

THE SHAME OF BEING A PHILOSOPHER
Critical Response to Tarnopolsky

In her recent essay “Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato and the Contemporary Politics of Shame,” Christina Tarnopolsky argues for a forceful, if chastened, rehabilitation of the political and moral value of shame. Shame challenges the identification with the “other” by whom we measure ourselves. Specifically, shame can elicit “a moment of recognition” in which we are forced to acknowledge either that we fail to live up to the ideal of the “other” or that this ideal is flawed (it does not measure up to us). When carried out respectfully, this experience of a lacuna between self and “other” can be beneficial: “Putting someone to shame is the very activity that first creates a potentially salutary discomfort and perplexity in the patient (i.e., the intra-psychic division between self and ‘other’) that is necessary for self-consciousness, self-reflection, self-criticism, and moral and political deliberation.”¹ Moreover, not only is shame potentially productive of these moral qualities relevant for individual growth and democratic politics but it also suggests the possibility of consensus—a *new* “other” around which both the person-shaming and the person-being-shamed might meet, as in Socrates’ invitation to share in a profession of ignorance.

The key text in Tarnopolsky’s analysis is Plato’s *Gorgias*, and the key event is Socrates’ shaming of Callicles in a public argument. Callicles, who enters the discussion to defend what Tarnopolsky terms “the life of the tyrant” (i.e., that a life of indiscriminate pleasure seeking is best and that to do wrong is better than to suffer it) is momentarily led by Socrates to admit that some pleasures are in fact more worthy than others. This shame borne from contradiction constitutes, Tarnopolsky says, a moment of recognition for Callicles in which he is led to the agonizing yet fruitful realization that he does not after all share the views of the tyrant whom he defends: that he is *other* than tyrant. Moreover, it leads to a temporary consensus with Socrates.² Callicles cannot stomach the shame, however. The moment of recognition is repressed as Callicles tries to avoid further discussion with Socrates, eventu-

ally forcing Socrates to continue the conversation by himself. Callicles, then, is doubly illustrative of the beneficial possibilities of an engagement with shame: his momentary experience of shame reveals its capacity for self-criticism and transformation, and his subsequent repression of shame suggests that such behavior is what one should expect from tyrants and defenders of tyranny.

Because Tarnopolsky's appeal to the value of shame is compelling and because she explicitly calls for criticism and a respectful shaming of her own views on shame, I think it is worth drawing attention to what is noticeably missing in her analysis—namely, the most dramatic, unusual, challenging, and famous instance of shaming within the *Gorgias*: Callicles' shaming of Socrates and the life of the philosopher. The content of this shaming is well-known. Callicles argues that while philosophy has real value for the education of the young, too much philosophy renders one strange and unable to lead a normal kind of life: "However well endowed one may be, if one philosophizes far on into life, one must needs find oneself ignorant of everything that ought to be familiar to the man who would be a thorough gentleman and make a good figure in the world" (484c-d).³ Philosophy renders one ignorant of "human pleasures and desires" and "utterly inexperienced in men's characters" (484d). Philosophers are weak and unable to defend themselves. They must live the life of the "absolute outcast" and are consigned to occupy "empty halls" (486c-d). Most brutally, Callicles describes the philosopher as someone who "must cower down and spend the rest of his days whispering in a corner with three or four lads, and never uttering anything free or high spirited" (485d).

The exclusion of this prominent instance of shaming within the *Gorgias* in an essay devoted to the salutary benefits of shame within the *Gorgias* is more than a little odd. After all, if shame has such positive potential as Tarnopolsky claims, then an opportunity for exploring shame should not be avoided or denied but be confronted and addressed.⁴ The key question, however, is not whether Tarnopolsky's exclusion of Callicles' shaming of Socrates is peculiar but whether it is illuminatingly so. When a philosophical essay on the virtue of shame totally avoids and circumvents any discussion of the shaming of philosophy, might it be appropriate to speak of a kind of repression at work? And if so, what would such a repression conceal? Another way of putting this is that the ultimate justification for taking Callicles' shaming of philosophy seriously is that a confrontation with this shame would produce—like Socrates' shaming of Callicles—a moment of recognition in which consciousness is heightened, the sense of possibility altered, and a repressed cognitive content productively brought to the fore. I think Callicles' shaming of philosophy can be said to have these qualities. As a way to demonstrate this, consider

first the one instance where Tarnopolsky does address Callicles' shaming of Socrates, if only to dismiss it:

