading can be found elsewhere in the Gorgias. For instance, Socrates says that a skilled and good orator will seek to instill justice and self-control in the citizens “when he applies to people’s souls whatever speeches he makes as well as all of his actions, and any gift he makes or any confiscation he carries out” (504d6-9)(my emphasis).

36 Pericles in particular “made the Athenians idle and cowardly, chatterers and money-grubbers,” which he believes was the result of the institution of wages for the people (515e5-7).

37 Emphasis mine.
supposed to train their students to be virtuous, which entails the student would no longer
do unjust acts, such as disrespecting the teacher who was responsible for their virtue.

D. *What These Three Passages Seem to Imply About Socrates*

The three passages cited above show that Socrates holds that (1) Gorgias *is*
responsible for the unjust behavior of his students; (2) leaders brought to ruin by their
citizens cannot rightly complain of unjust treatment; and (3) sophists—the supposed
teachers of virtue—are also responsible for the unjust behavior of their students. These
passages are supported by the identity conditions of a craft as well as Socrates’
conception of the political craft as the craft of the soul. If Socrates were to say that he
*practices* the political craft, then he too would have no grounds to object to the way in
which he was (eventually) treated by his own countrymen. Socrates’ criticism of the
Athenian statesmen’s failures to improve others would apply *mutatis mutandis* to his own
failures to improve others. It is safe to assume that Socrates believed that he was
unjustly put to death for crimes he did not commit. A passage from the *Apology* will be
sufficient to prove the point. There, he cautions his jurors that he is conducting his
defense primarily for the benefit of the jury themselves—he is trying to prevent *them*
from doing wrong (30d6-7). His attempt to persuade them was unsuccessful. Therefore,
we must conclude that Socrates does not practice the political craft.

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38 He says: “For I notice that whenever the city lays its hands on one of its politicians because he does
what’s unjust, they resent it and complain indignantly that they’re suffering terrible things. They’ve done
many good things for the city, and so they’re being unjustly brought to ruin by it...But that’s completely
false. Not a single city leader could ever be brought to ruin by the very city he’s a leader of” (519c1-3).
E. Socrates’ Failure to Improve Others

(1) Interlocutors in the Dialogues. There is even more evidence for this reading. First, Socrates failed to reliably improve his acquaintances as an expert would. Indeed, to many, one of the main points of the Gorgias is to show how Socrates often fails to improve his acquaintances. The discussions with Polus and Callicles appear to be good examples of how Socratic dialectic can fail to improve those who refuse to adhere to specific ground rules of discussion. Polus even openly mock[s] Socrates and his views and Callicles accuses Socrates of deceiving others through argumentative tricks. Their accusations against Socrates imply that they were not persuaded by the arguments made against them. And if they are not persuaded of Socrates’ views and deny that they have been refuted, then surely they have not been improved by being refuted.

(2) Companions of the Historical Socrates. In addition, the close associates of the historical Socrates turned out to lead unjust political careers. Critias and Charmides were part of the notorious Thirty Tyrants, an oligarchy installed by Sparta after the defeat of Athens in 404 B.C. In the Apology, Socrates depicts their rule as seriously unjust. He tells the jury that he will never do what is unjust even when ordered to do so by a government that would threaten death. He says that when they ordered him to arrest another citizen, he refused: “That government, powerful as it was, did not frighten me into wrong doing” (Ap., 32d4-5). Socrates was close friends with Alcibiades—he even describes their relationship as one between lovers.

All of these considerations suggest that Socrates could not have claimed to practice

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42 Socrates claims that he had two objects of love: Alcibiades and philosophy (481d4-6). Brickhouse and Smith (1994) make this connection explicit.
the political craft, since Socrates believes that no teacher of virtue or statesmen could rightly complain of poor treatment by those he allegedly makes good. And so if we were to assume Socrates practices the political craft, then the unreliability of his method and his unjust execution would be inexplicable. It would also follow from these considerations that Vlastos’ reading that Socrates practices the political craft cannot be correct—even if we read 521d as an instance of complex irony. A statesmen must succeed, and this only seems possible through a transfer-model of teaching.

X. Socrates “Attempts” the Political Craft

The problems above give us reason to revisit Socrates’ claim at 521d to see whether there is another reading available. As an alternative, a number of scholars argue that we should not understand Socrates to be saying that he only attempts the political craft, but does not actually practice it. I turn now to consider support for this interpretation.

Those who defend this interpretation point to the main verb in the passage where Socrates appears to claim to possess the political craft:

Οἶμι μετ’ ὀλίγων Ἀθηναίων, ἵνα μὴ εἴπω μόνος, ἐπιχειρεῖν τὴ ὡς ἀληθῶς τέχνη καὶ πράττειν τὰ πολιτικά μόνος τῶν νῦν ἀτε ὧν οὐ πρὸς χάριν λέγων τοὺς λόγους οὕς λέγω ἐκάστοτε, ἄλλα πρὸς τὸ βέλτιστον, οὐ πρὸς τὸ ἣδιστον (521d7-e1)

Here, Socrates says he “ἐπιχειρεῖν”—often translated as “to take up”—the “true political craft” (τὴ ὡς ἀληθῶς τέχνη) and “political things” or “the political affairs of the city” (πράττειν τὰ πολιτικὰ). Indeed ‘ἐπιχειρεῖν’ can mean “to take up” or “to put one’s hand to,” but it can also mean “to attempt.”

Indeed, there are several passages in the Gorgias where we find the verb used in this way. At 472b, for example, Socrates says that Polus “tries to” (ἐπιχειρεῖς) refute him.
from his position with fallacious reasoning. Polus will fail, he says, because he is attempting to refute what is true, which is impossible. In another passage, Polus faults Socrates, saying: “What an absurd position you’re trying (ἐπιχειρεῖξ) to maintain!” (473a1). The context shows that Polus believes that Socrates is trying to defend an indefensible position. And still elsewhere in the Gorgias, Socrates appears to acknowledge that a non-expert can attempt a craft. In this passage, Socrates berates Callicles for wanting to undertake politics when he can provide no evidence of his success at improving others in private life. To illustrate the absurdity of Callicles’ priorities, he appeals to an analogy with doctors, saying it would be absurd if “they should attempt to (ἐπιχειρεῖν) “learn pottery on the big jar,” and attempt (ἐπιχειρεῖν) both to take up public practice themselves and to call on others like them to do so as well?” (514e6-8).

The second piece of evidence scholars offer is that Socrates appears to distinguish himself from flatterers on the basis of the object at which they aim. Flatterers aim at what is most pleasurable for the listener and Socrates aims at what is best for him or her (521d10-11). Benson notes that aiming at the end of a craft is not sufficient to entail its practice. Socrates alone aims at the good, since he realizes that he is deficient in wisdom.

Aside from these textual considerations, there are other reasons why Socrates might only be claiming to attempt the political craft. First, Socrates’ frequent disavowals

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43 Shaw suggests that Socrates’ claim about public doctors should be understood as “attempt” (Shaw, 188-9). He does not, unfortunately, specify which passage he has in mind. I provide this passage as the one he appears to have in mind.

44 The saying here means that learning pottery on a small jar is better than learning on a big jar, since failure on a smaller scale causes little waste of material.

45 Benson (2000), 246.

46 Ibid., 246.
wisdom in the Socratic dialogues appears to immediately disqualify him from practicing the political craft. Recall that after Callicles is refuted at 505c6-d3, Socrates offers to continue the conversation on his own. Before he continues, he reminds the company of his ignorance:

I’ll go through the discussion, then, and say how I think it is, and if any of you thinks that what I agree to with myself isn’t so, you must object and refute me. For the things I say I certainly don’t say with any knowledge at all; no, I’m searching together with you so that if my opponent clearly has a point, I’ll be the first to concede it (506a1-5).

An expert must have knowledge of a subject matter in order to issue authoritative judgments. Socrates’ lack of confidence in the truth of what he says shows that he does not think he can decide the matter as an expert would. But, as Socrates says to Gorgias at 455b2-c2, experts should be able to judge authoritatively on matters related to their craft. This is why the city appoints craftsmen to advise on matters related to their expertise, not those who are non-experts, since non-experts will fail to achieve the end of the craft (La. 184c9-e9).

Brickhouse and Smith go further. They argue that Socrates does not think he meets any of the seven conditions for something to count as a craft. Socrates denies having knowledge and denies teaching (Ap. 33b2-6). Second, although the elenchus does not proceed at random, there is after all some order to the procedure, the rules that govern its practice are only rules of thumb. This includes the rule that the interlocutor must only say what he or she believes and the rule that the interlocutor must define virtue terms before he discerns the applications and extensions of them. Also, Socrates’ speech is often unplanned. And the elenchus itself cannot bring about “the sort of regularity and order

47 Again, these conditions are: (1) rationality and regularity; (2) teachability and learnability; (3) explicability; (4) inerrancy; (5) uniqueness; (6) distinctness of subject matter; and (7) knowledge.
that the products of the crafts of shipbuilding or architecture do." The perplexity that an interlocutor encounters after an elenctic examination can “hardly be regarded as an orderly outcome.” Socrates himself many times admits that he is perplexed by the result of the conclusion of an elenctic examination as well. Thus, he often proceeds by conjecture. All of these reasons show that Socrates does not possess a craft regarding moral questions.

**XI. The False Dilemma**

The main problem with the debate over the passage at 521d is that either reading assumes that we must choose between whether Socrates practices or attempts both branches of the political craft. But this is a false dilemma. Socrates might practice one branch and not the other. Indeed some scholars have noted this possibility, but none explain how this possibility fits with Socrates’ claims to be ignorant or why his critique of the statesmen would not also apply to his own failure to impart knowledge to either the jurors at his trial or to his companions. I argue in what follows that the resolution lies in the fact that Socrates claims to practice justice and attempt legislation.

This reading resolves several areas of tension in the dialogue. First, it explains how Socrates can disavow the notion that he is a teacher while he still succeeds in improving others. Second, it also explains why the reasons he has for condemning the statesmen would not apply to his own practice. Third, it explains the central theme of the dialogue: the defense of the philosophical life against the common practice of politics in Athens at that time. Indeed, Socrates feels no reason to explain why he defends the philosophical

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49 Ibid.
life and the practice of true politics interchangeably throughout the dialogue. He does not see any reason to flag the transition between the two. Last, this reading accounts for Socrates’ comparison of himself to a doctor.

Scholars who attribute to Socrates the political craft tend to include both its branches. Although most do not recognize a relevant distinction between the two branches when considering 521d, some are quite aware of it. Rowe, for example, says that Socrates practices both branches because the two crafts are “presumably, or involve, the same sort of knowledge.”

I think this is false.

To begin, it is surprising that scholars overlook the fact that Socrates condemns statesmen and sophists for their failures to improve those under their care yet does not level the same criticism against judges for the recidivism of the criminals they sentence. Unjust behavior by former defendants is taken for granted in the dialogue, yet it would be unreasonable to conclude from this that judges lack the craft of justice. Socrates’ differential blame of judges and statesmen is tied to his understanding that the craft of justice and the craft of legislation are two different forms of knowledge. This is clear from the analogies he uses to explain the political craft and the relative value of each.

Socrates distinguishes between justice and legislation not by their object, but by their function. The craft of justice eradicates injustice—an evil condition—from the soul (477a12; 478d5-6). However the application of justice to a defendant does not make her fully just. There are two reasons for this.

First, if the craft of justice aimed to make others completely just, then this would require teaching. Socrates associates justice with the judge and in the exchange with Polus, he says that the judge exercises justice through the use of corporal punishments,

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such as flogging, imprisonment, and execution (480d1-3). He likens a criminal who submits to judicial punishment to a sick patient who undergoes a surgical procedure. In both cases, treatment is painful, yet beneficial to the soul and body, respectively.

Second, suppose that the application of justice made the defendant fully just. On this assumption, the same reasoning Socrates used to refute Gorgias\(^{51}\) would apply to the judge: she would always want to do and always do what is just after the punishment had been meted out.

The analogy between justice and medicine introduced in passage 466-465 of the \textit{Gorgias}\(^{52}\) can help us explain Socrates’ differential treatment of statesmen and judges. Doctors do not need to teach medicine to their patients in order to remedy the ailments in the body (478c1). By analogy to medicine, we can say that the application of justice can extract the evil in the soul without teaching the craft of justice to the criminal. For example, when Socrates specifies the nature of the products of crafts at 503e1-505b12, he claims that one of the tasks of medicine is to monitor the appetites of a patient. If the patient is in good health, the doctor allows the individual to satisfy the desires he has, since the satisfaction of healthy desires will not bring about or exacerbate the disease of the body. But when a person is ill, the doctor will prevent the person from satisfying any of the desires he might have (505a6-b10). Analogous treatment applies to the soul: if a soul is corrupt, foolish, unjust, and impious, the doctor of the soul will not permit the individual to satisfy any desire that arises, unless satisfying a desire will be better for the soul (505b1-5). So just punishment can be applied to a criminal without teaching her the craft of justice just as medical treatment can be applied to a sick person without teaching

\(^{51}\) See section IX.A above.

\(^{52}\) See section IX.B.iii above.
them medicine.

So much for justice. Let us turn now to the other branch of the political craft, legislation. Socrates conceives of this craft as a unique form of knowledge. Its function is analogous to the function of gymnastics. Although Socrates does not explain legislation and its methods in the *Gorgias*, we can piece together what he assumes is the method. There are three sources we can draw from: (1) the analogy between legislation and gymnastics; (2) the aim and method sophistry falsely imitates; and (3) the common understanding of the function of legislation.

Consider the analogy Socrates draws between legislation and gymnastics. A necessary condition for gymnastics is a baseline level of health in the body. If one is not healthy, then one cannot participate in the activities related to gymnastics, because one will not be able to benefit from gymnastics in such a state. We can say the same of the soul: that an interlocutor requires a baseline level of development in order to benefit from elenctic discussion.

Recall the passage from *The Sophist*, where the visitor says that there is a specific state of the soul that *prevents learning.*53 This is the state of complete ignorance—i.e. the condition where someone mistakenly believes he is wise. Nowhere in the *Gorgias* does Socrates say that one must meet some baseline of psychic health, but the dramatic elements in the dialogue are more than enough to illustrate how an elenctic examination can fail to reach those who refuse to “submit” to it. One could easily explain the failure by psychological characteristics that hinder proper engagement with philosophical questions. Throughout the dialogue Polus and Callicles violate the rules that Socrates sets down for the elenctic discussion. When Callicles sees that his position is about to be

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53 See section III.
refuted, he withdraws from the discussion and tells Socrates to take up the conversation with someone else. In this case, Callicles shows that he lacks the traits of character that would allow him to benefit from elenctic discussion.

We have already seen why Socrates condemns statesmen and sophists in section IX. He thinks it is absurd for sophists to say they are wise and are able to teach excellence to others while simultaneously complaining about unjust treatment from their students. Based on what the sophist advertises, this type of behavior should not be possible (519d4). He claims that sophists are in no position to “charge the creature they themselves educate with being wicked to them, or else the simultaneously accuse themselves as well” (520b6-9). That is, sophists claim to teach others the whole of human virtue, “how a person might be as good as possible and manage his own house or his city in the best possible way” (520e3-5). It is clear that Socrates believes that they fail to achieve this aim, because they flatter others instead of aiming at what is best and perfecting the soul as gymnastics would perfect the body.

Now that we have distinguished between justice and legislation on the basis of correction and perfection, we can see that each involves two different types of knowledge. A doctor can have knowledge of medicine without having knowledge of gymnastics just as a judge can have knowledge of justice without having knowledge of legislation. Given that legislation involves the knowledge of the whole of human virtue and justice does not, we should expect Socrates to value legislation over justice—and he does just that. When he rebukes Callicles for mixing up his priorities, for valuing oratory over sophistry, he says:

you suppose that one of them, oratory, is something wonderful, while you sneer at the other. In actuality, however, sophistry is more to be admired than oratory,
insofar as legislation is more admirable than the administration of justice, and gymnastics more than medicine (520b1-5)

This passage makes it quite clear that we can separate the two crafts and rank legislation over justice. In light of this reading, Socrates can claim to practice justice while failing to achieve the function of legislation. Teaching virtue is better than correcting injustice. Thus, when he is condemned to death by his peers, he does not—like the sophists and Athenian statesmen—condemn himself when he says his execution is unjust. He is free to condemn others, since he did not promise to teach them anything—he does not have the knowledge that would make them virtuous and good men. He attempted to put their souls in a way that could make them open to learn about virtue.

XII. Socrates: the Doctor of the Soul

The case made thus far provides good grounds for understanding Socrates as practicing the political craft. The distinction between justice and legislation enables us to explain how Socrates can improve others, disavow knowledge (as well as teaching) of virtue, and blamelessly suffer injustice at the hands of his fellow citizens. Socrates endeavors to correct the unjust souls of others, but this is a temporary moral improvement. If these individuals do not go on to acquire knowledge for themselves after treatment, then it is reasonable to expect that given the right circumstances, they could relapse into injustice.

This reading is supported by three passages in which Socrates portrays himself as a doctor who is improving his interlocutors. Socrates as the doctor of the soul is a theme that runs throughout the Gorgias. Let us consider each passage in turn.

The first instance where Socrates refers to himself as a doctor occurs in the
discussion with Polus. Polus had attempted to defend the position that suffering injustice is worse than committing it. After he is refuted in a series of arguments, he finds himself on the brink of admitting that he holds an inconsistent position. With disaster ahead, he hesitates in his answers. Socrates notices and says “don’t shrink from answering, Polus. You won’t get hurt in any way. Submit yourself nobly to the argument, as you would to a doctor” (475d8-11). In isolation, this comment would mean little, but seen in the totality of the work, it is clear that Socrates views himself as improving others through showing them they hold inconsistent views.

The second passage arises in the exchange with Callicles. In this portion of the dialogue, Callicles has argued that “wantonness, lack of discipline, and freedom, if available in good supply, are excellence and happiness” (492c4-6). Through a series of arguments Socrates refutes Callicles by having him agree that “discipline is keeping the soul from what it has an appetite for” (505b9-10). He infers from this that “to be disciplined is better for the soul than lack of discipline” (505b11-12). Callicles, however, refuses to continue the discussion, feigns ignorance, and tells Socrates to continue the discussion with someone else. Socrates responds: “This fellow won’t put up with being benefitted and with his undergoing what the discussion is about, with being disciplined (κολαζόμενος)’(505c3-4). Socrates is referring to the process of the elenchus itself—Callicles is refusing to be treated by dialectic.

The strongest support for my interpretation is a third passage, which constitutes the heart of the Gorgias. As we see from the Socratic dialogues, most of his interlocutors are acquaintances who are courteous, even after they are refuted. But, as Socrates acknowledges in the Apology, there are many citizens who found interactions with him
harmful. In the *Gorgias*, Polus and Callicles both represent the ways in which this hostility might manifest itself. When Socrates shows them that they hold positions that are internally inconsistent, they both become angry with him, not themselves. Socrates acknowledges in the conversation that hostility against him is likely to lead to an indictment. He predicts what would happen at his trial by way of a metaphor:

> For I’ll be judged the way a doctor would be judged by a jury of children if a pastry chef were to bring accusations against him. Think about what a man like that, taken captive among these people, could say in his defense, if somebody were to accuse him. Think about what a man like that...could say in his defense, if somebody were to accuse him and say, “Children, this man has worked many great evils on you...He destroys the youngest among you by cutting and burning them, and by slimming them down and choking them he confuses them. He gives them the most bitter potions to bring and forces hunger and thirst on them. He doesn’t feast you on a great variety of sweets the way I do!” What do you think a doctor, caught in such an evil predicament, could say, “Yes, children, I was doing all those things in the interest of health,” how big an uproar do you think such “judges” would make? (521e4-522a8).

