

HELPING FRIENDS AND HARMING ENEMIES: THE CASE OF *GORGIAS* 480a6–481b5

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Resumo. Sabemos pelo *Crítion* (49c10–11) e pela *República* (335e5–6) que o Sócrates de Platão rejeita explicitamente toda ideia de retaliação. Essa visão é reforçada posteriormente no *Górgias* (480a6–481b5), passagem esta que ainda não foi totalmente discutida. Nela, Sócrates confronta a tradicional máxima “ὠφελεῖν τοὺς φίλους καὶ βλάπτειν τοὺς ἐχθροὺς” (“ajudar os amigos e prejudicar os inimigos”) ao transformá-la radicalmente em “ὠφελεῖν τοὺς φίλους καὶ ὠφελεῖν τοὺς ἐχθροὺς” (“ajudar os amigos e ajudar os inimigos”). A ética socrática não aprova que se cometa qualquer tipo injustiça.

Palavras-chave. Sócrates; Platão; *Górgias*; retaliação; injustiça; ética.

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THE WELL-KNOWN TRADITIONAL IDEA “ὠφελεῖν τοὺς φίλους καὶ βλάπτειν τοὺς ἐχθροὺς”¹ complies with the concept of ensuring one’s own interest by helping one’s friends and harming one’s enemies. Retaliation in the form of reciprocation of benefits or harms forms the basis whereupon this traditional precept is founded. However, when it comes to Socratic ethics, a question arises immediately: what is the Socratic approach towards this principle known as *talio*?² Plato depicts Socrates rejecting the idea of retaliation: In the *Crito*, he concludes that “one should never treat anyone unjustly, not even as a return for an injustice” (49c10–11),³ while, in the *Republic*, he concludes that “in no case can the harming of another be just” (335e5–6),⁴ although his interlocutor in the *Meno* claims to know what “a man’s virtue” (ἀνδρὸς

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¹ Many scholars have stressed the fact that this idea pervades Greek popular thought, see for example Kitto 1969, 243–7; Pearson 1962, 15–17, 86–89; Dover 1974, 180–84; Vlastos 1980, 303–7. For a detailed examination of this precept, see especially Blundell 1989, 26–59; cf. Cohen 1995, 61–118. For an opposite view, namely that this idea does not in fact pervade Greek popular thought, see Herman 2000, 7–27; Harris 2005, 125–42.

² The essence of *talio* is reciprocation. *Talio* is the Latin legal term for “repayment in kind” (*talio < tale = “such as”*), see Blundell 1989, 28 n. 15; Vlastos 1991, 181.

³ οὐτε ἄρα ἀνταδικεῖν δεῖ οὔτε κακῶς ποιεῖν οὐδένα ἀνθρώπων, οὐδ’ ἂν ὅτιοῦν πάσῃ ἢ π’ αὐτῶν.

⁴ οὐδαμοῦ γὰρ δίκαιον οὐδένα ἡμῖν ἐφάνη ὄν βλάπτειν. Xenophon, on the other hand, depicts Socrates endorsing repeatedly the traditional precept “to help one’s friends and to harm one’s enemies”,

ἀρετῇ) is: “to be able to manage the city’s affairs, and to manage them so as to do good to his friends and evil to his enemies, and to be careful so that no harm comes to himself” (71e).⁵ The aim of this paper is to shed new light on *Gorgias* 480a6–481b6 not only by unfolding and elucidating how, under the influence of the Socratic ethics, the traditional idea “to help one’s friends and to harm one’s enemies” is transformed into “to help one’s friends and to help one’s enemies” – thus proving that this passage contributes greatly to the expansion of the Platonic testimony in favour of Socrates’ rejection of retaliation –, but also by clarifying how the Socratic theory of the rejection of retaliation per se is inextricably linked to his theory of *eudaimonia*: Socratic ethics does not approve one’s doing injustice in any way.