The tyrannical democrat Callicles tells Socrates, "It is fine to philosophize, i.e. to refute and be refuted, when one is a youth, but this activity ought to be left behind when one enters politics" (485a1-b2). It is Callicles' fantasy that a person could learn everything as a child so that he would never again have to endure the pain of separation from his community or his own infantile omnipotent self. I follow Plato in assuming that no good democratic [person] would want to be the parent, friend, or political partner of such a person.⁵

It is highly revealing that Tarnopolsky discredits Callicles for infantile fantasies of omnipotence. This theme reappears throughout the essay. Tarnopolsky argues that infantile omnipotence is the reason Callicles is shameful (since tyranny is interpreted as precisely such a fantasy) and the psychological block that prevents the recognition of shame (since it is childish and omnipotent to be unable to admit shortcoming). Furthermore, the hegemonic power of the normal is linked to a kind of infantile omnipotence.⁶ But Callicles' shaming of Socrates, which Tarnopolsky elects not to consider, is grounded on the very same accusation! Philosophy is described precisely as a nostalgic longing for infantile omnipotence. Philosophy is for children. It is like "pretty toys" (486c). Adults who continue to partake in philosophy resemble "those who lisp or play tricks" (485b). Just as the precocious child who "talks distinctly" is nauseating, so too is a philosophizing adult "ridiculous and unmanly" and "deserving of a whipping" (486b-c). When carried into adulthood, philosophy "distorts with a kind of boyish travesty" (485e) souls of an otherwise noble nature. More deeply, the Socratic project can be said to partake in an infantile fantasy of omnipotence insofar as the objects of its search—the highest things (*ta megista*), that is, universal virtue—constitute nothing less than a complete wisdom that would enable a mastery of the moral world.⁷ To be sure, Socrates never believes himself to have attained this wisdom, but this failure in no way impedes the ambition or audacity of his investigations. He never despairs that an all-powerful morality is completely out of reach.

Moreover, just as infantile omnipotence defines both the nature of Callicles' superficial desires (the life of the tyrant) and his inability to admit his real shame in the face of them, so too is Socrates' infantilism manifested not only in his lust for supreme virtue but also in his own incapacity to feel shame for this kind of pursuit. Here it is important to recognize that what ignites Callicles' ire is not simply a desire to expose Socrates—to himself and to the public—as a ridiculous person but a frustration that Socrates lacks a sense of the ridiculous: *that he is immune to shame*. Callicles' rhetorical question—"Does it not seem to you disgraceful to be in the state I consider

you are in, along with the rest of those who are ever pushing further into philosophy?" (486a)—is at once a shaming of Socrates and a frustration that Socrates does not feel shame. Tarnopolsky ventures toward this admission in a footnote, acknowledging, "We never see Socrates squirm or blush in the Platonic dialogues," only to then downplay it.⁸ But Callicles is clearly correct to raise the issue of Socrates' incapacity for shame. Socrates' profession of ignorance (which in my view Tarnopolsky incorrectly interprets as an openness to shame) actually preempts the possibility of being shown to be in error by his interlocutors. Moreover, everything we have reason to believe about the personality of the historical Socrates—his characteristic good cheer, his mocking indifference when sentenced to death by his fellow citizens, his self-imposed poverty—suggests an almost inhuman indifference and, with it, an immunity to shame.⁹