Again, Socrates refers to himself as a doctor. In terms of the crafts he outlines in 464-465, the doctor is the counterpart craft of justice. If we return to the *Apology*, we can see that Socrates is predicting his own death at the hands of the Athenians.

**XIII. Objections**

**A. Methodological Ignorance**

One objection to my reading focuses on Socrates’ methodological ignorance. Levy, for example, argues that Socrates *does* claim to practice the political craft, but the claim is unwarranted.\(^{54}\) One of the necessary conditions for expertise is knowing how an argument establishes the truth of a proposition. Socrates, however, denies having this knowledge. Levy turns to 508e7-509a7 for support. At this point in the dialogue, Socrates

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\(^{54}\) Levy (2005), 209.
has successfully defended against Polus the view that doing injustice is worse than suffering it and against Callicles the view that it is more shameful to do injustice than to suffer it.\textsuperscript{55} He says that “these conclusions…are held down and bound by arguments of iron and adamant…So it would seem, anyhow.” (508e7-509a2). The strength of the argument resists being “undone” by others. If someone else cannot “undo” the binds of the argument, then “anyone who says anything other than what I am saying cannot be speaking well” (509a3-5). Socrates, however, moderates his confidence in the next sentence: “And yet for my part, my account is ever the same: “I don’t know how these things are, but no one I’ve ever met, as in this case, can say anything else without being ridiculous” (509a4-7). Levy interprets this passage to be an expression of methodological ignorance: “he is claiming not to know how it is that the logoi he has offered in defense of his position have been successful.”\textsuperscript{56} But “the technikos must be able to explain how the things he does by way of practicing his techne reliably lead to the intended outcome.”\textsuperscript{57} Since Socrates says that he cannot fulfill this condition, Socratic philosophy cannot be a craft any more than Gorgias’ oratory can be a craft.

Levy rightly notes that there might be a discrepancy between what Socrates says and what he does, but he overlooks a passage where Socrates explicitly claims methodological knowledge. Throughout the discussion with Polus, Socrates and Polus are at odds about how to conduct the conversation. Polus commits various fallacies and does not abide by the rules Socrates lies down as conducive to rational discussion. Socrates takes the opportunity to distinguish between two types of refutation: oratorical and

\textsuperscript{55} I do not intend to say that these are the only positions established in the exchanges with Polus and Callicles. There are many others established.
\textsuperscript{56} Levy (2005), 212.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 213.
dialectical refutation. According to Socrates, one of primary defects of oratorical refutation is that it appeals to the majority to settle disputes; it does not proceed from the premises granted by one’s opponent. Polus wrongly believes that he refutes Socrates because Socrates says things “the likes of which no human being would maintain” (473e5-7). Socrates calls this attempt at refutation “taking a vote” (474a1-2). He dismisses the attempt at refutation and offers to employ dialectical refutation with Polus. Before he even initiates the argument, he says to Polus: “I know (ἐπίσταµαι) how to produce one witness to whatever I am saying, and that’s the man I’m having a discussion with” (474a4-5). This method is “taking a vote (ἐπιψηφίζειν) from one man” (474a8).

B. Why Did Socrates not Teach Justice?

A second objection is this. According to the reading I defend, Socrates practices justice but only attempts legislation. Since justice is like medicine and medicine can improve others without teaching the patient medicine, then Socrates can improve others without teaching them justice. The practice of his dialectic orders the souls of his interlocutors by increasing their self-knowledge of their ignorance about moral questions. This allows us to say that he practiced a craft and that he was not responsible for the unjust behavior of his fellow citizens—especially for their bringing him to trial for wrongdoing. But one might wonder: why did Socrates not teach others justice after he had treated them with dialectic?

One reply to this objection is that no one reached the point in which they could learn the craft of justice. No matter how many times Socrates discussed virtue with others, no one’s soul was ordered enough to actually be able to learn the craft of justice.
Perhaps there was only one person who reached such a level: Plato himself.

A second reply to this objection could appeal to the nature of justice itself. Socrates places a great deal of emphasis on the importance of self-knowledge. This clearly must be a feature of the craft of justice—or any conception of Socratic virtue for that matter. Given that this sort of knowledge is from a first-person perspective, the craft of justice must be discovered from within, since no one could teach another person self-knowledge. Indeed, in the Laches, Socrates acknowledges that one might acquire a craft either by discovery or by being taught (La. 186d7-e4).

C. Socrates’ Condemnation of Athenian Statesmen

A third objection could be raised against my reading. I say that Socrates’ distinction between justice and legislation and claim that legislation is more admirable than justice shows that Socrates could have the craft of justice and fail to have the craft of legislation. One must have a certain amount of psychic order before one can benefit from legislation. But this appears to cause problems for Socrates. How could he condemn the Athenian statesmen on the basis that the citizens were in a poor condition after they ruled in the city? It would be open to the statesmen to object that the citizens became wild because they did not meet the baseline level of order in their souls. They tried to improve the citizens, but they were incorrigible.

This is a difficult objection to answer. I think this criticism can be directed against any reading of the Gorgias—except on the implausible view that the true statesman could teach others goodness through speeches alone, regardless of the previous condition of the souls of his listeners. Even if one were to defend this reading, it would be incompatible
with what Socrates says elsewhere about incurable souls—souls that he says are beyond all hope of reform. I think the most plausible response is that Socrates believes that statesmen both persuade and compel their citizens to become better; the ability to do this would require the knowledge of both branches of the political craft (517b7).

XIV. Conclusion

This chapter analyzed the problem of Socrates’ disavowals of knowledge in the *Apology* through the lens of the *Gorgias*. I provided a solution to two questions. One, how could Socrates claim to practice the political craft if the only thing that he knows is that he knows nothing? Two, if Socrates practices the political craft, why does his condemnation of the vulgar Athenian statesmen or sophists not also apply to him?

My answer to the first question is that we do not need to diminish Socrates’ claims of ignorance or his claim to practice the political craft. To claim that Socrates only attempted the political craft all together misses clear thematic evidence to the contrary and overlooks his various claims to treat others like a doctor. This shows us that Socrates understood himself as practicing justice, not necessarily legislation. My answer to the second question emphasizes the distinction Socrates draws between justice and legislation, and turns to the analogy with the crafts of the body to supply the missing details of the account. Socrates can deny that he teaches anyone anything, since the process of learning about oneself must be initiated by an individual from the inside. Since he does not teach, he does not impart knowledge in a way that would transfer a set of facts or first-order beliefs to another person. The Socratic elenchus works on an individual’s beliefs about himself. My reading, however, is that the Socratic elenchus is
the craft of justice. I also maintain that Socrates draws a distinction between types of justice in the *Gorgias*. I will argue for this distinction more fully in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 2

Moral Rehabilitation & Socratic Moral Psychology

I. Introduction

Thus far I have argued that in the *Gorgias* Socrates practices the craft of justice and sets out to learn the craft of legislation. This reading resolves the conflict between Socrates’ disavowal of knowledge in the *Apology* and *Gorgias* and his claim that he is the only statesman in Athens to take up the political craft. It also fits with the dramatic irony of the dialogue, which depicts Socrates as a doctor of the soul, a man put to death because he was the only statesman in Athens who did what all the other politicians pretended to do—improve the souls of others. Moreover, this reading is consistent with Socrates’ claims of ignorance in the *Apology* and Plato’s description of the therapeutic

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58 Plato presents to the reader a conflict between lives, the life of oratory and the life of philosophy. The *Gorgias* revisits three central doctrines from the *Apology*: (1) that the philosophical life is the best life; (2) that suffering injustice is better than doing injustice; and (3) that learning persuasive speaking without virtue can lead to gross injustice.
function of Socratic dialectic in *The Sophist*. In this chapter, I turn to a neglected topic in the *Gorgias*: discipline (κολάζειν).

In the previous chapter, we saw that in the *Gorgias* Socrates claims that both corporal punishment (478d9-12; 479d12; 480d1-8) and Socratic dialectic (475d8-11; 505c3-4; 521e4-522a8) improve or correct souls. Corporal punishment rehabilitates the soul by inflicting painful penalties and deterring would-be criminals; and Socratic dialectic improves a soul by increasing the scope of an individual’s self-knowledge. But when we look at Socrates’ commitments regarding moral psychology and human virtue in the other Socratic dialogues, it does not appear that either method would equally improve the condition of the soul.

This picture has led scholars to conclude that Socrates must hold that moral correction and education must be “purely intellectual”—viz. a type of education that targets beliefs, not desires. There are two reasons for this view. First, Socrates does not appear to believe that passions and appetites make any contribution to action at all. The *Protagoras*, for instance, seems to operate with a moral psychology entirely oriented around the intellect. Aristotle likely has this dialogue in mind when he faults Socrates for effectively eliminating the non-rational part of the soul and discounting passion and character in his account of the virtues. He says that Socrates mistakenly thought that virtue was knowledge itself, when knowledge is only a necessary condition of the virtues. More recent studies of Socratic philosophy concur with Aristotle. If there are

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59 The verb κολάζειν can also mean “punish,” “correct,” or “check.”
60 Penner (2000), 165.
61 M.M., 1182a15-23.
62 N.E., 1144b17-20.
63 Charles Kahn, for instance, claims that Socrates exhibits a “total disregard of emotional, affective, or otherwise non-rational factors in human motivation” (Kahn, 1996, 227).
no free-standing desires that aim at an object distinct from the good (such as pleasure), then all that would be needed in order to be virtuous is a single intellectual virtue: knowledge. A second reason for accepting the view that moral education is purely intellectual is that Socrates is optimistic about the benefit philosophical dialectic can bestow on anyone. Unlike Plato, Socrates appears to prescribe philosophy to everyone. In the Apology, for example, he offers to engage in philosophy with anyone—the “young and old, citizen or stranger” (Ap. 30a3). He says that “it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day” and that “the unexamined life is not worth living for men” (Ap. 38a4-7). Presumably, if one does not engage in philosophy, which is the rational examination of oneself and others, then one’s life—anyone’s life—is not worth living. I will call this “Socratic Optimism.”

Socratic Optimism comes in two forms. The first type is characterized by Vlastos, who observes that Socrates believes that “what is necessary and sufficient for moral reformation is intellectual enlightenment.” The main reason is that Socrates views each of the virtues as types of wisdom. Courage, for example, is not an emotional achievement: it is the wisdom of what is and is not fearful. So, if the moral reformer “can bring us to understand our good we shall be bound to pursue it.”64 He contrasts this mode of moral education with the regiment Plato outlines in the Republic, where enlightened judgment is insufficient “to produce right action unless the psyche has been brought into a condition where judgment can have practical efficacy.”65 For Plato, the virtue of courage is an emotional achievement. Thus, he “puts high on his agenda a project which did not

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64 Vlastos (1991), 88.
65 Ibid.
figure in Socrates’ program at all: the hygenic conditioning of the passions. On this view of moral improvement, moral education must train the passions to uphold reason against one’s potentially unruly appetites. I will call this “Platonic Pessimism.”

There is a second, more strict, form of Socratic Optimism. Penner, Rowe, and Scott maintain that Socratic intellectualism implies that that “only philosophical dialogue can improve one’s fellow citizens.” Of these philosophers, only Rowe acknowledges Socrates’ discussion of corporal punishment in the Gorgias. He warns that if Socrates endorses corporal punishment, then it would imply a complex model of the soul similar to the one Plato endorses in the Republic, where there are “non-good directed desires which are themselves capable of causing us to act.” In order to solve this problem, Rowe believes that Socrates rejects corporal punishment, since corporal punishment does not solve intellectual errors.

In this chapter, I contend that these views are mistaken for several reasons. First, they import into the Gorgias a conception of Socratic virtue and moral psychology that belongs in the Protagoras. Second, Socrates believes that corporal punishment improves an individual because pain brings some degree of order to the soul by tempering the appetites without needing to teach the wrongdoer. Now that we have an account of the two branches of craft aimed at bringing about goodness in the human soul, we have a framework for understanding judicial punishment. The judge is able to improve the condition of the wrongdoer’s soul by tempering appetites through pain and suffering. But if the wrongdoer is incorrigible, a person with a soul that is gnarled and deformed

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66 Ibid.
67 Penner (2000), 164. Rowe and Scott do not explicitly say philosophical dialectic is the only way. They do, however, imply this view (Rowe, 2007; Scott, 1999).
69 Ibid.
because of past injustices, the only thing a judge can do to benefit the wrongdoer is *execute him*. To Socrates, death is better than living with an unjust soul, since living in such a corrupt state makes the wrongdoer more miserable than he already is.

**II. Platonic Pessimism: the Republic**

Vlastos offers an elaborate interpretive framework that distinguishes between Socratic and Platonic philosophy on the basis of ten criteria. One of the criteria is based on the difference between the Socratic and Platonic soul. The Socratic soul is said to be a single, unified entity. It does not have “parts” that have independent sources of desire that might conflict with or override the dictates of reason. In the *Republic*, on the other hand, Plato introduces a tripartite model of the soul. On this view, the soul is comprised of reason, spirit, and appetite. The Platonic view of the soul differs from the Socratic view in that akrasia—viz. acting against what one believes is due to passion or appetite—is impossible.  

Penner, Rowe, and Scott are agreed on these points. Penner and Rowe in particular believe that the difference in models of the soul is the only criterion needed to distinguish between Socratic and Platonic philosophy. In this section, I discuss the passage that these scholars appeal to for support for a distinct Platonic soul and the sort of moral education required to improve this form of soul.

A. *The Platonic Soul in the Republic*

The traditional view of the *Republic* is that Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece for his views. In this work, we find Plato introduces a conception of the soul that would

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71 Ibid., 88.
be utterly foreign to the Socrates of the Socratic dialogues.\textsuperscript{72} He divides the soul into three parts: the rational, the spirited and the appetitive part. This view leads Plato to take on significantly different views of moral education, rehabilitation of the soul, political institutions, and epistemology.

Plato first divides the soul into the appetitive and rational part. He says that thirst is for drink \textit{simpliciter}, not for some “particular drink” (438e11-439a1). A “particular sort of thirst is for a particular sort of drink. But thirst itself isn’t for much or little, good or bad, or…for drink of a particular sort. Rather, \textit{thirst itself is in its nature only for drink itself}” (438e11-439a5). However, sometimes a thirsty person also experiences the contrary desire to not drink; this is a desire that results from reasoning about what is best overall for the soul (441e3-5).\textsuperscript{73} Thus, there are two desires pulling the soul in different directions: the desire to drink and not drink. Plato then endorses the \textit{principle of contraries}, which states that the same thing cannot do or undergo opposites in the same respect, in relation to the same thing, at the same time (436b). Therefore, since the soul both desires and does not desire to drink, it must have (at least) two parts: one part that desires to drink without calculation and the other part that (after calculation) desires not to drink (439c5-d1). He calls the part that thirsts the appetitive part and the part that calculates the rational part.

The next division is between the appetitive part (\textit{viz.}, the part that hungers, thirsts, lusts) and the spirited part. There is a part which lusts after shameful things and another part that resists it. In the case of Leontius, the desire for shameful gratification is not

\textsuperscript{73} Socrates does not characterize the function of the rational part of the soul in this discussion, but when he summarizes the discussion he says that the calculation—of which the rational part engages—is for the sake of the soul itself.
overruled—the appetitive part that lusters after shameful sexual arousal wins over the other part that is angry about the desire. The person relents to the desire and pushes open his eyes and rushes towards the sight, saying to himself: “Look for yourselves, you evil wretches, take your fill of the beautiful sight!”⁷⁴ Socrates believes that the part that relents and gives in to the intense desire to “take its fill” is a third part of the soul, which he calls the spirited part of the soul.

C. Interpretation of the Tripartite Soul

Penner and Rowe have similar interpretations of Plato’s conception of the soul in the Republic. Penner says that

Plato is explicitly attacking Socrates’ view that ‘all desire is for the good. In Plato we find desire for the good only in the rational part of the soul...Desires of the appetitive part of the soul, on the other hand, are brutally irrational, or, as we might say, bling. That is, they are blind to such changes in belief...[M]y behavior can be changed without any change in my beliefs—simply by acting on or awakening my irrational desires⁷⁵

Rowe notes that the change in the view of the soul would require a different conception of the function of the political institutions of the city. He says that if we all possess irrational elements or parts that are capable of causing us to act independently of, or even in direct contravention of, what our reason tells us to do, then it will plainly be insufficient...to talk to people, in the way that the Socrates of the dialogues seems to do, in order to change their behavior; we shall need to deal with their irrational parts as well—which will require irrational, i.e., political and rhetorical means⁷⁶

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⁷⁴ Socrates is discussing the story of Leontius, a man who struggles between his anger and lust to look at executed bodies (439e6-442a).
⁷⁵ Penner (1992), 129.
D. Akrasia and Moral Education in The Republic

In these passages, Plato allows that a desire that originates from one’s spirited part or one that originates from the appetitive part can conflict with and prevail over an intellectual desire. This is a phenomenon he considers to be a civil war (440b7-b5). One can act contrary to one’s rational calculation if one is not able to control either the lower parts of the soul. In order to ensure that the soul follows the calculations of the rational part, one must undergo the proper education, which, for example, involves

a mixture of music and poetry, on the one hand, and physical training, on the other, that makes the two parts harmonious, stretching and nurturing the rational part with fine words and learning, relaxing [the spirited part] through soothing stories, and making it gentle by means of harmony and rhythm (Rep. 441e1-442a1)

The aim of the moral education of the guardians in their formative years is to get the two lower parts to obey reason so that the individual can bring about psychic harmony among the parts of his or her soul. This is mainly achieved by strengthening spirit against appetite. But the entire soul must be educated to achieve four psychic virtues—wisdom so that the rational part is knowledgeable about the good (444d); courage so that the calculations of reason are carried out against temptation (442c-d); moderation so that each part can allow reason to rule the soul; and justice so that each part only does its own job (442d).

Plato does not recognize a virtue for the appetitive part. Yet appetite must “agree” that reason should rule the soul. This part should be ruled by an alliance between spirit and reason. Since an appetitive desire towards pleasure can disrupt one’s judgment, moral education must train the spirited part to resist pleasure and pain and retain true moral beliefs in the soul. The lower parts of the soul do not need to understand, but they must
be brought to obey the dictates of reason. If one is not conditioned to follow one’s reason, then talking will yield little change to the person’s behavior; they will follow their passions and give in to intense appetites. Indeed, the practice of philosophy before one is a fully matured adult is often harmful, not beneficial. Accordingly, Plato argues that the function of moral education must coordinate the spirited part to follow the rational part, moderate the appetites and keep them in check. Spirit must ally itself with reason in order to withstand the appetites and maintain harmony in the soul. Philosophy ought to be introduced to the student much later in life.

III. Socratic Optimism

Supporters of Socratic Optimism believe that since the Republic acknowledges different parts of the soul and possible instances of akrasia, Platonic moral education is very different from Socratic moral education. Platonic moral education focuses on the non-rational side of an individual first, then turns to the rational side once certain conditions are met. Socratic moral education focuses only on the intellect, which to Socrates is the practice of philosophy.