SOCRATES’ CONVERSATION WITH POLUS (461b2–481b5)

Socrates examines rhetoric as a craft claiming to benefit its practitioners. He argues that it is no real craft – since it is not concerned with the good – but rather an empirical skill in producing pleasure, a form of flattery (κολακεία) that cannot give any rational account of its procedure. In fact, it does not confer any benefit upon the rhetor, since it provides him with a power that is not a real good. While Polus has said that rhetors do “whatever they want” (βούλεσθαι), exercising more power than anyone else, Socrates claims that they do not do “what they want to” but “whatever it seems good to them” (δοκεῖν βέλτιστον). This distinction is of paramount importance. Doing what someone thinks best with intelligence (νοῦς) results in good for the agent; but if his actions are not accompanied by intelligence (cf. 458b), they result in no benefit. Socrates further clarifies what he means by this distinction:

- (i) First, there are activities which we pursue for their own sakes, as being themselves good; secondly, there are activities which we pursue for the sake of something else.
- (ii) Humans pursue what is intermediate for the sake of what is good. All voluntary actions are done with a view to benefiting the agent (the agent’s good, cf. 468b1). On the contrary, involuntary actions are those

see *Memorabilia* 2.1.19, 2.3.14, 2.6.35. On why Plato’s testimony should be preferred to Xenophon’s on this point, see Vlastos 1991, 297–300.

⁵ ἵκανὸν εἶναι τὰ τῆς πόλεως πράττειν, καὶ πράττοντα τοὺς μὲν φίλους εὖ ποιεῖν, τοὺς δ’ ἔχθρους κακῶς, καὶ αὐτὸν εὐλαβεῖσθαι μηδὲν τοιοῦτον παθεῖν.

which result in harm for the agent (the idea in question is contained in the famous dictum οὐδεις ἐκὼν κακὸς or οὐδεις ἐκὼν ἀμαρτάνει).

Consequently, in order to justify his claim, namely that rhetoric does not provide the rhetor with a real good, Socrates proceeds to say what a real good is, thereby arguing against Polus that we are better off being just than being unjust.

THE LAST PART OF THE CONVERSATION WITH POLUS: THE PASSAGE UNDER CONSIDERATION (480A6-481B5)

A brief summary

In this passage, Socrates returns to the consideration of the value of rhetoric. The main question arising from a first reading is the following: what is the value and usefulness of rhetoric, given the fact that, as the preceding conversations point out, a man should protect himself from doing injustice, because doing injustice entails a great enough *evil* (κακόν)? According to Socrates, if a man or whoever else he cares about acts unjustly, he must directly present himself (or his friend) before the court in order to be punished: in that case, he will prevent the disease of injustice from being protracted and making his soul festering incurably. Socrates maintains that rhetoric is useful to one only if intended, primarily, to accuse oneself, thereafter one's relatives as well as each of one's friends, of doing injustice.

Having completed the treatment on the first part of rhetoric's usefulness in respect of benefitting oneself and one's friends, thenceforth Socrates examines the second part: the way in which one must treat rhetoric, aiming at harming an enemy. The other benefit of rhetoric consists in defending an enemy in order not to be punished.

However, approaching the end of the passage, Socrates concludes: whoever does not intend to do injustice has no need of rhetoric. In other words, under these circumstances, rhetoric has no usefulness—if indeed it has any usefulness at all, since it was not evident in the conversation with Gorgias.

A further analysis

After briefly exposing the views unfolded in the passage under consideration, I can move onto a further analysis. To sum up, Polus' main

interests consist in the concept of personal gain, unconditional power,⁶ flattering, being pretentious, concealing falsehood with a view to achieving unconditional *ruling* (ἄρχειν). According to Polus, the greatest power (δύναμις) amounts to acting according to one's own desires, which entails unconditional *ruling* (ἄρχειν, cf. 452d7, 483d5, 488b4, 490a2) without being punished, regardless of the just or unjust characterization of one's actions. In other words, Polus focuses on the special outcome resulting from performing special deeds rather than on the manner or the intention of their performance. The fact that Polus presents the actual stages of Archelaus' obtaining unconditional tyrannical power indicates a special modification of the traditional precept "to help one's friends and to harm one's enemies". This specific alteration is showed in the following form:

(1.1) "To help oneself, to harm one's friends, to harm one's enemies"