If Tarnopolsky ignores the fact that Socrates, the hero of her illustration about the virtue of shaming, is unable to experience shame, her own analysis of the dynamics of shame nonetheless explains the basis for his immunity. Socrates lacks an ideal "other" in relation to whom he might experience a momentary de-identification and, from this, shame. As Socrates says famously in the *Gorgias*, he would rather "have any number of people disagreeing with me and contradicting me, than that I should have internal discord and contradiction in my own single self" (482c). This is usually taken as an admirable expression of conscience and as a commitment to logical consistency. But if Tarnopolsky is right that the salutary, transformative potential of shame inheres in a relation to the "other," then Socrates' extreme independence of mind precludes him from the possibility of self-criticism and moral development borne from shame. Indeed, as he is described by both Plato and Xenophon, Socrates' character appears utterly fixed and permanent—a sage whose moral perfection renders further development unnecessary. Without an ideal "other," without shame, Socrates is bereft of his own moments of recognition.¹⁰

What ultimately matters, of course, is not whether Socrates should feel ashamed before Callicles but whether we—the reader, the philosophers and political theorists of today—should feel ashamed when reading the *Gorgias*. Tarnopolsky repeats Socrates' immunity to shame when she declines to pursue Callicles' shaming of Socrates. My sense, however—and indeed the experience that launches these remarks—is that the *Gorgias* is harder to read for philosophers than for tyrants: that it does elicit shame in the reader/philosopher/political theorist and thus, following Tarnopolsky's argument, ought to contain the possibility of a moment of recognition. Specifically, whereas Callicles' shame momentarily leads him to realize the distinction between himself and his "other" (the tyrant), Callicles' shaming of philoso-

phy momentarily leads readers to recognize a distinction between themselves and Socrates. Either we realize that we cannot live up fully to the ideal of a world-transcending philosopher—that, unlike Socrates, we lack the faith in the “highest things” (e.g., theoretical knowledge of universal virtue) in whose name Socrates can entirely and without doubt disconnect himself from the everyday concerns of wealth, recognition, family, and politics—or we realize that the Socratic model of the philosopher fails to live up to us—that our own philosophizing, conducted with a hard-won postmetaphysical skepticism toward “the highest things,” cannot help but find its own justification in the very spheres of life toward which Socrates is indifferent (the contingent and the local; the economic; the common concerns of commerce, politics, and family) or, more radically, proceed *without a complete faith in its justification, without the certainty that the life of the philosopher is best*. In this lacuna between the classical ideal of the philosopher and the reality of practicing philosophy in the disenchanted contemporary world there is room for shame.

What do we get from facing this shame? What transformative possibilities are opened up from the reader’s recognition that he or she is other than Socrates? There are likely many different answers to this question, but one model appears to have been provided by Plato himself. Plato, after all, was acutely aware that he was not Socrates—that his form of philosophy could not be that of his teacher. Plato, unlike Socrates, taught within an educational institution rather than in the open public, valued his life more than his thought, found the primary vehicle of his expression in writing rather than speaking, and confessed that his first love was for politics rather than philosophy, turning to the latter only when a political career seemed unsafe and impossible.¹¹ These differences enabled Plato to experience what Socrates could not understand: that philosophy could be something about which one might feel ashamed. Perhaps it is out of a sense of shame that Plato remains all but hidden throughout the dialogues, refusing to engage in the direct philosophical discourse of his teacher. In any case, it needs to be recognized that the real source of Callicles’ antiphilosophical diatribe is Plato. This is important because it means that Platonic philosophy, unlike Socratic philosophy, shames *both* the tyrant and the philosopher. Platonic philosophy illustrates that whereas tyranny can be shamed only from without (from the philosopher or moralist), philosophy is capable, perhaps uniquely capable, of bringing about its own shaming. Plato’s artistic, dramatic, and equivocal form of philosophy—in which the enemies of philosophy are included within philosophy—appears as a kind of synthesis where the shame of philosophy can be confronted rather than concealed.