Consider some doctrines customarily attributed to Socrates. The first two are known as the Socratic Paradoxes:

(1) Prudential Paradox: no one ever does what he thinks, believes, or knows is bad for himself.

(2) Moral Paradox: (i) virtue is knowledge and vice is ignorance, (ii) all who do injustice do so involuntarily.

To these we may add the following doctrines concerning value:

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77 Penner (2000), 165.
78 Santas (1964), 147.
(3) *Happiness is the Final Unconditional Good:* happiness is the only good we “pursue” or desire only for its own sake and thus the “end” (τέλος) of all our actions.

(4) *Supremacy of Virtue:* (i) virtue is an unconditional non-final good; (ii) it is necessary and sufficient for happiness.

(5) *Subordinate Non-Final Goods:* intermediate things (viz., health, wealth, honor, power, etc.) are neither-good-nor-evil; they are never desired for their own sake, only for the sake of good things.  

The prudential paradox tells us that the object of desire cannot be what we conceive to be bad for us, and the moral paradox is a claim about the nature of virtue. The third doctrine supports the moral paradox: the ultimate aim of every action and desire is for the sake of our own happiness. So, once we come to believe that something is good for us and contributes to our happiness we will desire it. The supremacy of virtue doctrine tells us that every action *should* aim at virtue, because it is the one thing that makes us happy. Most people strive to acquire as much wealth, honor, and pleasure as possible, but they only do so because they are ignorant that no matter how many subordinate goods weigh on the scale against virtue, these things will never achieve happiness.

**IV. Socratic Moral Psychology in the *Protagoras***

The best evidence for Socratic Optimism is found in the *Protagoras*. In this dialogue, Socrates assumes the prudential paradox and introduces a measuring craft that explains the supremacy of virtue thesis as well as the moral paradox. In this section, I draw attention to how Socrates denies the role of non-rational desires in action.

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A. Denial of Akrasia in the Protagoras

Often, we must choose between two or more courses of action. It seems obvious that there are times when we decide one action is better than another, but then do what we think that we should not do. How does this happen? One widely held belief is that our attraction to pleasure pushes us to do things we know are harmful. In the Protagoras, Socrates denies that akrasia is possible. He argues that our experience of acting against our better judgment is an illusion. No one ever acts for the sake of something he thinks is bad for himself, because everyone only acts for the sake of what he thinks is good. If someone does something harmful, it can only be the result of ignorance about what is good. Even if someone feels like he is in a state of akrasia, he is mistaken about what is going on in his soul.

The Protagoras is widely considered to provide an account of the operations of Socratic moral psychology.⁸⁰ Towards the end of the dialogue, Socrates considers the popular explanation of what is believed to be a common experience. The common man believes that

while knowledge is often present in a man, what rules him is not knowledge but rather anything else—sometimes anger, sometimes pleasure, sometimes pain, at other times love, often fear; they think of his knowledge as being utterly dragged around by all these other things as if it were a slave (352b5-c2)

Socrates endorses the opposite view, which is that knowledge cannot be dragged around “as if it were a slave.” Knowledge is a fine thing capable of ruling a person, and if someone were to know what is good or bad, then he would never be forced by anything else to act in a way other than what knowledge dictates.⁸¹ It is this intelligence, he says,

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⁸¹ Ibid., 159.
that “would be sufficient to save a person” (352c6-7). But, how is intelligence to be sufficient to save someone?

To answer this question we must turn to Socrates’ characterization of human action. In the first passage, Socrates claims that “no one who knows or believes there is something else better than what he is doing, something possible, will go on doing what he had been doing when he could be doing what is better” (358b8-c3). In the second passage, Socrates claims that

no one goes willingly toward the bad or what he believes to be bad; neither is it in human nature...to want to go toward what one believes to be bad instead of to the good. And when he is forced to choose between one of two bad things, no one will choose the greater if he is able to choose the lesser” (358c10-d5)

Socrates concludes that to “give in to oneself” or akrasia is “nothing other than ignorance, and to control oneself is nothing other than wisdom (358c3-5).

B. Psychological Egoism

We see here that Socrates is a psychological egoist, which means he holds the view that every action by an agent is for the sake of that agent’s welfare. When he says that something is good, what he means is that it is good for an individual. Assuming it were true that no one ever acted contrary to what they hold to be the best course of action for themselves, knowing something is bad is sufficient to prevent one from acting that way. Moreover, we can say that if an individual does what is harmful for himself, the person did not know that it was harmful. He had a false belief that something was good when it was not. Socrates thus claims that wrongdoing is due to ignorance, which is
defined as a state of having a false belief about “matters of importance” or, simply, about what is good (358c7-8).

C. An Analysis of Akrasia

To understand this, we can draw a distinction. There is belief-akrasia, which is the phenomenon in which someone acts against a mere belief that he should perform an alternative course of action; and there is knowledge-akrasia, the phenomenon in which someone acts against the knowledge that one should do some action.

There are also two ways in which one could act against one’s judgment. The first way is to change one’s mind over some interval of time. Picture a man reminding himself that he should remain faithful to his wife after he notices an attractive acquaintance flirting with him. He begins to lose his composure. Instead of thinking he should be faithful, he begins to think things like—‘I still have it after all these years! Perhaps a kiss would be no big deal’. He ignores the long-term damage his act will cause to his wife and his family and decides to have intercourse with the woman that night. In the morning, he deeply regrets his decision, but it is too late. In this case, the man first believed he should remain faithful but changed his mind because he misjudged the amount of good to be gained in the short-term. It was this that caused him to overestimate the value of the action. This is an example of diachronic belief-akrasia.

Another way we could think of someone lacking self-control is if one acts against an occurrent belief. Suppose that the tempted man in our previous example had never entertained reasons why it would be a good idea to cheat on his wife—the acquaintance

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82 The claim here does not specify what type of belief the wrongdoer holds that leads to wrongdoing: is it an error about a particular action, a type of action, or what in general is good? Or is the error about all or some of these beliefs?
flirts, his passion flares, he cheats. However, throughout the whole ordeal he maintained the belief that it was a bad idea. But he did it anyway. His lust overwhelmed his belief and he did something he thought would be bad all things considered. He couldn’t help himself. This is an instance of *synchronic belief-akrasia*.

Going back to our two passages in the *Protagoras*, we can say that Socrates holds that *synchronic* belief-akrasia and knowledge-akrasia are impossible. The remaining alternative is acting against one’s better judgment over time, or what I have called *diachronic belief or knowledge akrasia*.

D. *Knowledge as a Necessary and Sufficient Condition for Virtue*

One of the central aims at this point in the dialogue is to explain why someone who lacks knowledge lives in a condition of confusion, worry, and regret. Socrates says that ignorant people lack the ability to accurately measure the amount of good to be gained by an action and so they are often led around by appearances. This is because they lack the ability to distinguish between what appears to be true and what is true. He says that we—presumably the ignorant ones—wander around in confusion

often changing our minds about the same things and regretting our actions and choices with respect to things large and small, the art of measurement, in contrast, would make the appearances lose their power by showing us the truth, would give us peace of mind firmly rooted in the truth and would save our life (356d-e)\(^3\)

\(^3\)I think this passage would be best explained with an analogy to the science of optics. To the naked eye, a straw in a glass of water appears to be split into two segments. The cause of this phenomenon is that the refraction index of the air is much lower than the refraction index of the water. And so when light passes through the two mediums, the phase velocity of the light wave is altered, causing a change in the light ray. So, when the light wave traveling from the submerged bit of the straw enters the perceiver’s eyes at an angle, whereas the light traveling from the other segment of the straw does not. Because a child lacks familiarity with basic physical laws, we are not surprised to see her believe that the straw separates and comes together in and out of water. The science of measurement is provides the moral expert with the knowledge to “see” the appearance for what it is: something that merely appears real, but is not.
The moral scientist—the one with the measuring craft—will understand what is good and be able to explain why things appear to be good but are not. The expert with the craft of measurement will be immune to misleading appearances. And this knowledge will ensure that our lives will go well (357b2-4). So, in this section Socrates allows for diachronic belief-akrasia, but denies that diachronic knowledge-akrasia is possible.

Before we move on, let us summarize what we have said so far about Socrates’ position in the Protagoras: (1) acting against one’s current belief about what to do is good is impossible; (2) if one has knowledge, one would never act against it; (3) those without knowledge often change their mind and lack resolve; and, finally, that (4) wrongdoing is the result of a false belief about what is good for oneself.

Let us describe again the tempted man in light of the discussion. We can say that Socrates would deny that this man was in a state of synchronic akrasia. Although the man thinks he gave in to unruly passion, he is mistaken about what was going on in his soul. He made a poor judgment about what to be gained from the action and wrongfully thought that he was overcome by pleasure and did what he thought was the worse option. The tempted man thought he suffered from synchronic akrasia, but he actually suffered from diachronic akrasia.

V. Socratic Philosophy in Dialogue with Gorgias?

The previous section appears to support the Socratic Optimists’ reading. On this interpretation, it appears that reason is all-powerful in the soul and that there are no desires that conflict with one’s judgments about what is best, since no one ever does what he thinks or knows what is bad for himself. The measuring craft will allow one to
determine the good from the apparent good, and so is sufficient to save a person, making him or her happy. Because wrongdoing is due to ignorance, if one can bring someone to have the correct beliefs, all would be well.

Let us turn now to the Gorgias. There are two passages widely considered to indicate that in this dialogue Socrates is operating within the Socratic philosophical framework in general and assuming the “intellectualistic” Socratic moral psychology in particular.84 The first passage is located in the discussion with Gorgias and the other is located at the start of the discussion with Polus. In the former passage, Socrates assumes both the prudential and moral paradox in his refutation of Gorgias and, in the latter passage, Socrates provides a theory of action that explains the prudential paradox.

A. The Just Man Only Wants and Does What is Just. The first passage is located at the end of the dialogue with Gorgias. Socrates’ argument against Gorgias focuses on two of his beliefs: (1) it is possible for Gorgias’ former students to use rhetoric or oratory unjustly; (2) the teacher of rhetoric or oratory is not responsible for the unjust use of oratory. Socrates steers Gorgias into contradiction when he first has him agree that a student of oratory would learn about justice from Gorgias if he does not already have this knowledge. Gorgias then accepts the consequence to his position that rests on the “intellectualist” Socratic moral motivation similar to the one in the Protagoras.

In response to Socrates’ first line of questioning, Gorgias says that rhetoric is concerned with the greatest good: freedom and rule over others in the city (452d6-10). Rhetoric, he says, provides one with the ability to persuade judges in the court of law and the audiences in all other political gatherings (452e2-3). Socrates points out that the subject of discussion in law courts and political assemblies is justice and goodness.

84 Mackenzie (1981), 160.
Gorgias agrees (or possibly infers) that justice is indeed the subject of oratory (454b5-7). Since oratory concerns itself only with persuading others about these topics, it follows that the orator is not a teacher of just and unjust things to the audiences in the law courts and other similar political gatherings. An orator only persuades audiences on various subjects so long as the audience is comprised of those who are ignorant of the subject of discussion (455a4-6). But orators and tyrants are often seen using the so-called skill Gorgias imparts for unjust ends. He believes that he can avoid blame by appealing to an analogy between rhetoric and competitive skills—teachers impart a competitive skill with the intention that the skill will be used justly. But if a student misuses a competitive skill, it cannot be the fault of the teacher (457a1-4). We do not blame the teachers of boxing when students use the skill for unjust ends, so we should not blame teachers of oratory when students use the skill for unjust ends.  

But Socrates charges that Gorgias’ current position is out of “harmony” with his previous statements. To show this, he asks Gorgias to explain what sort of training one could expect to receive from orators—what exactly must a student know about justice before he goes in front of crowds of the people to declare what is and is not just (459e1-4)? Must he not know what is just? Gorgias concedes: “I suppose if he really doesn’t have this knowledge, he’ll learn these things from me as well” (460a4-6).

The popular reading of this passage is that it is this admission that leads to Gorgias’ eventual downfall. Socrates turns to consider what it means for someone to have a craft. Craft-knowledge makes someone that particular sort of person (460b7-9). For any

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85 The initial question to Gorgias has two parts. The first part is framed according to what Socrates most likely believes is the cognitive status of the orator who has been trained by Gorgias—he asks: does the teacher of oratory simply “devise persuasion about [these things] so that—even though he doesn’t know—he seems among those who don’t know either, to know more than someone who actually does know?” (459d2-5).
craft whoever has that knowledge is that type of person. For example, if someone learns the craft of medicine, he is a doctor. The same goes for the moral craft of justice: whoever has learned justice is a just person (460b12-13). If this is true, then what Gorgias attempted to maintain is false. He first said is possible for orators to misuse oratory, employing it for the sake of injustice. He then says that an orator will neither do nor want to do what is unjust (460c1-5). So it does not seem that a teacher of oratory can deny responsibility for the unjust actions of his or her students, since if students were indeed already just or taught justice by the teacher of rhetoric, they would never do unjust things (457a1-4).

Given that Gorgias is a teacher of rhetoric and that he says that, in addition to rhetoric, he can teach his students justice, he appears to take it for granted that (i) justice is a craft and that (ii) it can be taught to others. But if justice is a craft, then it is like the other common crafts. Since justice is similar to the other common crafts, then (iii) the description of the common craftsman and the craftsman of justice with respect to the subject of their craft must be the same. Claims (i) and (ii) describe the nature of justice and (iii) explains the capacities someone must have in order to be a just man. Gorgias implies that justice is a craft when he says that he would teach it to his students if they did not have this knowledge. His admission also indicates that he acknowledges (on some level) that it is sensible for a teacher of oratory to place in his students a respect for justice. And (iii) explains why a just man will not always only ever do what is just, but also want only to do justice. But why does this follow? If justice is a type of craft-knowledge and every craft can be used for good or bad purposes, then why should the man who knows justice always do and want to act justly?
B. Irwin’s Assessment of 460b

Irwin believes that the refutation is illegitimate, since there is little reason for Gorgias to accept the “Socratic assumptions” about virtue and action.\(^8^6\) The inference from (i) – (iii) is only successful only on the basis of Socratic assumptions. Irwin does not explain which Socratic assumptions he has in mind, but we could provide two for him: (1) the prudential paradox, and (2) the supremacy of virtue doctrine.\(^8^7\) If these are the assumptions on which Socrates relies, then it appears that Socrates is indeed assuming the moral psychology of the Protagoras.

C. Objection to Irwin

I think that the evidence for this reading, however, is inconclusive. Indeed the “Socratic assumptions” could neatly secure the conclusion, but, as Irwin himself admits, it would be a poor argument against Gorgias. There is, however, another, more promising, route, since Gorgias has reason to accept the inference he draws. Like other sophists, Gorgias appears to believe that virtue is craft-knowledge and so can be taught. Clearly his admission 460a4-6 supports this reading. If so, then the identity conditions for craft-knowledge would be plausible to him. All that Socrates says in this brief argument is that if justice is a craft and the possession of a craft entails certain things about that person, then having knowledge of justice entails certain things about the person who has that craft. Gorgias is compelled to accept the conclusion for two reasons: (1) the identity

\(^8^6\) Irwin (1980), 126-127.
\(^8^7\) Cooper (1999) suggests a similar interpretation, even though he concludes that the passage shows us “Socrates committing himself to the ‘Socratic’ moral psychology” (43, 45). He thinks the inference from knowing justice to desiring and doing what is just provides only a “a very abstract—purely formal—consideration” of Socratic assumptions (44). He agrees with Irwin that Gorgias indeed has no reason to accept this conclusion (44, fn).
conditions of a craft and (2) the popular belief about the qualities a just person must have in order to be a just person. He might not know how a just man only does and desires justice, but the craft-analogy and the popular assumptions together compel him to accept the conclusion on this basis, not necessarily on the basis of the Socratic assumptions about motivation.88

D. Potential Problem for this Reading

But one might object to this reading. Since Gorgias explicitly distances himself from the injustice of his students throughout the discussion, surely he does not really believe that he actually did teach justice to his students when they came to him without this knowledge. Indeed further support for this view can be seen in the Meno. In that dialogue, Meno reports that the historical Gorgias viewed himself as altogether different from other sophists in that he only claimed to make his students clever speakers in the political forums of the city (M., 95c1-3). He would ridicule any sophist who promised to teach virtue. Some believe this shows that the literary Gorgias concedes that he would teach others justice if they did not already have it out of a sense of shame. He could not admit in public that he taught others an almost supernatural ability to persuade the crowds whilst lacking any knowledge of justice. Such a claim would make him look irresponsible to those present at the discussion—teaching others the ability to influence the course of affairs of the city without knowledge would be shameful. Thus, we have reason to believe that Gorgias’ admission was insincere.89

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88 Another interpretation is that Socrates could be saying that either justice is not a craft or it is a special sort of craft.
89 Kahn (1996), 134.
E. Response

This reading is plausible. Gorgias’ claim that he would teach others justice if they lacked it has seemed to many as a careless afterthought. But this cannot be the correct reading, since Gorgias has already implied that he teaches justice at the beginning of his discussion with Socrates. And if he teaches justice, then he must also be an expert about justice.\(^\text{90}\)

I want to turn to a passage that has gone unnoticed in recent scholarship. At 449d2 and again at 449d14-15 Socrates asks Gorgias to specify what he means by saying that oratory is about speeches. Speeches about what? Gorgias denies that oratory is concerned with all speeches, but it does make them “capable of speaking” (449e7). And Socrates follows up with the following question: “And also to be wise in what they are speaking about?” (449e9-10). Gorgias agrees. It is not until much later that we see the import of this admission. After some discussion about the subject of oratory, Socrates finally gets Gorgias to clearly state the subject of oratory—he submits that oratory is “concerned with those matters that are just and unjust” (454b7-8). On the basis of this answer it would be perfectly legitimate for Socrates to ask whether Gorgias would teach his students justice if his students did not have it. In fact, Socrates is highlighting Gorgias’ serious failure of self-knowledge. Gorgias advertises to others that he is an expert orator who can teach his craft. Since he is an expert and claims to teach, he must also have knowledge of the

\(^{90}\) Cooper (1999) also defends this reading but from a slightly different route. Cooper infers from Gorgias’ claim that he has expertise that he thus has expertise about the subject (Cooper, 33-36). My reading acknowledges this but also notes Gorgias explicitly commits himself to failure at 449e7-10 when he says that he makes his students capable of speaking and wise in whatever he teaches them. An additional virtue of my reading is that it gives full reign to Gorgias’ grand claims about the scope of his expertise. He says he can make anyone wise in not only justice, but also everything else under the sun. Socrates mentions the wide range of knowledge Gorgias claims for himself later: “SOCRATES: Do you say that you’re able to make an orator our of anyone who wants to study with you?” GORGIAS: Yes. SOCRATES: So that he’ll be persuasive in a gathering about all subjects, not by teaching but by persuading?” (my emphasis)(458e6-10).
subject of oratory, which he (eventually) says is justice. So, he has been saying *all along* that he teaches others justice—he is just unaware of what he is saying. Socrates’ question merely brings to light that Gorgias says that he does not teach justice but that he does teach justice to his students. Socrates suspected that this was the case from the start of the conversation (454b9-11).

This reading anticipates Socrates’ comments later. Shortly after Gorgias’ defeat, Socrates distinguishes between oratory and justice on the basis that oratory is a type of flattery and justice. Oratory is not a craft but it does *imitate* justice. Both practices “tend to work in the same area and concern themselves with the same thing” (465c7-10), and so orators confuse others about what they are. But they are also confused themselves—they “don’t know what to do with themselves, and other people don’t know what to do with them” (465c9-10).