The above protasis dictates a kind of behaviour in accordance with the tyrannical pattern, which has its roots in the heroic pursuit of *ruling* (ἄρχειν).⁷ *Ruling* constitutes the hero's main goal due to the fact that the promotion of his *honour* (τιμή) is the ultimate goal to which his steps are always directed. ἄγαθος (*good man*) in the Homeric poems denotes a brave, successful warrior of noble birth and high social status, capable of delivering speeches, taking decisions and effectively ruling his own *household* (οἶκος).⁸ For that purpose, the hero needs some help from his friends in order to ensure his *honour*. As Arthur W. H. Adkins says,⁹ "*philotes* is cooperation to meet the harsh demands of Homeric life". The pervasive feature of Greek popular morality, namely the assumption that one should help one's friends and harm one's enemies, is deeply rooted in Homer, the "fountainhead of all Greek literature and thought", as Mary W. Blundell points out.¹⁰

Both heroic and tyrannical types of conduct share the same goals in terms of pursuing unconditional *ruling*. However, the Homeric hero relies on his friends for supporting him in coping with the demands of Homeric life. Archelaus' example illustrates the fact that an insidious tyrant's deeds include harming friends or enemies without exception in order to achieve

⁶ Cf. Santas 1979, 247.

⁷ Cf. Adkins 1972, 73–5.

⁸ Cf. Adkins 1972, 11–13.

⁹ Adkins 1972, 17.

¹⁰ Adkins 1972, 26 n.2.

his end. The tyrant has no real friends. In establishing successful relationships, he seeks to promote his own interest.¹¹

According to Polus, the idea of unconditional tyrannical power underlies the restructured traditional precept that the protasis 1.1 suggests. The relish of impunity marking the exercise of unconditional power implies, in Polus' terms, *eudaimonia*. Thus, Polus' *eudaimonia*-pattern is summarized in the following:

(1.2.) The unpunished *unjust man = the most eudaimon*

Socrates is challenged to defend his theory on the value of punishment in contrast with thesis 1.2 that Polus presents as ideal. For that purpose, he evokes the traditional precept "to help one's friends and to harm one's enemies", since he believes that the ideas embedded in this theory reflect special concepts and terms that can be easily understood by Polus. Thus, Socrates, initially, appears to argue for that precept, which is much more clearly articulated in the following:

(2.1.) "To help oneself, to help one's friends, to harm one's enemies"

Socrates quickly clarifies himself with respect to the above idea, while determining the true value of rhetoric. He maintains that rhetoric is useful to one only if intended, primarily, to accuse oneself, thereafter one's relatives as well as each of one's friends, of doing injustice. The substantial utility of rhetoric must be determined by the disclosure of truth. Unlike the heroic and tyrannical pattern, Socratic ethics teaches us that one's friend's real benefit does not consist in the concealment of injustice, but in its disclosure. One can easily observe the diametrically opposed practices of lying and truth-telling. For Socrates, veracity is the only way to bring about punishment and the soul's deliverance from the *greatest evil* (μέγιστον κακόν), that is, injustice. The vital difference between the two value systems (conventional morality – Socratic ethics) results from the contrasting evaluation and the distinction between *good* (ἀγαθόν) and *evil* (κακόν). What conventional morality, founded on traditional ethics,¹² considers as a friend's harm is, according to Socratic

¹¹ Cf. Rebecca Bensen Cain's (2008, 225) description of Polus' priorities: "...doing whatever it takes to survive and having the power that guarantees success taking precedence over the values of justice and shame". For the portrait of the typical tyrant, see Herodotus, *History* 3.80–3; Plato, *Republic* 574a6–576a6; Aristotle, *Politics* 1311a–1315b. See further Dodds 1959, 344; Adkins 1972, 67–75; Tarnopolsky 2010, 23–26, 110–13.

¹² Adkins (1960, 266–8) notes that Polus represents the muddleheadedness of ordinary values, the confusion of values existing in Athens at this period, resulting from the infiltration of the

ethics, nothing but a friend's benefit. Socrates offers a special redirection of the traditional precept "to help one's friends and to harm one's enemies", which brings about the revision and redefinition of the concept of real benefit. Socratic ethics does not focus on the camouflage of injustice or the pretense of justice, but on the disclosure of injustice, on truth and just (*δίκαιον*). Therefore, a man must use rhetoric as a means of disclosing a specific unjust deed in order to purge himself – or his friends – from it, ensuring a special state of health. Generally, one must include rhetorical practice among one's actions, which should, in any case, be addressed towards *good* (*ἀγαθόν*) and *fine* (*καλόν*) without taking any account of the pain (*ἀλγινόν*).