If the consensus offered by Socrates’ shaming of his interlocutors is the consensus between those who profess their ignorance in the search for truth

(i.e., between knowers), Plato's shaming would appear to seek a consensus between truth-seekers (whether successful or unsuccessful) and those uninterested in knowing, thinking, and philosophizing. Callicles suggests the basis for such a consensus. To be sure, Callicles' primary proposal that the life of the mind be limited to youth and then abandoned in adulthood cannot be accepted by Plato, nor by any adult political theorist or philosopher of today. But in one momentary lapse within Callicles' diatribe—an alternate moment of recognition that Tarnopolsky overlooks—a slightly different consensus is proposed by Callicles to Socrates:

[When philosophers] enter upon any private business they make themselves ridiculous, just as on the other hand, I suppose, when public men engage in your studies and discussions, they are quite ridiculous. The fact is, as Euripides has it: "Each shines in that, to that end presses on / Allotting there the chiefest part of the day / Wherein he haply can surpass himself." (484d-e)

Here Callicles is not condemning philosophy but merely rehabilitating the life of the nonthinker, affirming its integrity and seemliness from its devaluation in the hands of Socrates, who unabashedly elevates philosophy as the quest for the "highest things." The suggestion from this brief passage is that Socrates' universalization of the life of the philosopher is just as childish as Callicles' universalization of the everyday and the normal. Difference is real. One must choose and not depend on the universal value of one's choice or disrespect the choice of others. But this consensus depends on a twofold shame: not just the shame of the nonthinker who recognizes that his incapacity to study and explore with intellectual rigor renders him suspect in the philosopher's eyes but also the shame of the philosopher who acknowledges that philosophizing without appeal to transcendent metaphysical values means that the ultimate purpose and justification of these studies and explorations can never be established unequivocally. Philosophy ought not be condemned or discontinued simply for being strange, but neither can its strangeness be interpreted as proof of its superiority vis-à-vis the everyday world from which it differs. To philosophize in a postmetaphysical world means engaging in a practice whose worth, meaning, and social function permanently remain in question—a practice that must either dispense with the myth of its absolute justification or find such justification in the service of the very everyday interests upheld by the Callicleses of the world.

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NOTES

1. Christina Tarnopolsky, "Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato and the Contemporary Politics of Shame," *Political Theory* 32, no. 4 (2004): 479.

2. *Ibid.*, 478.

3. Translations, here and throughout, are from Plato, *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). All citations refer to the Stephanus pages.

4. Despite the vitriol of Callicles' attack, it is impossible to write it off as the ranting of a perverse or evil mind. Callicles, in his own way, participates in the kind of respectful shaming endorsed by Tarnopolsky: he praises the value of philosophy for the young (485c) and he repeatedly insists that he is speaking to Socrates as a well-meaning friend (485e, 486a). Indeed, it is this balanced aspect of Callicles' attack that makes it so potentially devastating.

5. Tarnopolsky, "Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants," 483.

6. *Ibid.*, 482, 483. See, for example, "The Greeks' notion of the tyrant ultimately converges with the modern notion of the 'normal' citizen because both consist of projecting the nostalgic image of infantile omnipotence onto a fantastical 'other' that no mature human being can fully live by" (483).

7. Socrates' linkage of philosophy with "the highest things" occurs prominently in Plato's *Apology*. See, for example, 22d7.

8. Tarnopolsky, "Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants," 494.

9. Accounts of Socrates' good cheer can be found in Xenophon (*Memorabilia*, I.ii.1), Alcibiades' witty encomium of Socrates (*Symposium*, 216e, 219e-220b), and Aristotle (*Posterior Analytics*, 97b16-24). For Socrates' mockery at his own death sentence, see Plato, *Apology*, 36d7.

10. The one obvious exception is the birth of Socrates' passion for philosophy, but this derives not from being shamed but from the very opposite experience of being praised: the Oracle at Delphi's pronouncement of Socrates' status as the wisest person in the world.

11. For Plato's privileging of life over thought and for his initial attraction to politics over philosophy, see "Seventh Letter."

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