**VI. Socratic Philosophy in the Dialogue with Polus?**

In the previous section, I considered a passage where it appears that Socrates commits himself to an intellectualist moral psychology in the *Gorgias*. It was, however, unclear whether it could serve as definitive evidence that could support the Socratic Optimism reading. The most we could say about the passage is that Socrates (possibly) holds the prudential paradox and (probably) holds the supremacy of virtue thesis in the dialogue with Gorgias. He appears to hold that once one has knowledge of justice, one would always desire and do what is just. If one lacks knowledge, it is possible that a person could be subject to diachronic and synchronic belief akrasia. So, at this point in the *Gorgias*, it is still a live possibility that Socrates believes that moral rehabilitation
should aim at training both the intellect and non-rational desires. Thus far, there is no reason to deny that Socrates could believe that the souls of those without moral knowledge are replete with various non-rational desires (e.g., appetites, passions, etc.) aiming at something other than what an agent believes is good. Indeed there might very well be powers in the soul that could cause ignorant people to change their mind about moral value as well as what to do in a given circumstance before one has acquired the knowledge of justice. After acquiring this knowledge, it is possible that the soul undergoes a discernable change—where the soul of an ignorant person was once comprised of multiple parts, when someone has knowledge, the person is one unified whole.91

A. No One Wants to Do What is Bad for Themselves

I turn now to consider the second passage in the *Gorgias* where Socrates discusses desire and action. This passage is commonly thought to provide an explanation of the prudential and moral paradoxes in the *Protagoras* as well as the refutation of Gorgias we considered in the previous section.92

The first refutation of Polus deals with two topics: the power of orators (and tyrants) and what it means to do what one wants. Polus’ position is the following: (1) power is something good for the one who has it (466e6-7); (2) doing what seems best is equivalent to doing what one wants (467b2-10); and (3) doing what seems best without intelligence is bad (467a3-5). Socrates argues that it is possible for a man who does

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91 This possibility is entertained in the *Republic.*
92 Taylor (1976); Irwin (1979), 143; Santas (1969); Mackenzie (1981), 161.
whatever he sees fit in a city (e.g., a tyrant or demagogue) to lack great power and to fail to do what he wants.

The crux of the refutation (466e6-468e7) is Socrates’ distinction between doing what seems best and doing what one wants. He begins by dividing all things into three categories: good things, bad things, and intermediates. He then makes a claim about human action: whenever human beings act for the sake of something, they act for the sake of what is good for themselves, never for the sake of what is bad nor what is intermediate. One does not desire an action tout court, since actions are in themselves intermediates. Thus, whenever one acts for the sake of something, and they think it is good, yet it turns out to be harmful, one did what one thought was best, not what one wanted. Actions for the sake of something bad or something intermediate are done as a result of ignorance about that object.

B. Doing Something Harmful to Oneself is Due to Ignorance

Socrates applies this reasoning to the orator and tyrant, individuals who can do whatever they think is best in the city. He shows Polus that sometimes an orator attempts to accomplish some objective (such as having a rival put to death) and it turns out to be the cause of his ruin. In such cases, he only did what seemed best, not what he wanted. Therefore, (2) is false—it is not the case that doing what one thinks is best is equivalent to doing what one wants.

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93 Things that are in themselves neither-good-nor-bad since they may be used for good or bad purposes.
C. The Failure of Self-Knowledge

We might be tempted to think that when one fails to get what one wants, one always realizes whether one was successful or not. To be sure, if an orator attempts to have a rival exiled and the move led to his own premature death, he would know quite well that he did not do what he wanted. But this is not always the case. Sometimes people fail to do what they want, yet never find out that they have failed to accomplish what they set out to do. This is certainly the case with moral conditions and qualities. Many—if not most—people fail to realize that they are miserable. Most people even falsely believe that they did what they wanted when they did not get what they wanted.

VII. Corporal Punishment in the Gorgias

In the previous two sections we considered two passages in the Gorgias where Socrates appears to signal that he is still operating within the Socratic framework. We saw that there is some evidence that Socrates assumes the prudential and moral paradox in the discussion with Gorgias and again in the debate with Polus. Taking these two passages together, Socrates appears to hold his customary views—the prudential and moral paradox as well as the denial of akrasia. Wrongdoing once again seems to be the result of ignorance, not unruly appetites. But scholars have noticed that Socrates’ discussion with Callicles in the second half of the dialogue appears to assume a model of the soul that is similar to the tripartite soul of the Republic. First, he appears to divide the soul in a way that the Socrates of the Protagoras would not recognize. Second, he appears to maintain views that imply that the two Socratic paradoxes are false.94

94 The moral and prudential paradox.
I argue in the remainder of this chapter that the *Gorgias* systematically assumes that one’s physiological desires can usurp reason’s role. Socrates’ conception of discipline or punishment *throughout* the *Gorgias* suggests that the discrepancy between the first and second half of the *Gorgias* is explained by the damage intemperance causes to the structure and operation of the soul as well as the relationship between the body and soul. In self-controlled people, for example, appetites are manageable. Within intemperate people, however, the appetites begin to hinder the reasoning capacity. The body begins to *judge* in place of the soul. We will see that the model of the soul in the *Gorgias* is much different from the model in the *Protagoras* but it is also different from the tripartite division in the *Republic*. In the *Gorgias*, the soul is similar to the body-soul dualism of the *Phaedo*. I also argue that Socrates’ discussion of corporal punishment and discipline shows that the Socratic Optimist reading of the *Gorgias* is mistaken. One can be improved by both judicial punishment *and* by dialectic.

**A. Introduction of Corporal Punishment in the Debate with Polus**

One of the central themes in the *Gorgias* is the benefit of discipline or punishment to those who have done wrong. Socrates first claims that the primary function of punishment is not to harm but rather to *rehabilitate* wrongdoers in a way that is analogous to the way in which doctors heal patients. The function of punishment is to improve, not to harm, the wrongdoer. We might think that the given the moral psychology of the *Protagoras* that punishment must aim at the intellect of the wrongdoer since on this model wrongdoing is caused by false beliefs about what is good. As Penner and Rowe maintain, the only difference between good and bad people is the state of their
beliefs. However, contrary to this expectation, in the dialogue with Polus, Socrates indicates that (1) the judge is analogous to the doctor; (2) just punishment *eradicates* injustice from the soul; and (3) nonmoral incentives (such as pain and suffering) can *improve* the moral condition of the wrongdoer. I now consider each of these points in turn.

B. Judicial Punishment

The first passage arises in the context of the discussion about whether tyrants are happy. Polus shamelessly defends the life of a tyrant. For support he appeals to the tyrant Archeleas, who can do as he pleases, “whether it’s putting people to death or exiling them” (469c6-10). Socrates counters that those who do what they think is best only do what is good for themselves if it is done justly, not unjustly (470b9-11). The tyrant who pays what is due, the one who submits punishment, is better off than the tyrant who uses any means possible to avoid paying for his crimes (472e4-8; 473d8-e4). Both tyrants, however, are unhappy, but the one that avoids paying what is due is worse off than the other (473d8-11).

C. Just Punishment is Beneficial, Not Harmful

Socrates argues against Polus’ belief that punishment is harmful. He says that Polus is mistaken because just punishment benefits the wrongdoer like a doctor benefits the sick. The main justification for punishment is that the just actions of the judges have beneficial effects on others. The argument in support of this position is the following:

1. Paying what is due (τὸ διδόναι δίκην) and being justly punished (τὸ κολάζεσθαι δίκαιως) for wrongdoing (ἀδικοῦντα) are identical things (476a8-9)
2. Just things are admirable insofar as they are just (476b1-3)

3. When one acts upon something, there is necessarily something having something done to it (476b4-6)

4. Something acted upon by something else is acted on in “the sort of way the thing acting upon it does it” (476b8-11)\(^95\)

5. Paying what is due is a case of being acted upon by the person who acts—the judge, presumably (476d8-12)

6. Whoever correctly (ὀρθῶς) punishes justly punishes (476d13-e1).

7. Whoever punishes justly is acting justly (476e1-6)

8. The one being punished is being acted upon justly when he pays what is due

9. The one being punished is having admirable things done to him

10. Admirable things are either beneficial or pleasurable or both (agreed to in previous argument)(474d7-13; 477a1-3)

11. Punishment is not pleasurable (agreed to in previous argument)(475c1-6)

12. Thus, someone who pays what is due has something beneficial done to him (477a4-7)

13. Beneficial improvement is beneficial treatment of the soul (477a9-10)

14. Thus, one who pays what is due “gets rid of evil in his soul” (477a12-13)

The argument appears to rely on a faulty premise that can be traced back to the preceding argument (474c5-475e8).\(^97\) In that argument, Socrates targeted Polus’ claim that doing

\(^95\) Socrates reaches this principle by a short inductive argument that appeals to different things doing an action and the thing being acted upon: he says that something that is hit is hit by something in the way the hitter hit it (476b9-c1); something that is burned is burned by something in the way the burning does the burning (476c6-7); and something that is cut is cut by something in the way the cutting thing cuts.

\(^96\) Another issue with this argument is that premises 9 and 10 conflict what Socrates says elsewhere. Back at 469a7-b7, Socrates criticizes Polus’ admiration of those who put to death anyone they think is best, whether just or unjust. People should only do these things if they are just and not if they are unjust. Polus is visibly confused: “so, you think that a person who puts to death anyone he sees fit, and does so justly, is miserable and to be pitied?” (469a10-12). Socrates clarifies what he is saying: “No, I don’t, but I don’t think he’s to be envied either”(469a13-b2). Thus, we are to understand that one who justly puts someone to death is doing something just and enviable. But if a criminal deserves to be put to death and putting him to death is just, then the judge is doing something just. Wouldn’t Socrates think that all just acts, since they are good, are enviable?
injustice is better than suffering it. One of the key premises of the refutation is a principle derived from a short inductive argument establishing that the admirable (καλόν) is something beneficial or pleasurable or both; the shameful is what is harmful or painful or both. The inductive argument Socrates used to secure this principle, however, relied on premises that stated that (i) what is admirable is beneficial or pleasurable to the perceiver (or both). But what Socrates needed for the argument was (ii) what is admirable is beneficial or pleasurable or both to the doer of injustice.98

Despite this issue, our focus is on what Socrates is saying about punishment. In the argument above, we see that he leaves it open whether a wrongdoer can be improved by either intellectual or non-intellectual means. All that is required in order for a punishment to be beneficial to the wrongdoer is that he is justly disciplined. The means by which this discipline is achieved are not specified.

D. Discipline Relieves the Greatest Harm: A Corrupt Soul

Just discipline rids the soul of evil. In fact, Socrates argues, it gets rid of the greatest evil in the soul (477b11). The corrupt condition of the soul is one that is unjust, ignorant, cowardly, and the like (477c4-6). Polus had agreed in the first refutation that shameful things are either painful or harmful or both. Since he agrees that the most shameful state of the soul is ignorance, injustice, and cowardice, having these vices is either the most painful or harmful or both. Socrates infers from this that being unjust, undisciplined, cowardly, and ignorant is the greatest harm (477d7-8; 477e4-5).

98 Santas (1979), 238-240. I return to this issue in chapter 3.
VIII. “A Type of Justice”

This next passage provides key evidence for my reading. It also explains the distinction I made between two types of justice, Socratic dialectic and judicial punishment (which includes some forms of corporal punishment).

At 478a6-7, Socrates asks Polus to specify where people bring those who “behave unjustly and without discipline.” Polus replies that wrongdoers are brought to judges so that they can pay what is due (478a8). Socrates says that “those who administer discipline correctly employ a type of justice (δικαστική) in doing so” (478a11-13). Again, he invokes the analogy with medicine: the judge uses a type of justice to remove the worst evil in the soul as a doctor removes disease from the body.

A. Methods of Punishment: Violence, Fines, Exile, and Execution

What has been missing in the conversation so far is the sort of just punishments that make a wrongdoer self-controlled and more just. At the end of the discussion with Polus, we get our answer. Here, Socrates says that if someone has committed an injustice, the wrongdoer should

grit his teeth and present himself…[to the judge] as to a doctor for cauterization and surgery, pursuing what’s good and admirable without taking any account of the pain…and if his unjust behavior merits flogging, he should present himself to be whipped; if it merits imprisonment, to be imprisoned; if a fine, to pay it; if exile, to be exiled, and if execution, to be executed (480c1-d4)

From the argument above, we see that the nature of the punishment has beneficial consequences to the wrongdoer’s soul. All that is needed for the improvement of the soul to occur is that it is subject to some action. But how would the lash of a whip improve the soul of the wrongdoer by making him disciplined and more just?
B. Are These Socrates’ Views?

Rowe believes that this view of punishment is better suited for the moral psychology of the Republic, a moral psychology “where it is not just the state of our beliefs that determines the way that we behave, as on the Socratic model, but the state of our beliefs and desires; because our desires...can cause as much trouble as our beliefs.”99 He complains that flogging, imprisonment, and execution simply cannot help the wrongdoer to think better.100 Thus, “Socrates has no reason to believe that punishment normally understood made any one better.”101

C. Two Rival Forms of Justice

In order to defend this reading of the passage, Rowe must find a way to show that Socrates does not mean what he says. He does so by interpreting the passage as Socrates putting his argument in terms in which his interlocutors could understand. On this reading, it is Polus, not Socrates, who suggests that the judge is like a doctor. Although Socrates relies on this suggestion to refute Polus, he stands clear of this view by distinguishing between kinds of justice. The distinction Socrates makes between types of justice (at 478a11-13) is not to acknowledge that there are two types of justice (as I contend), but rather to contrast two very different conceptions of justice: conventional justice and his own rival sort of justice, Socratic dialectic.102 Conventional justice is not really justice because it inflicts pain instead of improving the wrongdoer. Socratic justice, however, is philosophical dialectic, which indeed improves the wrongdoer.

100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid, 32.
As mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, most of the adherents of the Socratic Optimism interpretation overlook the problem corporal punishment poses for their reading of the *Gorgias*. Each scholar must explain corporal punishment by either distancing Socrates from this sort of justice in a way similar to the way Rowe does, or by explaining how pain and suffering can be beneficial to the wrongdoer. I think there is more evidence in favor of the latter option.

IX. “Pain is the Only Way to Cure an Unjust Soul.”

Socrates argues against Polus that if the wrongdoer is curable, punishment will be the most beneficial thing to him because it removes intemperance and injustice from the soul in a way that is analogous to a doctor removing disease from a body. Polus does not believe this. In fact, he believes traditional methods of punishment are both painful *and* harmful. Socrates has to argue that this punishment is indeed *beneficial*, not harmful. He takes up this task in the majority of the exchange with Polus. Against Callicles, he argues that if one successfully evades punishment for injustice throughout life, one will become *more* miserable and receive a more painful punishment in the afterlife. Even in the afterlife, pain is the only way to *remove* injustice from the soul, and fear is the best way to prevent others from *doing* injustice.

A. Painful Punishments in the Myth of the Afterlife

After Callicles has been refuted several times, Socrates tells him about a myth that centers on the divine punishment an unjust person will receive after death. His aim is to persuade Callicles that that it is necessary for one “to practice justice and the rest of
excellence both in life and in death….and to call on others to do so, too” (527e3-6).

When an unjust orator or tyrant is alive, he can hide the condition of his soul behind wealth, power, status, or attire in order to seem good even though he is not in fact good. After death, however, his soul separates from the body and arrives to Hades without any of the things that can prevent an earthly judge from passing a just assessment of the true condition of the soul. When an unjust soul arrives, it will have all of the scars of injustice on it, visible to both the wrongdoer and the judge, and it will be judged accordingly. This is because even after death it is

appropriate for everyone who is subject to punishment rightly inflicted by another either to become better and profit from it, or else to be made an example for others, so that when they see him suffering whatever it is he suffers, they may be afraid and become better. Those who are benefited, who are made to pay their due by gods and men, are the ones whose errors are curable; even so, their benefit comes to them, both here and in Hades, by way of pain and suffering, for there is no other possible way to get rid of injustice (525b1-9) 103

Socrates says that punishment is justified in the sense that it improves the wrongdoer—the criminal himself must profit from the punishment he receives. According to Socrates, improving an unjust soul requires pain and suffering. Specifically, he says that it is the only way to benefit unjust curable souls. Souls that are hopelessly corrupted are “incurable souls.” The only thing that can be done with them is to punish them in order to frighten those who are curable. This last point about incurable souls is especially instructive, since although their psychic condition cannot be reversed, the function of their punishment is to frighten others who might be saved from becoming incurable through committing serious injustice. So, either experiencing pain oneself or fearing the consequence of pain can improve the lot of others.

103 My emphasis.
B. Curable vs. Incurable Souls

We saw at 480c5-d6 that Socrates lists many different forms of rehabilitation a judge administers: lashes, imprisonment, fines, exile and death. He says that these punishments remove injustice from a damaged soul. We also saw at 525b6-9 that Socrates states a general principle about discipline or punishment: the only way to extract injustice from curable souls is by means of pain and suffering (525b6-9). Moreover, he claims that the purpose of inflicting pain and suffering on incurables is not to benefit the wrongdoer, since they are beyond reform. The proper punishment of incurable people is to execute them and use their punishment to deter others from behaving in a similar way. Rather, the punishment of incurable wrongdoers is to improve others by deterring them from doing injustice. Their fear of pain works as a restraint, which will, in turn, make them believe that they should not commit injustice.

C. Types of Souls is Incompatible with Socratic Optimism

Some scholars view the Gorgias as Plato testing the limits of Socratic assumptions against hostile interlocutors. Klosko, for example, refers to the Gorgias as the tragedy of philosophy, since Socrates tries but fails to persuade Polus and Callicles by means of the Socratic elenchus. On this reading, Plato is illustrating to the reader that the Socratic regime of moral improvement through philosophy cannot be beneficial for everyone. But as we have seen, it is not Plato arguing this case through the drama of the dialogue; rather, it is Socrates himself who claims that there are those who should be punished and others who are hopeless.

104 See Klosko (1983).
Rowe’s account of punishment does not acknowledge that there is a causal connection between acts performed by an individual and the damage done to the soul itself. Each unjust act damages the soul, and so to go on living without the possibility of rehabilitation will increase the misery of the wrongdoer. In the dialogue with Polus and Callicles, Socrates is arguing that tyrants who live their lives without punishment are in the worst condition there is.

That the rehabilitation of a curable soul is achieved by the use of pain or fear suggests that a person can indeed be made better without being taught—the judge can improve the moral condition by either associating pain with injustice or preventing someone who might injure himself through injustice by fear. Although having vicious beliefs is to be in a bad condition, it is even worse when one has the opportunity to act on these beliefs (525c2-7; e2-6). It is worse yet for the unjust person to have the freedom to do as many unjust acts as possible while still alive because these actions harm the soul. This is why in the myth at the end of the dialogue Socrates divides the ranks of incurable souls who arrive to Hades into two: those who were wicked only in private and those who were wicked in public as well. The former lacked the freedom to harm themselves as much as the latter did (525c1-4).

D. Living with a Corrupt Soul

In chapter 1, I pointed out that Callicles warns Socrates that he is putting himself in danger by practicing philosophy and neglecting oratory. Socrates replies that it is much more important for a person to learn “some craft” (the political craft, presumably), since it will enable its possessor to avoid the most serious evil: doing injustice. Those who have
committed serious injustices, however, are usually the same people who have either escaped detection or have the political status to avoid punishment for their injustices.