Socrates completes the first part of rhetoric's usefulness in respect of benefitting oneself and one's friends, being able, at the same time, to reach the end of the appropriate treatment on the first half of the traditional precept ("helping friends"). Now, he examines the way in which one must treat rhetoric aiming at harming an enemy (*κακῶς ποιεῖν*). Socrates maintains that, if one indeed should harm one¹³ who treats unjustly a third one – provided that he himself is not being treated unjustly by the enemy, something that should be avoided, since *to be treated unjustly* also indicates one's harm¹⁴ –, he must take care to avoid the enemy's attendance at court in order not to be punished for his unjust deed. It is noteworthy that what the proponents of traditional morality or tyrannical power deem shameful, that is, an enemy's benefitting by means of ensuring his impunity, is exactly the same as what Socrates considers as harm. This wide ideological divergence is based on a differentiated good – an evaluation relying on a further distinction between *opinion* (*δόξα*) and knowledge or, in other words, between *false*

quiet moral excellences into the group of terms based on *agathos*. Cf. Kahn 1983, 95–6; Johnson 1989, 197 n. 2. For a somehow different idea, namely that Polus is insincerely tailoring his remarks to conventional Athenian wisdom, see Kahn 1983, 117. Richard McKim (1988, 40) holds a different view. Furthermore, for the idea that Polus is confused and perplexed by what he actually considers as admirable and shameful, see for example Dodds 1959, 11–12; Benardete 1991, 40–1. See Tarnopolsky 2010, 65–78, for a careful examination of these views.

¹³ The conditional has prompted considerable scholarly discussion. Terence Irwin (1979, 168) notices that "the conditional (cf. *HMi*. 376b) shows that Socrates does not necessarily endorse this use of rhetoric to harm enemies. He normally insists that we should harm no one, *Cri*. 49b–d, *R*. 333b–336a". George Kimball Plochmann and Franklin E. Robinson (1988, 370 n.19) say: "Here Socrates does not directly contradict the import of his question (*Republic* 1.335b), Whether a good man should harm anyone at all?". John Beversluis (2000, 338 n.39) contends that "It should not be inferred that, in saying this, Socrates is endorsing the *lex talionis*, thereby renouncing his interdict on retaliation (*Cr*. 49b10–11) and opting for the Simonidean – Polemarchian view of justice as helping one's friends and harming one's enemies". John Beversluis criticizes Eric R. Dodds (1959, 259) for overlooking the fact that this passage "has a deeper and more unsettling implication. Those who do cover up for their friends and relatives by failing to prosecute them and by helping them to escape punishment, are, in fact, harming them and thereby treating them as if they were enemies".

¹⁴ See Dodds 1959, 259. Cf. 469c1–2.

opinion (ψευδὴς δόξα) and *right opinion* (ὀρθὴ δόξα).¹⁵ Consequently, if a man has embezzled money, he must be allowed to keep on spending it to his own and his friends' advantage, continually showing an unjust and disrespectful pattern of behaviour; furthermore, if a man has done injustice in a way worthy of the death penalty, he must not be punished but be allowed to continue living an unjust life. Thus, in Socrates' opinion, the greatest harm that one can inflict on one's enemy is to leave him unpunished, namely to allow him to still live as wicked (πονηρός) and unjust, since this is the real harm of the soul which brings him wretchedness. Socrates achieves his goal of reversing the traditional precept "to help one's friends and to harm one's enemies" with the assistance of those terms and verbal-ideological means that can be easily perceived by Polus, the "extreme" representative of traditional ethics. On the basis of the above reasoning, Socrates offers a counter-proposal to Polus' idea 1.2:

(2.2.) The unpunished *unjust man* = *the most wretched man*

Socrates gives the unpunished *unjust man* the last position on the newly introduced *eudaimonia*-scale. According to the Socratic value system, the greatest wickedness is identical with injustice correlated with impunity. Polus' defending of unconditional power is restricted to merely phenomenal benefit, anchored in unreflected opinion, thoughtless mind and false belief. The benefit to one's self and one's friends is closely related to the soul. The truly great power lies on the *good*, the benefit, which right opinion, resulting from the deductive reasoning exercise, and truth dictate: namely a punishment based on justice which aims at healing the soul. After putting the finishing touches to his theory of punishment, Socrates concludes with the following idea:

(2.3.) The punished *unjust man* = *less wretched man* than the unpunished *unjust man*

Consequently, the punished *unjust man* is ranked in a higher position than the unpunished *unjust man* on the suggested *eudaimonia*-scale. The utility of rhetoric lies in the disclosure of injustice. Injustice forms the soul's major evil, which is eventually healed by means of punishment and justice implementation.

¹⁵ The true good is what one really wants (ἐκόν), as opposed to what one thinks (δόξα) one wants (apparent good), cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 466b–e. In other words, what one really wants (ἐκόν) is what one knows (or rightly believes) to be the best.

Had the conversation with Polus ended precisely at this point, one would have deduced quite different conclusions about the main objective of the whole Socratic dialectic method addressed towards his interlocutor in the general context of the passage under consideration. However, Socrates emphasizes that whoever does not intend to do injustice has no need of rhetoric. It is noteworthy that it has not been proved yet to what extent rhetoric is useful. Thus, now, the value and usefulness of rhetoric are being called into question again. Socrates contends that the just man, namely the one who performs just deeds, has no need of rhetoric. At this point, let us recall some previous Socratic views in the dialogue in order to facilitate the interpretation of the whole passage:

- a) *Just things* (δικαία) are *fine* (καλά). Therefore, he who performs *just deeds* performs *fine deeds*; and if they are fine, they are *good* (ἀγαθά) as well (*fine* and *good* being identical) (476b ff.);
- b) The fine and good (καλὸς κἀγαθός) man and woman are *eudaimones*, but the unjust and wicked are wretched" (470e10);
- c) Ultimate *eudaimonia* is found in the health of the body and soul (478c3). Secondly, *eudaimonia* is found in the relief of the body and soul from *evil* (κακόν). In view of the soul's superiority in relation to the body, Socrates' concept of *καλοκἀγαθία* (the quality of being a *fine and good* man)¹⁶ is founded on the health and well-being of the soul;
- d) The idea of a soul's well-being implies the Socratic concept of the unity of virtues. The soul's welfare represents soul's virtue, that is, *justice* (δικαιοσύνη), *temperance* (σωφροσύνη), *courage* (ἀνδρεία), *knowledge/ wisdom* (σοφία) or *good opinion* (ὀρθὴ δόξα) founded on dialectic reasoning (cf. 477c).

Combining the above ideas with the present Socratic assertion, it follows that:

- (3.1.) The *just man* = the most *eudaimon*

Socrates gives *just* and *justice* a central role in the concept of *eudaimonia*. The just man is the most *eudaimon*. He has no need of rhetoric or flattering leading to insincere or feigned behaviour. The best weapon in his arsenal does not consist in falsehood but in truth, relying on knowledge or *right opinion*, namely that type of an as yet unrefuted opinion, which is deduced by exercising critical reasoning questions. This is the point on

¹⁶ I use the abstract noun *καλοκἀγαθία* as a derivative of *καλὸς κἀγαθός*, denoting the quality of the latter, such as *κακία* is a derivative of *κακός*.