X. “Ruling the Pleasures and Appetites Within Oneself”

Scholars point to 491d7-9 as evidence that Socrates appears to assume things about the soul that contradict the Socratic “intellectual” model. In this passage Socrates says that a ruler must be self-controlled by “ruling the pleasures and appetites within himself.” Some scholars believe this comment shows us that Socrates holds that if an individual is to become a good ruler, he must have control over desires that aim at something other than what the individual believes is best. This picture of the soul undermines the Socratic moral psychology established in the discussion with Gorgias and Polus and conflicts with the moral paradox.

In this passage, Callicles charges that Polus lost the argument only because he was tricked. Socrates slyly equivocated between two senses of justice, which caused Polus to confuse the two. Polus failed to see that Socrates did not distinguish between conventional and natural justice. Conventional justice should be rejected, because it is unnatural. It attempts to force an egalitarian political system on those who are superior by nature. What one should really care about is natural justice, since it allocates shares among those in the political community based on the natural order of things—only the best get the greater share and the inferior get the lesser share.

Socrates attempts to have Callicles define what a superior person is and why these sorts of people deserve the greatest share of communal goods. Callicles struggles with the question but finally says that the superior men are those who are brave and intelligent.
They are brave in the sense that they are “competent to accomplish whatever they have in mind, without slackening off because of softness of spirit.” (491b1-4); moreover, they are also intelligent about the “affairs of the city, about the way it’s to be well managed” (491b1-4). Instead of analyzing the virtues Callicles mentions, Socrates turns to where he believes the study of politics should begin—with the character of the one who rules. Here is the brief exchange between the two:

SOCRATES: But what of themselves, my friend?

CALLICLES: What of what?

SOCRATES: Ruling or being ruled?

CALLICLES: What do you mean?

SOCRATES: I mean each individual ruling himself (αὐτὸν ἑαυτὸν ἄρχοντα). Or is there no need at all for him to rule himself, but only to rule others?

CALLICLES: What do you mean, rule himself?

SOCRATES: Nothing very subtle. Just what the many mean: being self-controlled and master of oneself, ruling the pleasures and appetites within oneself (Οὐδὲν ποικίλον, ἀλλ’ ἄσπερ οἱ μολὼι, σώφρονα ὄντα καὶ ἐγκρατῆ αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ, τῶν ἡδονῶν καὶ επιθυμιῶν ἄρχοντα τῶν ἐν εαυτῷ)

CALLICLES: How delightful you are! By the self-controlled you mean the stupid ones (491d4-e1)!

Callicles is visibly confused: why should one rule over one’s pleasures and appetites? What does this have to do with ruling a city?

This passage appears to strain the Socratic conception of the soul as a unitary entity. Irwin observes that such talk of “controlling and overcoming suggest desires of

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105 Socrates repeats this assessment at 491c1-6.
106 One reason Socrates asks these questions is that the conversation up to this point has not progressed very far. Callicles has repeatedly praised the superior man and condemned the inferior man. When is forced to explain what makes a superior man superior, the answers he puts forth contradict with his other related beliefs. Despite being refuted several times, he refuses to admit that he has been defeated. He changes his answers just as they begin to crumble under scrutiny and he blames his difficulties on Socrates’ word games and distortions of what he says.
different strengths, which may not reflect our comparative valuation of their objects.”

If one must rule over the pleasures and appetites within oneself, this implies that the soul is comprised of two parts, reason and appetite, where each part has its own desire. If the soul had this makeup, then there could be internal conflict within the soul. But if this were true, then akrasia would be possible and this would be a serious problem for Socrates’ doctrine that virtue is knowledge. This is because Irwin believes that the only conflict allowed by the Socratic Paradox is indecision about what is best, caused by conflict between different considerations; but this conflict would cause hesitation, not the impetuous and demanding desires which a self-controlled man is supposed to restrain. The [Protagoras] suggested, contrary to common belief, that ‘being overcome by pleasure’ (and so lacking self-control) is only ignorance. If this were Socrates’ view here, we would expect him to qualify the common belief in a similar way; but he does not.

Irwin here makes two different claims. First, he is saying that the phrase ‘ruling over one’s appetites and pleasures’ means ‘ruling over one’s good-independent desires.’ Second, he is saying that the Protagoras differs from the Gorgias in that Socrates denies the common conception of temperance in the former and adopts it in the latter. Is this the proper interpretation?

There are several plausible replies. One is that there are no other desires in the soul except for the one single desire that aims at our own happiness. Similar to the moral psychology in the Protagoras, action is the result of a single desire for happiness pairing with whatever belief about the means we think will achieve our own happiness. Bad people differ from good people because of their true or false beliefs about what things are good, nothing else. Another possibility is that Socrates is already operating with a picture

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107 Irwin appeals to the following passages to support his contrast between the “common view” and Socrates’: 460b, 467c-468c, and Pr. 352-357.
108 My emphasis.
109 Irwin (1980), 190.
of the soul that is like the tripartite division in the *Republic*. In this case, one must train reason and spirit to work together in order to keep potentially ruinous appetites from ever seeing the light of day in action.

One might also object that Irwin’s reading of the passage overlooks the fact that Socrates qualifies the view he presents, by attributing it to the common man. Perhaps he wishes to consider it without actually believing it. We might understand the argument to follow a type of dialectical argument, one that “employs premises to at least some of which the presenter of those premises is not committed, but to which the presenter uses as expedients.”\(^{110}\) Socrates is using the view of the common man as an expedient premise in the argument, which does not require that he actually agrees to the view of the soul it entails.

We can see Socrates use similar language regarding the popular conception of temperance and how this informs his own thinking of the virtue in the *Republic*. Even though he attributes the definition of temperance to what “the Many” say of it, most if not all scholars believe that this provides us with Plato’s definition of temperance. He says that

\[\text{Moderation is...a kind of order, the mastery of certain kinds of pleasures and appetites} \ (\text{κόσμος πού τις, ἥν ἡ ἐγγυθῇ, ἦ σωφροσύνη ἔστιν καὶ ἦδονόν τινων καὶ ἐπιθυμητόν ἐγκράτεια}). \text{People indicate as much when they use the phrase, “self-control” and other such phrases. I don’t know what they mean by them, but they are...like tracks or clues that [temperance] has left behind in language...Yet isn’t the expression “self-control” ridiculous? The stronger self that does the controlling is the same as the weaker self that gets controlled, so that only one person is referred to in all such expressions...Nonetheless, the expression is apparently trying to indicate that, in the soul of the very person, there is a better part and a worse one and that whenever the naturally better part is in control of the worse, this is expressed by saying that the person is self-controlled and master of himself. At any rate, one praises someone by calling him self-controlled. But}\]

\(^{110}\) Wolfsdorf (2008), 112. Wolfsdorf himself does not appeal to this argument as an instance of a dialectical argument.
when, on the other hand, the smaller and better part is overpowered by the larger, because of bad upbringing or bad company, this is called being self-defeated or licentious (ἀκόλαστον) and is a reproach (Rep., 430e6-431b2)\textsuperscript{111}

There are two differences between “the popular account” of temperance in the Republic and the description of the popular account in the Gorgias. One difference is that the former recognizes spirit, whereas the latter does not. The other difference is that a part of the soul is both smaller but better in nature, whereas the other part is larger but inferior in nature. Those who deny that Socrates accepts the popular definition of temperance in the Gorgias but accept that Socrates holds the popular definition of temperance in the Republic need to provide an explanation of this. For instance, why would Socrates deny the definition in the Gorgias but accept it in the Republic? My reading is that he accepts the definition in both dialogues; the difference between the two is that the soul in the Gorgias lacks a spirited part that can join with reason to keep down the soul’s appetites, as it does in the Republic. Without the spirited part, in the Gorgias it is reason that must play the role of maintaining appetites and desires at their proper level through the beliefs that the individual holds. An orderly and disciplined life prevents desires from ever “enlarging” and wresting control of the soul from reason.\textsuperscript{112} I will develop this view in the next two sections. But, for now, I think it is sufficient to cast doubt on the objection that only appeals to the fact that Socrates attributes a definition to the many so as to distance himself from the view.

This interpretation of the soul also explains the way in which Socrates portrays the sort of life Callicles’ man with enlarged appetites will lead. Callicles praises the man who allows his appetites “to get as large as possible” and never restrains himself in the

\textsuperscript{111} Shorey (2003).
\textsuperscript{112} My view is similar to Cooper (1999), but I see no reason why someone with appetitive desires that have become insatiable should not become akritic.
pursuit of pleasure (491e7-192a1). This man must have control over others and have free reign to fill up his appetites as they arise. He declares that no one can be happy while enslaved to anything at all, especially to the government that advocates justice and self-control, “allotting no greater share to their friends than to their enemies” (492b8-c1). Socrates’ argument against Callicles’ position attempts to show that even if the licentious person avoids the rule of governments (or other people in general), he will be in an even worse situation: he will be ruled by his own insatiable appetites.\footnote{The passage from the Republic finishes up the point: when the worse part (appetites) overcomes the better part (reason) it is called being “slave to oneself” and “intemperate” (Rep., 431a8-b1).}

Socrates appeals to the image of a leaky jar in order to show that this view of a happy life is incoherent. The happy life Callicles defends would be filled with a high degree of pain, which, on his own terms, would be a very unhappy one. What could be worse than continually filling up desires until they become insatiable, turning one’s thoughts and deeds toward the futile task of satisfying their ever-increasing demands? Callicles’ happy life would be a life of subjection to the never-satisfied monster inside—always demanding, never satisfied.

The subjection of the soul to the appetites parallels the subjection an orator will be subject to with respect to the masses. An orator who flatters and fills up the appetites of the citizens, creates a political context where he is enslaved to both his own desires and the desires of the crowds, the sort of people Callicles disdains. Socrates’ objection to Callicles’ life would lose much of its force against Callicles if he did not mean that one is reluctantly “compelled” or “forced” to the serve the internal and external demands from enlarged appetites and an audience with appetites equally insatiable.
XI. “The Part of the Soul with the Appetites”

At 493a1-493b2, Socrates appears to confirm that the soul has a rational and non-rational part. He does so in a cautionary tale where he explains how a person who feeds their appetites without restraint will end up subjecting himself to these appetites. The argumentative function of this myth is to illustrate the “strange” sort of life Callicles’ ideal man will live.

A. The Myth of the Leaky Jars

Socrates says that he has heard some wise man wonder whether “we are now dead and that our bodies are our tombs, and that the part of our souls (τοῦτο τῆς ψυχῆς) with the appetites (αἱ ἐπιθυμίαι) is the sort of thing to be open to persuasion and to shift back and forth” (493a3-6). He builds on this image with a myth, which he says he heard from “some clever man, a teller of stories, a Sicilian perhaps, or an Italian.” The man said that there is a part of the soul in thoughtless ones where the appetites reside; this part is like a leaky jar “on account of its being a persuadable (τὸ πιθανόν) and suggestible (πειστικὸν) thing” (493a6-8). This part of the soul of mindless people continuously “leaks,” which is the image that represents the insatiable demand of these desires upon the person (493b2). Having an insatiable appetite is the result of a lack of discipline. The soul is no longer stable and secure; instead, it is like a leaky jar. These people carry “water into the leaking jar using another leaky thing, the sieve. That’s why by the sieve he means the soul…And because they leak, he likened the souls of fools to sieves; for their untrustworthiness and forgetfulness makes them unable to retain anything” (493b7-c3). Socrates confesses that his sole motivation for presenting these myths to Callicles is to persuade him to renounce
his radical hedonism and to “choose the orderly life, the life that is adequate to and satisfied with its circumstances at any given time instead of the insatiable, undisciplined life” (493c6-8).

The passage we considered from the Republic we considered states that there are two parts of the soul, one better and the other worse. A person is said to be intemperate when the worse part—the part with the appetites and pleasures—rules the other part(s). The myth of the leaky jars in the Gorgias appears to recognize a similar metaphysical structure of the soul. Indeed, scholars have been quick to notice that the moral psychology in the myth is much different than the soul in the Protagoras. Mackenzie observes that in the myth

a new element appears [in the soul], for Socrates has marked off the appetitive part…from the intellect. If the appetite is distinct from the reason, there is, to begin with, a move away from the reduction, in the Protagoras, of all impulses to the pursuit or avoidance of a single type of value. This, in turn, will disrupt the simple analysis of desire which succeeds or fails according as the agent knows or is ignorant.\(^\text{114}\)

Irwin agrees. He says that the recognition of parts in the soul and appetites that can increase in intensity or “leak” suggests that there is a “subset of desires in anyone’s soul, which are particularly developed in the foolish man.”\(^\text{115}\) He points out that the intemperate appetites of the foolish man

must surely be good-independent. For either the foolish man’s good-dependent desires are insatiably in the same way as his appetites are, or they are not. If they are, insatiability does not, as Socrates suggests, distinguish the two parts of the soul. If good-dependent desires are not insatiably, they will conflict with insatiably desires, which must be good independent. This recognition of good-independent desires is incompatible with the Socratic Paradox\(^\text{116}\)

\(^{114}\) Mackenzie (1981), 162.

\(^{115}\) Irwin (1980), 195.

\(^{116}\) Ibid.
In the myth of the leaky jar, then, Socrates appears to allow for the possibility of psychological conflict between desires that are good-dependent and good-independent. This conflict allows for akrasia, which, in turn, tells us that intellectual error cannot on its own explain bad or imprudent actions.\(^{117}\)

B. Does Socrates Endorse the Structure of the Soul in the Myth?

We might be tempted to think that the myth should not provide us with any conclusive evidence about Socrates’ considered view of the soul. After all, Socrates says he has heard the myth from “some wise person,” which he admits sounds a “bit strange” \((493a5-c3; 493c3-4)\).\(^ {118}\) It is possible that he says these things in order to distance himself from the view he introduces for consideration. Second, an analogy does not dictate its own application. When we think of the point of an analogy used in an argument, we should focus only on the features that are relevant to the point being made by speaker himself.\(^ {119}\)

The attempt to weaken the evidence from the myth overlooks what is going on in the dialogue. In the myths, Socrates speaks as if the soul has two independent parts and that the desires of each part has a desire of its own.\(^ {120}\) Devereux points out that the language Socrates uses throughout the dialogue suggests that he recognizes two types of desires that correspond to two different aspects of a person when that person has become

\(^{117}\) Mackenzie (1985), 162. Her full assessment is similar to Irwin’s interpretation. She says: “Now there is the possibility that a man’s judgment may be overruled by his appetites, and therefore both the ignorant man may, under pressure from his desires, succeed and the knowledgeable man may, for the same reason, fail. Psychological conflict, therefore, is no longer ruled out, and akrasia can no longer be denied on the grounds that intellectual error alone accounts for vice. In short, the notion that the soul may have parts opens the door to a complex theory of action denied by the strong intellectual thesis.”

\(^{118}\) Cooper (1999), 65-66.

\(^{119}\) Ibid.

\(^{120}\) Devereux (2008), 398-399.
licentious. In the debate with Polus, when he discusses the desire that motivates a person to act, Socrates uses the verb βούλομαι, which is usually translated as ‘to want’ or ‘to wish’. In the debate with Callicles, however, Socrates uses the verb ἐπιθυμεῖν, which is usually used in relation to the desires related to the appetites. Elsewhere, this distinction between appetite and wish does not escape Socrates’ notice. In the Charmides, for instance, Socrates distinguishes between two types of desire on the basis of the object the desire is naturally for: the object of wanting or wishing aims at what is good, while the object of appetite is the pleasant, which may or may not be good (167e1-5).

We can find better support for two types of desire in the Gorgias. Indeed, the distinction between the desire for the good and the appetite for pleasure suggests that there are two types of desire, but these two types of desires only appear to be in the soul of a licentious person. Socrates acknowledges that there is a part of a person that is “persuadable” in that it lacks the capacity to judge and discern. In the myth, he describes the souls of thoughtless people as leaky sieves, on account of their untrustworthiness and forgetfulness. It is presumably because of these two vices that a person’s soul is like a leaky jar, unable to retain anything. Although the sieve is a dilapidated vessel, the person uses it to transport water to a jar that also leaks, which stands for the part of the soul where the appetites reside. Socrates makes a similar point about a part of a person being “persuadable” in his discussion with Polus. Here is the full passage:

sophists and orators tend to be mixed together as people who work in the same area and concern themselves with the same things. They don’t know what to do with themselves, and other people don’t know what to do with them. In fact, if the soul didn’t govern the body but the body governed itself, and if pastry baking and medicine weren’t kept under observation and distinguished by the soul, but the body itself made judgments about them, making its estimates by reference to the gratification it receives, then the world according to Anaxagoras would prevail,...all things would be mixed together in the same place, and there would be
no distinction between matters of medicine and health, and matters of pastry baking (465c7-d9).

When Socrates says that non-experts lack the ability to differentiate between experts and impersonators, he states that the confusion experienced is the result of the inability of the body to discern between reality and appearance.\textsuperscript{121} This is a significant claim. He is saying that the body judges on the basis of the pleasure it experiences and lacks the ability to discern between pleasurable things and good things. If the body were to rule the soul, it would do so irrationally, on account of its susceptibility to pleasure and the confusions that follow from it. Everything would be mixed together, without distinction.

\textit{C. Judging with the Body}

Now, at 465c7-d9 Socrates suggests that the body can usurp the soul and judge for itself, even though it cannot perform this function. In the myth at 493a4-5 he says that the part of the soul with the appetites is a persuadable thing and shifts back and forth. It is curious that in the myth Socrates locates the appetites in the soul but here and elsewhere allows that the body and soul have distinct desires. Here the body is not conceived of as part of the soul that houses the appetites and pleasures. But given what he has said at 465c7-d9, it is likely that he thinks the part of the soul with the appetites operates independently from the mind.

The notion that the body can undertake to judge value reemerges in the myth of the afterlife at the end of the dialogue. One of the morals of the myth is to explain how judges often make the wrong assessments of the defendants before them. It is because the

\textsuperscript{121} Socrates suggests this when he says that the body cannot distinguish between a knack and a craft. Presumably, this is because the body judges according to the pleasure it receives, which cannot properly distinguish between what appears to be the case and what only appears to be the case.
judges are misled by irrelevant concerns—all too often, they let the heritage of the defendant, the status, wealth, clothes, and witnesses influence their judgment, when they are only there to judge the truth of the case before them (523c3-6). Socrates says that “the judges are confounded not only by their evidence but at the same time by being clothed themselves while they sit in judgment, having their own soul muffled in the veil of eyes and ears and the whole body. Thus all these things are a hindrance to them, their own habiliments no less than those of the judged (523c9-d6).122

XII. “Putting the Soul into a Certain Organization.”

The third passage typically used to argue that the moral psychology of the Gorgias is the intellectualist one is 503e5-504a1. Here Socrates states the general rule that each craftsmen brings about a certain organization into his or her object; the craftsman “compels each thing to be suited for another (καὶ προσαναγκάζει τὸ ἑτέρον τὸ ἑτέρω πρέπον) and fits to it until the entire object is put together in an organized and orderly way” (503e6-504a2). Moreover, each object is a good instance of its kind when it has the order and organization that is proper for it. Since there is a craft that cares for the soul, then the craftsman of the soul must work on the soul like any other product of a craft. Presumably, he compels the parts of the soul into a certain order and organization, which Socrates describes as “lawfulness” or “law.” Lawfulness in the soul causes it to be law-abiding and orderly, which are states that we call “justice” and “self-control” (504d1-3).

122 Fowler translation.
At this point in the dialogue, the subject is the harm that demagogues inflict upon the citizenry. Demagogues treat their audience like children, attempting to gratify them, “slighting the common good for the sake of their own private good” (502e5-503a1). Their shameful public harangues make their listeners worse off. In contrast, there is a true orator, the expert statesman, who seeks to instill virtue in the citizens (504e). He will address his audience as adults, not children—he will tell them what they need to hear, and will not gratify them. The statesman will refrain from speaking at random and only speak to his fellow citizens “with a view to something, just like the other craftsmen, each of whom keeps his own product in view and so does not select and apply randomly what he applies, but so that he may give his product some shape” (503e1-5). The statesman will shape the citizens to be just and self-controlled with “whatever speeches he makes as well as all of his actions, and any gift he makes or any confiscation he carries out” (504d7-9).

To some, Socrates’ description of the true orator suggests that the methods of moral education implemented by the statesman are “purely cognitive.” On this view, the statesman can do away with vice and improve people entirely through the speeches he gives, since vice is the result of ignorance. If this were possible, then there does not appear to be any need for the citizens to be prepared through previous moral character training in order to benefit from the things that are communicated to them in the speeches given by the statesman. With the language Socrates uses and the crafts he says are like statesmanship, it would appear that the statesman persuades the citizenry of certain

123 Irwin (1980), 216.
124 Cooper (1999), 65. Cooper says: “Already we can see that Socrates is assuming that someone might make someone a good and virtuous person simply by instructing them, through speeches of some sort, in how to behave—he neglects all together any separate, independent preparation for virtue of parts of the soul other than the mind or understanding.”
beliefs, which is another way of saying that the statesman compels the one part of the soul to fit with the other part.

If we recall the division between justice and legislation discussed in the previous chapter, we can explain why Socrates appears to say that virtue can be instilled through these sorts of speeches. The body must have some state of health before it can benefit from gymnastics just as the soul must have some state of health before it can benefit from legislation. Analogously, the citizen must meet a certain threshold of order in their soul in order to benefit from legislation. So, the statesman here is not simply giving speeches; rather, he teaches virtue and endeavors to bring about justice in the souls of his fellow citizens in other ways as well—in “every gift that he gives and action that he does” (504d6-7).

**XIII. Socratic Pessimism?**

In the *Gorgias*, we see that Socrates distinguishes between two kinds of justice, corporal punishment and dialectic. Corporal methods are used to discipline those who are still curable, and execute those who are not. The justification for the discipline enacted on each type of wrongdoer is to do what is best for him given his condition. If one lacks discipline, then the soul lacks order and organization. Desires arise and persist beyond what would be beneficial to the soul, since the licentious person begins to judge with the body, substituting pleasure and appearance as a standard of what is good. This conception of the relationship between the body and soul is very similar to the *Phaedo*, not the *Protagoras* or the *Republic*. 
Consider how Socrates speaks about the influence the body has on the soul in the *Phaedo*. He says that those who practice philosophy “in the right way keep away from all bodily passions, master them and do not surrender to them” (*Phd*, 82c3-6). “Lovers of learning know that when philosophy gets hold of their soul, it is imprisoned in and clinging to the body, and it is forced to examine things through it as though a cage” (82d8-e3). Furthermore, Socrates says that pleasure and pain will join the soul to the body, making it corporeal, “so that it believes that truth is what the body says it is. As it shares the beliefs and delights of the body, I think it inevitably comes to share its ways and manner of life and is unable to reach Hades in a pure state” (*Ph*. 83d5-8).

Indeed, in the *Gorgias*, Socrates uses similar imagery. He says that the body can usurp the role of the soul and judge according to its standard of what is good and bad—pleasure and pain. He even refers to the body as the tomb of the soul. And as we saw above, in the myth of the afterlife he says that divine judges are inerrant judges of the souls that come before them, since they are free from the distortions that occur with an embodied soul.

**XIV. Conclusion**

I am arguing that Socrates takes up the branch of the political craft he calls justice. Socrates’ rejection of akrasia in the *Protagoras* and his doctrine that virtue is knowledge suggest that Socrates holds that moral improvement must target only the intellect. On the strict Socratic Optimism reading, Socrates believes that only philosophy can improve others. In this chapter, I argued that in the *Gorgias* Socrates draws a distinction between two types of justice, dialectic and corporal punishment. Both types of justice improve the condition of the soul: dialectic by refutation and corporal punishment
by pain. The model of moral psychology Socrates assumes in the *Gorgias* supports this distinction.

In the next chapter, I consider how Socratic dialectic can improve a soul without teaching. My account will show why Socrates’ choice to compare Socratic dialectic to medicine is an especially useful analogy. I argue that the dialectician aims to uncover what one *really* wants and what one *really* believes. Since the desire for the good is fixed on the real good and the latent universal beliefs that we hold are *true*, we can see why Socrates believes that self-knowledge is a form of moral knowledge.
CHAPTER 3

Self-Ignorance & True Political Craft

I. Introduction

In the first chapter, I argued that Socrates thought of himself as practicing one of the sub-crafts of justice and attempting legislation. This interpretation resolves some of the tensions we have already identified. First, it is consistent with his disavowals of knowledge in both the Gorgias and other dialogues. Second, it accounts for the three passages where Socrates indirectly refers to himself as a doctor of the soul by correcting or disciplining others through refutation. In the second chapter, I turned to consider the question of how judicial punishment and dialectic could both be justice. I argued that Socrates recognizes dialectic and judicial punishment as the two sub-crafts of justice. In this chapter, I argue that there are two ways in which a dialectician can improve the soul without teaching justice just as the doctor improves the body without teaching medicine.
I want to begin by returning to an objection I raised in chapter one. The objection is this. After Socrates cleansed his interlocutor’s soul of complete ignorance, brought it into a condition of Socratic ignorance, why did he not then teach justice to his interlocutors? Can’t justice be taught like any other craft? In this chapter, I argue that although the analogy between the craft of the body and craft of the soul serves as an especially instructive analogy, there are some ways in which the analogy breaks down. One of the ways in which the analogy breaks down is that the body and soul inherently dissimilar in fundamental ways. In the first place, a doctor deals with the processes of a physical body that operates for the most part beyond rational, self-conscious control. The dialectician, however, must deal with a soul, which is an entity that can be more or less self-aware. The soul has beliefs and desires about what is good or bad for itself (“first-order” beliefs and desires) as well as reflexive beliefs about its beliefs and desires (“second-order” beliefs). Unlike the doctor, a dialectician must concern him or herself with first and second-order beliefs of his or her “patient.”

In the Apology, Socrates believes that a false second-order belief about one’s own wisdom is a serious obstacle to moral improvement. But is showing someone that they do not know what he thinks he knows the only task of dialectic? I argue in this chapter that there are two arguments in the Gorgias that show that there are forms of self-knowledge that can provide one with moral knowledge.

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125 Chapter 1, section XIII.
II. Failing to Know What One Wants

The first argument where Socrates points to a significant failure of self-knowledge of a wrongdoer is the refutation of Polus from 466-468. Here, Socrates makes a crucial distinction between doing what seems best and doing what one wants. He argues that we only want what is actually good for ourselves and doing what seems best fails to achieve the object that we want when we act. He argues that when we do what seems best, we fail to do what we want. In order to do what we want, we must know what we want.

The argument, however, is controversial. Some believe that it defends a key Socratic doctrine. Others disagree. Weiss, for example, contends that the argument is *ad hominem*. She argues that Socrates utilizes “radicalized” and “exaggerated” claims in order to make a mockery of the “particularly noxious view [Polus] shamelessly advances.” In a similar line, McTighe construes the argument as utilizing fallacious reasoning for a moral purpose—Socrates aims to deconstruct Polus’ position, not defend any serious doctrines of his own. I think that these attempts to diminish the importance of the argument to Socrates are mistaken. The argument provides key insights into how Socrates believes that a serious failure of self-ignorance leads to vicious action.

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126 The prudential paradox is the doctrine that no one does wrong willingly
127 Weiss (1992), 300.
A. The First Stage of Refutation of Polus: 467c-468b6

After some initial discussion, Socrates considers two of Polus’ beliefs: (i) power is something good for the one who has it^{128} (466e6-7) and (ii) doing what seems best is equivalent to doing what one wants (467b2-10). Our focus in this section will be on Socrates’ rejection of (ii).

The first stage of the argument is the following:

1. When people do something, they want the thing for the sake of which they act, not what they’re doing (467c5-7)

2. Wisdom, health, wealth, and other similar things are good things (467e6-7)

3. The opposite of wisdom, health, and wealth are ignorance, disease or sickness, and poverty (467e7)

4. The opposite of a good thing is a bad thing (assumption)

5. Ignorance, disease, and poverty are bad things (467e7)

6. Whatever can be sometimes good and sometimes bad is neither-good-nor-bad (henceforth, “intermediates”)(468a6-9)

7. Sitting, walking, running, sea voyages, stones, and sticks are examples of intermediate things (assumption)

8. Everything is either good, bad, or intermediate (assumption)

9. Whenever a person acts for the sake of something, he does what is intermediates for the sake of what is good; no one ever desires what is good for the sake of what is bad or intermediate (468b1-2)(induction)

10. Whenever a person acts for the sake of something, he does not want the thing that he does, but the thing for which he does it (467d10-e1)

11. Thus, whenever a person sits, stands, takes medication or travels, he does these things for the sake of what is good and because he supposes that it is better to do it than to not do it (468b3-6)

1-11 underscores that no one desires and pursues things that one conceives of as intermediate things or bad things. There are two things to note about the argument. First, premise 1 and premise 7 appear to claim that all actions are in themselves neutral things. Second, the list of good things and bad things appear to include goods that are not in fact unconditional goods. I return to these issues after an analysis of the next stage of the argument.

But before we move on, we should also note that the argument from 1-11 is invalid. The conclusion states that when one acts for the sake of something good, one does so because one believes the action was better to do than not to do. But it is possible for one to act for the sake of what is good without thinking that it is better to do than not to do. Socrates himself believes that we all act for the sake of some final good and that we might lack any idea about what this good is. Socrates needs Polus to agree to the following claim:

1.1. Whenever a person acts for the sake of something, it is because he believes it is better for him to do that action than to refrain from that action.

We can insert 1.1 between premise 1 and premise 2. This addition also makes clear that from 1-11 Socrates is assuming the *de dicto* reading of desire. This reading of desire

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129 Socrates appears to renegade on this view in two ways: (i) he claims that there are times when we do want what we do, and (ii) he claims that some actions are in themselves less enviable than others. With respect to the former, in the second stage of the argument, Socrates claims that actions are desired in cases where the action achieves something good. With respect to (ii), at the conclusion of the refutation, Polus applauds the ability of tyrants to do whatever they think is best, whether justly or unjustly. Socrates demurs, saying that it is better to do these actions if they are just and worse to do them if they are unjust. Polus says: “So, you think that a person who puts to death anyone he sees fit and does so justly, is miserable and to be pitied?” (469a10-13). Surprisingly, Socrates replies: “No, I don’t, but I don’t think he is to be envied” (469a13-14). It is puzzling that Socrates would say this. Unless some actions are in themselves worse or less preferable than others, it does not seem like Socrates would say that the act is not enviable, especially if it is just. After all, doesn’t Socrates think all just acts are good and enviable? If one just act is enviable and another is not, then there must be something about the act itself that licenses the distinction between an enviable and unenviable just action. Weiss (1992) also notes this issue.
states that the object of desire is governed by some descriptive belief about the object that contains the mental content, ‘this is good for me’. 

B. The Second Stage of the Refutation of Polus: 468b8-d8

In the second stage of the argument, Socrates considers Polus’ praise of the ability orators and tyrants have to do whatever they desire. If 1-11 is an accurate account of human action, then doing something bad is the result of ignorance about what is good. One does what is bad because one has a false belief about what the particular action accomplishes. Socrates applies this account of wanting to orators and tyrants in the second stage of the argument:

12. A person kills, banishes, and confiscates property because he believes that doing these things is better than not doing these things (468b8-10)

13. But killing, banishing and confiscating property can be beneficial or harmful to the one who does it (468c6-7)

14. Whatever is beneficial is good and whatever is harmful is bad (assumption)

15. Whatever can be sometimes good and sometimes bad is an intermediate thing (468a6-9)(reiteration from 6)

16. Thus, killing, banishing and confiscating property are actions that are intermediates (468c7-8)

17. Because killing, banishing, and confiscating property are actions that are intermediates, no one desires these actions as such—everyone only wants what is good and not what is intermediate or bad

18. Thus, whenever a person kills, banishes, or confiscates property, he does these things for the sake of what is good, not for its own sake or for the sake of what is bad (468b12-13)

130 No one desires an object while thinking ‘this is bad for me’ or ‘this is not good for me’. We should also notice that the good and bad things included in this argument appear to be the good and bad things the individual believes are good or bad, not things that are actually good or bad.
19. When a tyrant puts someone to death, banishes him, or confiscates property, he does so because he thinks that doing so is better for himself (468c4-7)

20. We want to do these things if they are beneficial and do not want to do these things if they are harmful (468c6-10)

21. When the tyrant thinks that doing these things is better for himself when it is actually bad, then he is simply doing what he thinks is best (468d2-5)

22. When one does what one thinks is best yet it is actually bad, then one is not doing what one wants (468d7-8)

From 1-11, Socrates underscores that no one desires and pursues things that one conceives of as something bad or something intermediate. He shows this by expressing the implicit means-end structure of actions done for the sake of some end. From 12-22, he distinguishes between doing what seems best and doing what one wants. Because each person only wants things that are good and pursues things they think are good, whenever a tyrant or orator does what is in fact bad for himself, he fails to do what he wants.

After he argues from 12-22, Socrates finishes up the argument:

23. Thus, it is true that when a tyrant or orator does what he thinks best, it is possible that he is not doing what he wants (468e5-7)

24. But power is something good for its possessor

25. Thus, the orator and tyrant do not have great power and do not do what they want

In this last stage of the argument, Socrates believes that he has shown that the orator or tyrant does not necessarily do what he wants because his plans might not achieve the end for the sake of which he acts. Socrates distinguishes between ‘doing what seems best’ from ‘doing what one wants’ from 1-22. From this conclusion, he derives the conclusion at 25 that orators and tyrants do not have great power.
III. Criticism of the Argument

This picture of desire appears to fix the object of wanting on objects that are *apparent* goods. This reading undermines my initial claim that we only want what is actually good. In this section, I consider some objections to the argument. This discussion will show that there are the tools within the argument to resolve what looks like a fallacy.

A. *Socrates Equivocates between De Re and De Dicto Reading of Desire*

McTighe claims that the main problem is that the account of wanting in the first stage of the argument (from 1-11) is inconsistent with the account of wanting in the second stage of the argument (from 12-25). In the first stage of the argument, Polus only agrees that everyone desires the things that they conceive of as good things. These things are the conventional goods listed in the argument: health, wealth, wisdom. McTighe understands this to mean that Polus assents only to the *de dicto* reading of desire. In the second stage of the argument, Socrates shifts to the *de re* reading of desire (13-25). The *de re* reading states that everyone desires what is *in fact* good for them. Desiring something is independent of what the individual conceives of as worth desiring. McTighe says that Polus is “tricked when, after agreeing that all men desire the apparent good, he is oblivious when Socrates tacitly shifts to the *de re* reading and pretends that the *de dicto* is no longer valid—even though it was the very reading presupposed at the beginning of the argument.” Due to the equivocation between the two readings, the argument is fallacious.

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132 Ibid., 206.
133 Ibid., 207.
B. *Equivocation between the “Actual Good” and “The Good”*

In the refutation of Polus, Socrates distinguishes between doing what seems best and doing what one wants. On the *de re* reading of desire, acquiring what one wants is to get the actual good, which is the object of one’s desire. But Socrates has neither argued for nor implied at this point in the argument that the actual good is in fact the *Socratic good*, i.e., “the good-by-nature subscribed by Socrates and Plato.”\(^{134}\) The tyrant wants to do what he does for *subjective goods*, not necessarily the *objective goods* Socrates recognizes.

To illustrate, consider a tyrant planning on executing a rival faction. If the tyrant is ignorant of the fact that the assassination of his rivals might lead to his overthrow, we would say that his actual good would be to refrain from having his political rivals assassinated. But the actual good for the tyrant is still a subjective good—retaining his position (subjective good) will be achieved by refraining from having his rivals killed (actual good). The objective good that Socrates recognizes, however, might be something else altogether. To him, it is objectively good if the tyrant ceases to rule unjustly and rules for the sake of those being ruled, rather than for his own misguided reasons. This means that there is a gulf between the two notions of desire at work in this argument with Polus.

C. *McTighe’s Charitable Reading*

McTighe suggests that the argument contains errors because Socrates is engaging in what he calls ‘destructive dialectic’. This form of dialectic is destructive “not (necessarily) of any false beliefs the interlocutor may have concerning the matters under

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 208.
discussion but rather of the false belief he has about himself—that he is wise and hence in no need to engage further in investigation.” Destructive dialectic is a form of “purgative dialectic.” Purgative dialectic aims at “removing the opinions that obstruct the teachings, and this purges him and makes him think that he knows only what he knows and no more” (Soph. 230d1-4). Socrates assumes that Polus would benefit more from suffering from aporia in front of other people—especially Gorgias, his teacher—than from a careful consideration of the topics at hand. As a result, Socrates has no reason necessarily to adhere to the standards of logic or fair play—and possibly reason not to. To achieve his ends the practitioner of the purgative method may find it simply more efficient to argue fallaciously, to admit into discussion theses he regards as false, and in general to steer the discussion…in whatever direction is conducive to eliciting self-contradiction—rather than “follow the logos wherever it may lead,” or agree only to what he regards as true, or strive for logical consistency.

Although it might be the case that fallacies and distortions are bad in themselves, Socrates most likely believes that the good he is accomplishing by the argument outweighs the bad.

D. Replies to McTighe

(1) Socrates’ Demonstration of Dialectic. Indeed, there are issues with the argument with Polus, but the errors should not compel us to adopt McTighe’s reading. The main reason is that it would seem very odd—and self-defeating—if Socrates were to rely on fallacies and distortions in a discussion where he is trying to demonstrate the difference between oratorical refutation and dialectical refutation to Polus (and the other

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135 Ibid., 225.
136 Ibid., 225.
137 Ibid., 226.
138 Ibid., 227.
Throughout the debate Socrates charges that oratorical discourse (the kind Polus is relying on) fails to aim at truth: it praises and condemns without defining key terms and is indifferent to the use of fallacies in its attempt to persuade others. Socrates catches Polus committing several fallacies—e.g., the appeal to the masses, appeal to fear, argument ad nauseam, among others. In each case, he halts the conversation to explain why they are inadmissible in dialectical discourse. Not only does he claim that he has shown that Polus’ thesis is false, but he also claims to have shown that dialectical refutation is superior to oratorical refutation.139

(2) The Charge of Equivocation. McTighe argues that Socrates equivocates between the *de dicto* and the *de re* reading of desire. Socrates, however, leaves open whether the object for which one acts is the Socratic good (at 20 and 22). There, he claims that we want to do these things if they are beneficial and do not want to do these things if they are harmful. Although the apparent good is pursued, we want to do an action if and only if it is in fact beneficial for us. What is in fact beneficial for the orator and tyrant has not yet been specified. Socrates is aware of this, since he returns to this issue later and argues that doing injustice leads to the corruption of the soul, which is the greatest evil for an individual (477b1-477e5).