which actual utmost power is based. The just man is the most eudaimon, enjoying his soul's state of health. One's healthy – via justice – soul determines one's quality of being a *fine and good* man (καλοκάγαθία). Socratic ethics dictate the only type of real benefit: justice. The soul's virtue resides in justice, temperance, courage, knowledge/wisdom or true opinion.¹⁷ It is this idea that establishes the Socratic unity of virtues¹⁸ and the famous Socratic views “no one errs willingly” and “no one willingly performs bad deeds”. Socrates and Polus agreed that all men consider *good* as their ultimate goal in life (468b). For Socrates, as we have already seen, real good depends on the soul's benefit related to justice and the rest of virtue. Thus, one can safely conclude that, by the term *fine and good* (καλὸς κἀγαθός), Socrates means nothing less than being just, temperate, courageous, a man of practical wisdom who knows and performs just and good deeds resulting in his *eudaimonia*. This leads naturally to the verification of the idea of the *Crito* (49c10–11) “οὔτε ἄρα ἀνταδικεῖν δεῖ οὔτε κακῶς ποιεῖν οὐδένα ἀνθρώπων, οὐδ' ἂν ὅτιοῦν πάσχη ὑπ' αὐτῶν” and the *Republic* (335e5–6) “οὐδαμοῦ γὰρ δίκαιον οὐδένα ἡμῖν ἐφάνη ὄν βλάπτειν”.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis leads irrevocably to a certain conclusion. The notion of *talio*, representing the cornerstone, firstly, of the traditional precept “to help oneself, to help one's friends, to harm one's enemies” and, secondly, of the tyrannical precept “to help oneself, to harm one's friends, to harm one's enemies”, is finally repudiated. In *Gorgias* 480a6–481b6, a thorough transformation is noted of both traditional and tyrannical precepts under the influence of Socratic ethics focusing on the crucial distinction between *opinion* and knowledge, or, in other words, between *false opinion* and *right opinion*, as well as between the apparent and the real *good-benefit*. Such wis-

¹⁷ Cf. Santas 1979, 253.

¹⁸ Charles H. Kahn (1983, 95) notes: “the elenchus here brings into the open...a deeper conflict between two equal traditional but incompatible ideals of human excellence: (A) the heroic or competitive notion of *aretē* formulated in the motto of Achilles: ‘always be the first and best ahead of everyone else’... (B) the ideal of measure and moderation, knowing one's limitations as a mortal and one's duties as a citizen”. In p. 96 he adds: “It was one of Socrates' greatest achievements to reshape these two conceptions into a new and consistent moral ideal, the unity of virtues founded on wisdom and on the cooperative excellences, pushing justice to a new and revolutionary demands (‘never harm anyone, even an enemy’), but remaining faithful to the old ideal of manliness by fearlessly risking and finally giving up his life in the cause of justice and loyalty to moral principle”.

dom, consisting in the knowledge of good and evil, is the result of the whole process of exposing one's deeply held views to co-examination, eventually leading him to reject the false opinions and certify the true ones. Now, the reformulated idea, revealing the basic principles of Socratic philosophy, can be summarized in the following:

(3.2.) "To help oneself, to help one's friends, to help one's enemies"

This reformulated idea, marking a concomitant reconceptualization of the main concept of benefit and a complete repudiation of one's harming, shows that the so-called Socratic intellectualism does not promote exclusively one's own interest at the expense of altruistic intentions. The concept of real benefit is short of any idea of reciprocity, becoming a direct consequence of a just deed. Here in the conversation with Polus Plato declares that rhetoric of the kind celebrated by Polus cannot be the key to living well. To value the kind of power rhetoric claims to offer is to hold a false view of what is beneficial to someone. By seeing—through the dialectical discussion—why this view is false, humans reach a true view of what is good, in this way understanding why it is better for the agent, as well as for the patient, to be just than to be unjust. The cardinal virtues, suggested by Socrates, are related to private-individual benefit as much as to the whole community advantage. Eventually, the predominance of *justice and the rest of virtue* indicates the predominance of cooperative values over any competitive value system.

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Abstract. As we know from the *Crito* (49c10–11) and from the *Republic* (335e5–6), Plato's Socrates explicitly rejects any idea of retaliation. This view is further strengthened by *Gorgias* (480a6–481b5), a passage that has not been extensively discussed yet. In the passage in question, Socrates challenges the traditional maxim "ὠφελεῖν τοὺς φίλους καὶ βλάπτειν τοὺς ἐχθροὺς" ("helping friends and harming enemies") by radically changing it into "ὠφελεῖν τοὺς φίλους καὶ ὠφελεῖν τοὺς ἐχθροὺς" ("helping friends and helping enemies"). Socratic ethics does not approve one's doing injustice in any way.

Keywords. Socrates; Plato; *Gorgias*; retaliation; injustice; ethics.