(3) Acting for the Sake of the Greatest Good. McTighe argues that orators and tyrants are not governed by the Socratic objective good, since the goods for which orators and tyrants pursue are only the apparent goods. We should notice, however, that Polus believes that great power is valuable because it is the greatest good for mankind. The first stage of the argument draws attention to the fact that doing whatever one thinks is best

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139 This is why Socrates says after Polus’ several failed attempts to refute him by an oratorical refutation that he is attempting to “produce many false witnesses against me and try to banish me from my property, the truth” (474b5-7).
cannot be unconditionally good since actions are done for the sake of what is in fact good. Let us look more closely at Polus’ belief that power is something good.

In order reach the conclusion of the second stage of the argument, many commentators modify Polus’ belief that ‘power is something good’ actually means:

(P.1) power is an unconditional good

If P.1 is what Polus means, then we can see why he and Socrates both think that 20-21 are devastating blows to his position. The ability of the tyrant or orator to do whatever he thinks is best in the city is not unconditionally good for oneself, since at least some of the time it is bad for the orator or tyrant. The argument, however, is not just about power. It is about great power. Thus, we should modify it again:

(P.2) great power is an unconditional good

Although this formulation allows us to derive the contradiction, it still does not capture the essence of Polus’ position.

Recall that the dialogue with Gorgias. Socrates asked why anyone should bother to learn oratory. Gorgias claims that it provides an orator with the greatest good for mankind—it gives one freedom and rule over others in one’s city (452d6-9). Polus agrees. Let us modify the premise one last time:

(P.3) great power is an unconditional good in that it is the greatest good for mankind

This is a generous modification of the initial claim that “power is something good,” but it gets us closer to seeing why Polus believes that great power is all that is needed to make

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140 McTighe (1984), 204; Weiss (1992), 302.
141 Irwin (1979), 139.
142 Irwin (1979) also points this issue out with a slightly different approach (139-141).
143 We see from his extensive praise of the tyrant Archelaus that he is saying that tyranny is the ultimate goal of the orator because he believes that great power is the greatest good. Archelaus is the most happy man precisely because he is in a position to do whatever he thinks best. Everyone, Polus believes, strives for this kind of freedom and admires those who have it.
someone happy (471a4-c9). The mere possibility that orators and tyrants—those who are (to Polus) the paragons of a happy life (471a4-d1)—might not be doing what they want shows that Polus’ account of happiness cannot be correct.

So, orators and tyrants think they pursue what is in fact unconditionally good when it is not. But everyone—including the orator and tyrant—only want things that are objectively good. We see this in steps 21-23 in the argument above: the orator or tyrant want what is in fact beneficial.

Indeed, Socrates is aware that he has put an objective restriction on the object of what one wants, even though he does not draw all of the implications of this view in the present argument. First, although Socrates places health and wealth in the list of good things, the discussion about a proper object of want should lead us to classify these things that can be either good or bad—or, in other words, intermediate things. Even within the argument itself there are the means to explain why these things are not wanted for the sake of themselves. Second, Socrates later defends the view that justice (the Socratic objective good) is in fact the greatest good and injustice the greatest evil. So, although Socrates does not defend the view that justice is what orators and tyrants in fact want but fail to pursue in the argument itself, he leaves open the possibility that the Socratic objective good is what is the proper object of wanting.

We see from this section that Socrates believes that orators and tyrants want what they fail to pursue. They are ignorant of the proper object of what they want. They pursue and achieve things that are not the proper object of what they want. Later, Socrates suggests that the pursuit of things that are thought to be good but are not indicates that the individual fails to have a true view of themselves (495e1-2).

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IV. Failing to Know What One Believes

In the previous section, we see that the orator fails to act for the sake of things that are unconditionally good. Even though Socrates provides examples of conventional goods as things that are good things, this is in the service of the dialectical aim of the argument. The aim of the argument is to show that doing what seems best and doing what one wants are not equivalent.

In the next refutation, Socrates draws attention to the fact that the orator does not know what he believes. At a crucial juncture in the Gorgias, Socrates and Polus square off to determine whether doing or suffering injustice is worse. Socrates argues that doing injustice is worse than suffering it; Polus argues that suffering injustice is worse than doing it. The refutation of Polus rests on his admission that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. Later, Callicles faults Polus for this concession. Polus gave in to a feeling of shame instead of saying how things really stand. Although doing injustice is by convention more shameful, doing injustice is by nature something better. Polus did not notice the equivocation and was bound and gagged by Socrates’ cleverness at exploiting the ignorance of his interlocutor (482d10-e5).

Indeed, commentators have tended to agree that the refutation of Polus is not successful. Vlastos, for instance, concludes that the refutation of Polus is a “hollow victory”—it is only an ad hominem argument. He concludes that even Plato himself “misjudged the facts which he depicted.”\(^{145}\) Santas agrees. He contends that the argument

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\(^{145}\) Vlastos (1995), 64.
does not succeed in refuting Polus, but he attempts to solve the problem Vlastos spots. He concludes that it is not possible.

I think that the criticism Vlastos and Santas lodge against the argument is generally correct, but they overlook a key point Socrates is trying to make about what Polus thinks he believes and what he actually believes. This point will become clearer when we consider Callicles’ objection to the argument. For now, I turn to the argument itself.

A. The Argument: 474c-475e.

The argument from 474c-475e refutes Polus’ view that suffering injustice is worse than doing it. The refutation rests on his further claim that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. Here is the first portion:

1. Suffering injustice is worse than doing it (474c4-7)

2. Doing what is unjust is more shameful than suffering it (474c8-10)(assumption)

3. What is admirable is not the same as what is good; what is shameful is not the same as what is bad (474d1-3)(assumption)

4. But colors, shapes, sounds, practices, laws, etc. are admirable or shameful on the basis of some standard (474d6-7)

5. Admirable bodies are admirable in virtue of their benefit, relative to whatever it is that each is useful for or in virtue of some pleasure, if it makes the people who look at them get enjoyment from looking at them (474d7-11)

6. All other things (shapes, colors, sounds, laws, and fields of learning, for example) are admirable in virtue of their benefit, relative to whatever it is that each is useful for or in virtue of some pleasure (474d8-23)

7. Something is called admirable if and only if it is useful, pleasurable or both useful and pleasurable (474d7-475a6)

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146 Santas (1979), 238-9.
8. The shameful is the opposite of the admirable (475a7-9)

9. Something is called shameful if and only if it is harmful, painful or both harmful and painful (474a7-8)

10. Therefore, whenever something is more admirable than something else, it is so because it is more pleasurable, beneficial or both (475a10-13)

11. Therefore, whenever something is more shameful than something else, it is so because it is more painful, harmful or both (475a15-b2)

12. Therefore, whenever something is more shameful than something else, it is so because it is more painful, harmful or both (475a15-b2)

13. Therefore, if doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it, then it is either more painful and would be more shameful by surpassing it in pain or in evil (or both)(475b9-12)

In this argument, Polus believes that doing injustice is better than suffering it and that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. Given his definition of what is admirable and shameful, Socrates shows that he is committed to the view that doing injustice must be either more painful or more harmful, or both. Socrates will go on to argue that since it is not more painful to do injustice than to suffer it that doing injustice is more harmful than suffering it. But before we turn to this portion of the argument, I turn to the problem Vlastos notes.

B. The Admirable & The Shameful

Vlastos maintains that the error in the argument originates from premise 5. There, Socrates says that bodies are admirable relative to what each is useful for or in virtue of some pleasure “if it makes the people who look at them get enjoyment from looking at them.” This qualification, however, is missing from the remaining premises for stylistic reasons. Socrates, unfortunately, does not notice. Although the remaining steps of the
argument do not explicitly contain the qualification, it is implied by the formulation in premise 5. So, the full definition of the admirable sensible things is the following:

**Modified Definition of the Admirable:** the admirable is that which is useful or else that which delights those who see or hear or contemplate it.\(^{147}\)

Since the admirable and the shameful are opposites, we must alter the definition of the shameful:

**Modified Definition of the Shameful:** the shameful is that which is harmful or else that which pains those who see or hear or contemplate it.

The modified definitions of the admirable and shameful apply to the sensible as well as the moral, political, and intellectual.\(^{148}\) The question Socrates asks at 475b8-c3 and Polus’ reply, however, does not reflect this qualification. Consider the question Socrates asks Polus:

**Q1:** is it more painful to do or to suffer injustice?

Polus asserts that it is obvious that doing injustice does not surpass suffering the pain of injustice. Socrates then inserts the admission into the argument:

14. Doing injustice is not more painful than suffering injustice (475c1-3)(admission)

He then derives the following:

15. Therefore, doing injustice does not surpass suffering injustice in both pain and evil (475c7-8)

16. Therefore, doing injustice is more evil (or worse) than suffering injustice (475c10-14)

17. Therefore, doing what is unjust is more evil (or worse) than suffering injustice (475c14-d1)

\(^{147}\) Vlastos (1995), 62.

\(^{148}\) Ibid.
But there is a problem. In light of the modified definitions of the shameful and admirable, Socrates has asked the wrong question. He should have asked Polus,

Q2: which is more painful to those who view or contemplate: doing injustice or suffering injustice?

If Polus had noticed the shift in sense, he would have needed to answer the corrected question in a way that was consistent with his original claim—namely, that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. Vlastos suggests that he would need to say that most people would find witnessing prospering villainy more painful than witnessing an innocent suffering. If he had given this answer, he could maintain his original claim that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it. But even if he had given this answer, he still would not have been committed to the conclusion.

Santas believes that Vlastos’ assessment of the argument is essentially correct. He doubts, however, that Polus could have offered the response that would align with his original claim. Indeed, Santas says, Polus would be in a position to say that most people would be pained at the thought or sight of prospering villainy than of suffering innocence. After all, immediately preceding the refutation, Polus praised Archelaus, whom he took as the paradigmatic case of prospering villainy. And in his praise of the tyrant, he implies that most of the Athenians would think that it is not painful to view prospering injustice (471c7-9).

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149 Santas (1979), 238.
150 Ibid., 238.
151 Ibid., 239. Moreover, Santas believes that in order to properly explain how most people would feel pained one would need to consider feelings of resentment and sympathy regarding the witnessing or thought of each action. Santas suggests that settling this matter would require a “large and difficult investigation” that would need to begin with an analysis of feelings of sympathy, resentment, etc. But it is clear from the text that Polus thinks that doing wrong is admirable and enviable if successful, that suffering wrong is pitied, and that doing wrong is pitied only on occasions when the wrongdoer is punished.
V. Callicles’ Objection

Let us turn now to Callicles’ criticism of Socrates’ refutation of Polus. When he takes Polus’ place in the discussion, his first order of business is to rebuke Socrates for the way in which he conducted himself in the argument thus far. First, he says that Socrates is “grandstanding in these speeches, acting like a true crowd pleaser” (482c4-5). Second, he faults Socrates for the manner in which he refuted Polus.\(^{152}\) He says:

[Polus] agreed with you that doing what’s unjust is more shameful than suffering it. As a result of this admission he was bound and gagged by you in the discussion, too ashamed to say what he thought. Although you claim to be pursuing the truth, you’re in fact bringing the discussion around to the sort of crowd-pleasing vulgarities that are admirable only by law (νόμω) and not by nature (φύσει) (482d10-e5). He claims that Socrates is up to his usual trick: “if a person makes a statement in terms of law, you slyly question him in terms of nature; if he makes it in terms of nature, you question him in terms of law” (483a2-6). This is unacceptable because “by nature all that is more evil is also more shameful.” He continues:

no man would put up with suffering what’s unjust; only a slave would do so, one who is better dead than alive, who when he’s treated unjustly and abused he can’t protect himself or any one else he cares about. I believe that the people who institute our laws are the weak and the many. They do this, and they assign praise and blame with themselves and their own advantage in mind. They’re afraid of the more powerful among men, the ones who are capable of having a greater share, and so they say that getting more than one’s share is “shameful” and “unjust,” and that’s doing what’s unjust is trying to get more than one’s share (483a10-c5)

\(^{152}\) Callicles also says that Socrates pressured Gorgias to concede that he would teach his students justice if they did not already have it. But he only said such a thing because he was ashamed to deny it; it was only out of his “deference to custom” that he teaches his students oratory and justice if they needed it (482c8-d4).
He concludes that when Polus had said that ‘injustice is more shameful by convention’, Socrates took him to be saying that ‘injustice is more shameful by nature’ (483a8-9). As a result, Polus unwittingly contradicted himself.

Callicles’ criticism brings to mind the following two questions. First, if doing injustice is worse than suffering it, for whom is injustice worse: the individual or the many? Socrates intends to show that it is worse for the individual who does it, but the argument (even on the corrected version) does not seem to establish this conclusion. Second, did Socrates refute Polus by an appeal to convention or did he refute Polus on the basis of his sincerely held beliefs? If Polus agreed to a premise out of reverence for convention, then the refutation would not be a refutation of the beliefs that Polus actually holds. And Socrates himself agrees that in the pursuit of truth, one must state one’s sincere beliefs in argument.

VI. Universally Held True Conventional Beliefs?

On the surface, Callicles’ criticism appears to be correct. Socrates and Polus make claims about what everyone believes and at the close of the argument Socrates infers that the argument shows that not only Polus is committed to the conclusion, but everyone else as well. The status of these beliefs is unclear: are they true by convention or true by nature? To answer this question, let us turn to the context.

A. The Context.

Not only have Socrates and Polus taken up the question of whether doing injustice is better than suffering it, but they have taken up two other questions: (1) what Socrates,
Polus, and *everyone else* believe (474b2-11), and (2) whether oratorical refutation is better than dialectical refutation (472b4-c7). We will see that Polus could answer Vlastos’ modified question, since doing what is unjust is more painful in the eyes of the many. Moreover, this answer fits with Callicles’ challenge.

I will focus on (1). Polus admits that it is more shameful to do injustice than it is to suffer it. Callicles says that Polus only conceded this claim because he was too ashamed to contradict conventional belief. Indeed, this appears to be the case. After Socrates concludes that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, he reminds Polus of what was agreed to at the outset: “Now didn’t the majority of mankind, and you earlier, agree with us that doing what’s unjust is more shameful than suffering it?” (475d1-3).

The trouble with this claim is that it is not clear where this agreement has been made. There are only two passages before the argument where Socrates and Polus make assertions about what everyone does and does not believe (472a3-b4; 474b2-11).

First, Socrates says that Polus is trying to refute him in an “oratorical style,” which is a mode of refutation that appeals to the opinions of the majority to determine the answer to a moral question (471e3-472c3). Socrates claims that this is not anyway to determine the truth of the matter under discussion: “Now, too, nearly every Athenian and alien will take your side on the things your saying, if it’s witnesses you want to produce against me to show that what I say isn’t true” (472a3-5). It is obvious, then, that Polus’ position is consistent with the conscious belief of nearly every person. So, we can say that everyone consciously believes that the tyrant is happy and that suffering injustice is the greatest of evils.

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153 Specifically, Polus holds that the tyrant is happy (470d2-3) and that suffering injustice is one of the greatest evils (469b11-12).
But something different happens in the second passage. He says that everyone holds, whether they admit it or not, the following two beliefs:

(S1) doing what’s unjust is worse than suffering it (474b2-3)
(S2) not paying what is due is worse than paying it (474b3-4)

Predictably, Polus denies S1 and S2 and asserts that Socrates and everyone else believes:

(P1) doing what’s unjust is better than suffering it (474b6-7)
(P2) not paying what is due is better than paying it (474b6-7)

Looking back to the beginning of the argument, we could also say that everyone believes that

(S/P3) doing what is unjust is more shameful than suffering it

So, Socrates, everyone does not believe P1 and P2, even though they say they do. They believe what he believes (namely, S1 and S2).

With these points in mind, let us return to Callicles’ criticism of Socrates’ refutation of Polus. Polus’ concession of S/P3 appears to be the result of going along with what is considered to be true by convention. Indeed, the remainder of the argument supports this reading. After Socrates concludes that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, he reminds Polus that he and the majority of mankind agreed that doing injustice was more shameful than suffering it. The argument, he believes, shows the following:

SOCRATES: Would you then welcome what’s more evil and what’s more shameful over what is less so?

POLUS: No, I wouldn’t Socrates.

SOCRATES: And would any other person?

POLUS: No, I don’t think so, not on this reasoning, anyhow.
SOCRATES: I was right, then, when I said that neither you nor I nor any other person would take doing what’s unjust over suffering it, for it really is more evil (475e5-7)

What is interesting here is that Socrates believes that the argument warrants him to attribute the conclusion to Polus and everyone else. But why is this?

B. Vlastos’ and Santas’ Criticism of the Argument (Again)

For now, let us return to Vlastos and Santas’ criticism of the argument. They point out that Socrates asked the wrong question when he asked Polus, ‘which is more painful, doing or suffering injustice?’ They argue that what he should have asked was, ‘which is more painful to view or contemplate by the viewer, doing or suffering injustice?’ Santas sought to provide Polus with an answer to the question. He concluded that he could not.

But is the Vlastos/Santas modification of the question the correct reading? In light of the discussion above, we can modify the question in order to reflect Callicles’ criticism. The question Socrates should have asked Polus is the following: ‘which is perceived to be more painful by convention, doing or suffering injustice?’ Indeed, the correct answer to this question would avoid Santas’ objection. It is not individual people who are pained by the sight or contemplation of doing injustice, it is something true by convention. And so when Polus claims that injustice is more shameful than suffering it, he is committing himself to a conventional view.

But problems still remain. Even if the argument is fixed in this way, it is still not clear whether Socrates can infer that it is more harmful to the doer to do the injustice than it is to the one who suffers it. The subject of the harm is ambiguous. Who is harmed if by convention it is perceived by convention to be more painful—the doer, the injured, the
many, etc.? Callicles’ objection exposes this ambiguity. According to him, convention is the product of the many weak individuals in the city; these people fear for their own safety and make the laws for their own advantage.

**VII. Self-Ignorance in Deliberation**

In the previous section, we saw that Socrates attributes two beliefs to Polus and everyone else: (S1) doing what’s unjust is worse than suffering it (474b2-3) and (S2) not paying what is due is worse than paying it (474b3-4). It would appear that in this context he means that they believe this by convention. Does Socrates believe that the universal beliefs he attributes to everyone are true beliefs by convention or by nature? It would appear to be both. He says not only that he or everyone in the city believes these things, but that every other human being as well. If everyone believes these things, then he is saying that everyone has beliefs with very specific moral content.

This shows that both Socrates and Polus commit themselves to a moral psychology that allows for extensive ignorance of one’s own personal beliefs. If Polus is wrong and Socrates is right, then there is at least one person, Polus, who believes these things, but also falsely believes that he does not. On the other hand, if Socrates is wrong and Polus is right, then there is at least one person, Socrates, who falsely believes that he holds both beliefs. In this passage, then, Socrates and Polus are saying that it is possible for one to believe that-\(p\) and yet falsely believe that one believes not-\(p\). This also entails

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154 Santas (1979), 239-240.
that it is possible for one to believe that not-\( p \) and yet falsely believe that one believes that \( p \).\(^{155}\)

But this raises a problem. Given what Socrates has said about human motivation universally held beliefs, and the objective value of justice, one might wonder how injustice is possible at all. If everyone holds these beliefs about the benefit of justice and everyone only desires what is really good for themselves, how are unjust actions possible?

In order to answer this question, let us consider an example. Suppose that an evil politician receives word that a rival is going to have him arrested on false allegations and have him executed. The only available option is to murder his rival. So, he can either suffer or do injustice. According to what Socrates says about everyone’s beliefs about justice, he must believe that doing injustice is worse than suffering it. After some deliberation, however, he decides that it would be better to commit the injustice. In such cases, we can see that he has a latent Socratic belief and an active non-Socratic belief. In other words, he believes both that doing injustice is worse for him than suffering it and that doing injustice is better for him than suffering it. But, when he goes ahead with the murder, he acts on the basis of the non-Socratic belief.

We could say that although the unjust politician believes that doing injustice is worse than suffering it and wants justice over injustice, he is ignorant that he holds this

\(^{155}\)Throughout this discussion I assume that the normal way of generating beliefs about beliefs is a process comprised of a three-step process. The first step is one of self-awareness. One must be aware that one has various beliefs about what is good or bad. The second step is a matter of judgment. When one is aware that one has beliefs, one must determine which beliefs one holds. This judgment gives rise to a belief regarding the beliefs that one holds. Here is our belief about our beliefs, which is a second-order belief. So, we become aware of our beliefs through some self-reflection, and as we become more aware of the content of our minds, we become more aware of each of the individual beliefs in our total belief set. But the function of second-order beliefs is to represent the beliefs that one actually has, and are true insofar as they correspond to the beliefs that one actually holds. And since beliefs are either true or false, it follows that Polus and Socrates assume that we can be in error about what we actually believe.
belief and this preference. So, although he believes that doing injustice is worse than suffering it, he falsely believes that he does not believe it. It is this false second-order belief that obscures his awareness of this belief and the object of what he really wants. This ignorance renders the Socratic belief ineffective in his deliberation. After all, he is not even aware that he believes such a thing when he deliberates about what to do. As a result, he fails to attribute the Socratic belief to himself when he deliberates about which action is best. The failure of self-knowledge renders the Socratic belief a latent belief. If this is true, then in the *Gorgias* Socrates acknowledges that one can act against one’s belief about what is really good.

The possibility that one could act against latent beliefs shows that moral knowledge must involve some level of self-awareness. Indeed, this is because having a large number of latent beliefs is an unavoidable limitation of the human mind. Given its limited capacity to consider and accurately recall every belief one has, it is impossible to consider at every moment every belief we have when we deliberate about what to do. The mind considers and discards beliefs according to the relevant reasons for or against an action. Excellent deliberation must involve some sort of cognitive agency: one must be aware of and select among relevant beliefs and choose the best course of action. One does something other than what one believes is best overall because one fails to believe that he believes that some other type of act would be better than the one he is doing.

We saw in the argument from 466-468 that Socrates holds that one can desire to do something other than what one actually does and be ignorant of the fact that one had desired to do something other than the action one in fact does. One can deliberate about what to do, freely decide among several available actions, act, yet desire to do an entirely
different action. Even after the action is done, it is still possible for the wrongdoer to think that one did do what one wanted to do. If the tyrant decides to condemn his minister to death thinking it is good but it turns out to be bad, then he did not want to do the action. It only seemed to be best. In this case, the tyrant only does what he thinks he wanted to do, when in fact he does not do what he wants to do.

Recognizing a wide scope of self-ignorance appears to undermine Socrates’ conception of virtue as knowledge. We might wonder: why should one who knows what is virtuous always be aware of that knowledge in the right way, at the right time, and apply that knowledge in each and every action done? Surely if one can have false-second order beliefs \textit{and} latent true beliefs, we could have knowledge about what is good and fail to incorporate that belief into our deliberations about what to do.

From the discussion in this chapter, we are in a position to see that this objection misunderstands what moral knowledge is to Socrates. He does not hold that moral knowledge is a set of justified true propositions. If this were true and it is possible to have latent beliefs, then one could act akratically. But if moral knowledge is conceived of as a form of \textit{self-knowledge}, then akrasia appears to be less of a possibility. If one has Socratic moral knowledge, one would have knowledge of what one really wants and what one really believes. If this is true, then one would not have second-order beliefs. And if one only desires what is actually good for oneself and one has knowledge of this good, then one’s beliefs about what is in fact good will \textit{always} govern action.
VIII. Elenchus and Self-Knowledge

In the first chapter, we saw that in the Socratic dialogues, Socrates primarily tests the consistency of the beliefs of his interlocutors. Recall that Ex-Vlastos and Benson conceive of the elenchus as having three steps: (V1) The interlocutor asserts a thesis, \( p \), which Socrates believes is false and targets it for refutation; (V2) Socrates then secures agreement to further premises, say, \( q \) and \( r \); (V3) Socrates then argues, and the interlocutor agrees that \( p, q \) and \( r \) entail not-\( p \). After the interlocutor sees that he is refuted, he finds himself in a state of aporia.

This account of the elenchus fits many of the exchanges Socrates has with his interlocutors in the Socratic dialogues. In the Apology, for example, Socrates tells the jury that after subjecting reputed wise men to rational cross-examination, he saw that they were unable to provide a rational account of their supposed wisdom. Socrates infers from their incompetence that they do not have the wisdom they say they have. But why is this so? It seems possible that one could have knowledge and yet fail to provide an account during the elenctic examination with Socrates. In order to infer that his interlocutor does not have the knowledge, Socrates must assume three things: (1) someone with knowledge must meet the identity conditions of a craft; (2) a necessary condition of craft-knowledge is being able to provide an account of the subject of that craft (inferred from 1); and (3) one can always say what one knows.\(^{156}\) These assumptions allow Socrates to infer that if one fails to provide a rational account of a subject, then one fails to have knowledge of that subject. Socrates applies this sort of reasoning to the virtues: if one cannot give a rational account of a virtue, then one does not have knowledge of that virtue. From this,

\(^{156}\) Dancy (2006), 38.
he goes a further step: he infers that if one fails to provide a rational account of a virtue, then one does not have that virtue. This inference is justified if Socrates assumes that either knowledge is a necessary condition for any virtue or that virtue just is knowledge.\footnote{157}

As we saw in chapter one, in *The Sophist*, Plato describes the elenchus as a way to cleanse the soul of the most destructive belief, the belief that one knows when one does not know. Those who are refuted become angry with themselves and calmer towards others—presumably because they are in a state of aporia, confusion. Refutation can be a painful experience for the one who experiences it, but state of aporia is beneficial, since it increases one’s self-knowledge. The Socratic elenchus enables an individual to become aware of his own cognitive condition by way of first-person awareness. If one is not wise, then one will discard the belief that one is wise. This self-knowledge benefits the individual because he or she will (presumably) seek to remedy the deficient cognitive condition.

In the *Gorgias*, however, Socrates goes further than simply exposing inconsistencies in his interlocutor’s beliefs. He maintains that the elenchus can yield *truth*. To show how he can make this claim would require an enormous undertaking, but we can say that in the *Gorgias* Socrates attributes universal true moral beliefs to everyone. Once one is shown not to be wise through refutation, one is able to begin the process of self-discovery. This process also requires critical self-examination in order to uncover the latent truths one already has in one’s soul.
We can see Socrates revisit this reflexive process of learning about oneself in the *Meno*. One of the most interesting theories to come out of this dialogue is the theory of recollection. This theory states that learning is a process of recollecting the knowledge that is latent in the soul. Although Socrates uses an example focusing on mathematics, the context dictates that he is trying to demonstrate how it is possible for the process of recollection to uncover moral truths. Specifically, he says that a soul always has true beliefs and that these can be “stirred up like a dream” by philosophical questioning which will become knowledge (*M.* 85c5-d1). Someone who has been subjected to systematic questioning will learn without having been taught because he learns through engaging with the true beliefs that have always been present in the soul.

What Socrates says in the *Gorgias* about what everyone believes foreshadows the theory of recollection in the *Meno*. We could say that Socrates could hold that true moral beliefs are analogous to true mathematical beliefs that are latent in the soul. The belief that justice is better than injustice, for example, could be an example of a true belief in the soul that requires questioning in order to be “stirred up” and transformed into knowledge. If this is true, then the *Gorgias* sits neatly between the *Apology*, on the one hand, and the *Meno*, on the other hand.

**IX. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I considered an objection to my contention that Socrates claims to practice the political craft. The objection highlights the virtues Socrates’ use of the doctor-dialectician analogy. It also brings to light some of the limitations of the analogy. The analogy is useful because dialectic does not transfer knowledge to another person.
Dialectic improves others by “working on” what is there in the soul and orders the “elements” as a doctor works with the body and orders its composition to bring about and maintain physical health. Indeed, Plato himself does not change his mind about this approach to moral education. In the Republic, for instance, Plato relies on a metaphor with sight to explain how moral education ought to proceed. He says, “Education isn’t what some people declare it to be, namely, putting knowledge in to the souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes...[since] the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul” (Rep. 518b5-c5).

To be expected, the analogy, however, has its limitations. It appears that the sub-craft of the branch of justice, dialectic, cannot be taught like other crafts. Even if Socrates does not teach dialectic himself, it does not appear to be teachable (like other common crafts) even in principle. Dialectic is a process of self-discovery and must take place from a first-person perspective. Despite this limitation, it does not follow that it is not learnable. In the Laches, Socrates recognizes that there are two ways to acquire a craft: by learning it from someone else or by discovering it on one’s own (La. 186d7-e4).
CONCLUSION

My thesis brings to light the importance of the political craft in the *Gorgias* dialogue, our understanding of Socrates, and the role philosophy plays in the political community. It also has implications for Socrates’ conception of the soul in the *Gorgias*. Since many scholars hold interpretive frameworks that categorize the dialogues into Socratic and Platonic dialogues based on philosophical doctrines Socrates defends, the results of this study challenges their accounts of Socratic philosophy. In many ways, the outcome of this study will force us to reconsider whether the *Gorgias* should be considered to be a Socratic dialogue after all.

For example, my discussion of the two branches of justice has implications for how we conceive of the soul in the *Gorgias*. Many scholars assume that the soul must be similar to the one Socrates assumes in the *Protagoras* and other dialogues and so deny that Socrates could endorse corporal punishment as a legitimate way to improve others. But there are many passages that show that Socrates assumes a moral psychology that would require non-rational control of the appetites (or other appetites associated with the body).

This different model of moral psychology, however, does not appear to be fully worked out. In some passages Socrates appears to endorse mind-body dualism, yet in other passages he appears to endorse a complex soul that has a rational and a non-rational part. Indeed, the mind-body dualism is evident throughout the *Gorgias*. In the discussion with Polus, for example, Socrates says that an individual has a body and a soul and that the body can attempt to judge moral value instead of the soul (465c9-d9). And in the
myth of the afterlife, he suggests that the judging faculty of the soul is innerrant, but when embodied is misled by the senses of the body (523c4-5). This picture of the soul is more akin to the Phaedo. But there are passages that suggest that appetites arise from the soul itself. For example, in the discussion with Callicles, Socrates locates the physiological appetites in the soul (493a3-5). And in the discussion about the harms past statesmen have wrought on the city, Socrates says that the flattering statesmen filled whatever appetite the people had for harbors, dockyards, etc. (518e4; 519a2-4). An appetite for harbors and dockyards is better understood as an appetite originating from the soul, not the body. These passages suggest that Socrates is beginning to change his thinking on the simple mind body-dualism of, for example, the Crito. The body and soul interact and the body can distort the soul, but their precise relationship remains unclear. His uncertainty about the exact relationship between the body and the soul, however, does not undermine his overall view that there are non-rational appetites and desires that must be dealt with through non-rational means.

In the discussion in chapter two, we saw that Socrates recognizes that corporal punishment indeed plays an important role in the service of moral improvement of others. I suggested that since Socrates does not recognize a virtue of appetite and he does not recognize a spirited part of the soul as he does in the Republic, the only line of defense against enlarged appetites is the intellect. Once one enlarges appetites with past indulgences, one’s reason is overrun with the demands of the appetites. Although Socrates argues that corporal punishment can free a soul from injustice and intemperance through pain and suffering, he does not explain how this is possible.
Regardless of how the details of this psychological picture are worked out, it appears that the *Gorgias* does not meet the criteria of what is considered a Socratic dialogue. For instance, Vlastos, Penner, and Rowe hold that in the Socratic dialogue, Socrates holds a model of the soul that is simple (or that it does not have a non-rational “part”). Penner distinguishes the Platonic from the Socratic dialogues almost entirely on this basis. If the *Gorgias* is not a Socratic dialogue, then there are serious implications for these scholars interpretation of Socratic philosophy.

For example, Vlastos holds that the *Gorgias* gives us the standard account of the Socratic elenchus—instead of viewing the elenchus as uncovering inconsistencies in his interlocutor’s beliefs (steps V1-V3), it also yields moral truths (step V4). If the *Gorgias* is not a Socratic dialogue, then the standard Socratic elenchus would be only find inconsistencies in his interlocutor’s beliefs. If Vlastos intends to justify his position, he would have to turn to *Republic* I to provide this account. It is not clear whether he could do so on this evidence.

Penner (1992), Santas (1964), and Taylor (1976) also believe that the *Gorgias* provides us with the Socratic theory of desire at 466-468 that supports Socrates’ paradoxes (viz., the Prudential and Moral Paradoxes). If the *Gorgias* is not a Socratic dialogue, then they must turn to other Socratic dialogues to defend these paradoxes.

With respect to our understanding of the political craft, Socrates views himself as practicing a sub-craft of justice. This practice treats the souls of others by attending to their second-order beliefs. By eradicating self-ignorance, the practice of the Socratic elenchus helps one uncover true latent beliefs in the soul. This explains why Socrates attributes to others these beliefs, even when they deny that they believe them. And it also
gives us a picture of how philosophy is not simply a compliment to politics, but that philosophy is the very practice of politics. Politics requires self-knowledge, and so philosophy is an essential practice for all statesmen in any political community. But the account of philosophy as a craft, requires much more attention, since it is not clear how philosophy meets the conditions of a traditional craft. Indeed, Socrates’ conception of the branch of justice as a craft analogous to medicine might be the best way to explain some of the features of this craft. Even though it faces some of the limitations we have noticed, the practice of philosophy is best understood as the therapeutic craft of the soul.
One of the most influential approaches to the Platonic corpus in the last hundred years is that there is a set of Socratic dialogues that are distinct from the Platonic dialogues. These dialogues are said to be Socratic in that they express the mode of dialectic akin to the historical Socrates and represent some of his views, in particular the so-called Socratic paradoxes. The Platonic dialogues, on the other hand, are Platonic in the sense that Plato either modifies or rejects one or more foundational Socratic doctrine or introduces his non-Socratic philosophical outlook.

Vlastos claims that there are two Socrateses in the dialogues: the Socratic Socrates and the Platonic Socrates. The Socratic Socrates is strictly occupied with questions related to ethics. Specifically, Socrates is interested in how one can care for one’s soul, and what is it that makes a good life. He does not conduct any investigation in to any theoretical science, in particular metaphysics or mathematics. Even when he discusses the divine, his primary concern is how these things bear on action. Socrates is staunchly dedicated to follow his own method of investigation which pursues moral truth by engaging with adversative discussion partners. As he engages with others regarding virtue and happiness, Socrates appears to believe that his philosophical practice is accessible to the common man—indeed, that philosophy ought to be practiced by everyone in order to make their lives worthwhile. The Platonic Socrates, however, is significantly different than the Socratic Socrates. Metaphysical questions are prominent, mostly—but not only—with respect to the theory of Forms, which Socrates first introduces in the Republic and Phaedo. Moreover, the Platonic Socrates is no longer the
puzzled philosopher putting to the test the views of his fellow citizens; he becomes one of the main speakers of the dialogues and argues for theories of his own with his interlocutors.

Vlastos classifies the dialogues into three groups. The first group is the early dialogues (or the *elenctic* or *aporetic*) dialogues, which he believes are the best representation of the Socratic stage of Plato’s philosophical development. The middle dialogues express the new and elaborate Platonic ideas and the late dialogues are those that refine or reject Platonic theses presented in the middle period. Vlastos categorizes the following dialogues as Socratic dialogues: *Apology, Charmides, Crito, Euthydemus, Euthyphro, Gorgias, Hippias Major, Hippias Minor, Ion, Laches, Lysis, Protagoras* and book 1 of the *Republic*.

The terminology that Vlastos uses, however, can be misleading. For instance, Sarah Abhel-Rappe, a former student of Vlastos, claims that

*all of the dialogues that Vlastos considered ‘Socratic’ are aporetic:* they take the form of conversations pursued with a number of interlocutors whose views are elicited, shown to entail contradictions and dismissed. These dialogues end in impasse and are destructive, showing only that the virtue in question has not been successfully defined.\(^{158}\)

This characterization of Vlastos’s Socratic dialogues is not unusual. But the *Apology, Crito* and *Gorgias* do not meet the requirements of what counts as an early or aporetic dialogue. The primary aim of the *aporetic* dialogues is to consider the arguments within the discussion between Socrates an interlocutor about virtue. These dialogues are ‘aporetic’ in the sense that at the close of the dialogue Plato dramatizes the state of perplexity or *aporia* between Socrates and his interlocutors with respect to some question

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\(^{158}\) Ahbel-Rappe (2009), 54. My emphasis.
or puzzle related to virtue. These dialogues are characteristically inconclusive: they often end without providing an authoritative solution to the problem addressed so that the reader may think further about the issues raised.

In the biographical dialogues, however, Plato has other reasons for writing the dialogue in the way that he does. In the *Apology* and *Gorgias*, Plato portrays Socrates defending the practice of philosophy in ways that are distinct from the cross-examination itself.¹⁵⁹ First, Plato presents Socrates as appealing to the benefits philosophy bestows on those who practice it. Second, Plato paints a portrait of Socrates to the reader as the ideal exemplar of a philosopher. The *Crito* poses an even more stark contrast with the *aporetic* dialogues, since it is a review of the reasons for a course of action Socrates has decided to take. In this work, Socrates introduces “The Laws,” a personification of the laws of Athens, in order to help explain to Crito why he has decided on a course of action that will result in his unjust execution.¹⁶⁰ The dialogues that deal with the events related to the historical Socrates and Plato’s interpretation of these events have additional aims independent from an inquiry into the definition of virtue in the dialogues themselves. What Socrates does and his explanations of what he is doing are as important as the arguments in the dialogues.

For these reasons, I will call what Vlastos calls the early dialogues the ‘Socratic dialogues’ and break this category into two classes: the *aporetic* and biographical

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¹⁵⁹ I understand both to be biographical but in different senses. In the *Apology*, it would seem reasonable to understand the actual words spoken at his trial were close to what Plato presents. In the *Gorgias*, on the other hand, Plato takes a more comprehensive approach to Socrates’ status in a democratic society, and explores the more general topic of the condition of a philosopher in a democracy which values persuasive speaking in front of an audience.

dialogues.\textsuperscript{161} The division draws attention to the relevant features of each type of dialogue: in the \textit{aporetic} dialogues Plato is primarily concerned with the argument itself, whereas in the biographical dialogues Plato places great emphasis on Socrates’ biography and behavior more generally. The emphasis in the biographical dialogues gives special weight to the verbal \textit{and} non-verbal meaning of what Socrates says and does.

\textsuperscript{161} Benson (2000), Irwin (1979) and many others follow this categorization, though for slightly different reasons.
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