Christopher Moore

Introduction
Tarnopolsky argues that the Gorgias articulates three types of shame, doing so as part of its study of Athenian democracy. She then offers up Plato’s analysis of shame to disputants in contemporary debates about shame in, for example, punishment, gay rights, war-making, and policy about economic inequality. How and when might the phenomena of shame—causing people to feel shame, coming to be disposed to feel shame, judging actions to be shameful—belong in a liberal society? Tarnopolsky takes Plato’s story about Socrates, Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, each of whom accuses the other of capitulating to shame or shamelessness, to help us come up with answers.

With her interest in shame in the Gorgias Tarnopolsky joins much recent inquiry. Three decades ago, William Race (1979) surveyed some of the dialogue’s references to shame. Those passages suggested to him that Plato wanted to redeem shame as a term of criticism. Socrates’ contemporaries had worked to empty the experience of its critical bite. They found embarrassment about acting shamefully quite ungrounded and “a stumbling-block to true political power.” The Gorgias shows, however, that some experiences of shame do genuinely indict a person. The shame in discovering one’s false presumptions to knowledge has real diagnostic power.¹

Jessica Moss applied this political lesson to psychology. In a paper published last decade (2005) she linked the question of shame to the puzzles of soul-tripartition.² She had been wondering how the less-than-fully-rational can still be motivated to act virtuously. How could anyone ever turn hedonists away from their unthinking desires? She took the Gorgias to give an answer. That dialogue shows that “spirit” (thumos) is the internalization of social norms. This moldable aspect of everyone’s soul allies with reason. Shame’s task is to get through to the unreasoning part of a person, that which thoughtlessly seeks pleasure.

On Moss’ account, shame can speak to the unreasoning part of a person on the basis of two features. First, shame reacts to broaches to a person’s internalized norms. Second, shame practically sees what’s bad. This perceptual intensity affects the unreasoning part more powerfully than rational judgment or inference could. Such power is important because the unreasoning part bears under a massive force: the enticement of pleasure. Pleasure—the feeling associated with taking something to be good—has tremendous visceral appeal. So appealing is pleasure that it may distract a person from judging whether what is taken to be good actually is good. Shame counters that distraction with something as powerful. Indeed, Socrates believes, shame shines even brighter than pleasure. It not only neutralizes pleasure’s influence; it dredges up one’s deepest beliefs. One’s deepest beliefs, Moss argues

¹ Race 1979, 198, 202.
² Moss 2005.
Socrates believes, are those most likely to be true. Thus shame serves not just to counteract but also to correct. Thus shame, for Socrates in the *Gorgias* taking the form of painful elenchic questioning, serves as a tool of moral persuasion. With it he can try to reach those he could not reach through rational means.

In paper published two years later, drawing again on the *Gorgias*, Moss (2007) worked to explain why it seemed to her that Socrates fails to persuade his hedonistic interlocutors. The earlier paper had already expressed doubts at the power of shame to overcome the grip of pleasure, and thus at Socrates’ confidence in his own method. The incomplete effect on Polus and Callicles had provided the evidence. The later paper tries to give some reasons. The argument is that, according to the Platonic account, reformation of the hedonistic requires paining them. In other words, properly Socratic persuasion must be displeasing. And yet the hedonistic will listen only to that which pleases them. So the hedonistic will not listen to Socrates, and so will not be persuaded by him, and so will not be improved by him. This explanation is distinct from John Heath’s (2005), that a shame-using Socrates failed to improve his neighbors because, humiliating them into silence, he caused them to hate him rather than to want to improve themselves. But both authors take the infliction of psychic pain to be Socrates’ lead practice and also his chief obstacle.

This recent work on shame, especially Moss’s, attempts to do moral psychology. Its explicit approach is to look into the powers of shame, pleasure, and reason, largely by assessing the Platonic Socrates’ practical and theoretical understanding of them. There are, however, two big problems with this work. It distinguishes inadequately between reason and shame and their roles in discussing Plato’s depictions of conversational engagement. It also undersells the range of actions properly considered part of the Socratic practice of persuasion, not excluding his conversation-preserving mechanisms and his dialectically-situated theoretical remarks. This combination of problems makes it hard to know what status to attribute to shame and what benefit to grant to Socrates’ purported deployment of it.

D.B. Futter (2009) has given the clearest published critique of Moss’ 2005 paper. Socrates’ interlocutors, Futter acknowledges, may well have accepted certain premises for reasons connected to actual or prospective feelings of shame. So badly might they have wanted to avoid feeling shame, for example, that they would not say what they otherwise would have preferred to have said, perhaps because of interests in their personal appearance. But, Futter argues, “it is by inference, rather than by shame, that Socrates draws people’s deepest moral convictions to the light” (461). The exchange with Polus, about whether doing wrong is more shameful than suffering it, shows this (475b8-d4). Having gained Polus’ agreement that doing wrong is more shameful than suffering it, Socrates engages Polus in an analytic sequence of questions that concludes that doing wrong is worse than suffering it. “Shame, functioning as a moral sense, may be what secures Polus’s agreement to a crucial premise,” but “the admission that doing injustice is worse than suffering it is forced out of Polus by deliberate and fine-grained inference” (454). Futter and Moss disagree about what counts as shame and what counts as reason. To defend her position

---

about the priority of shame to reason, Moss would need to articulate some criteria for their differentiation. Having read Futter, a reader might even conclude that such priority-claims are logically mistaken. The two concepts might be categorically distinct. Perhaps shame is a pathos or hexis disposing a person to accept something with less skepticism; reason is the phenomenon whereby one belief influences, in accordance with certain patterns, the acceptance of another belief.

If shame and reason differ qualitatively, then moral-psychological investigations into shame must look beyond the emotion or disposition’s painful and deep-belief-revelatory qualities. Analysis of Socratic practice must focus on the sorts of admission that play the practical roles Socrates seeks. This demands a broader research question: what exactly does Socrates do to get people to acknowledge their ignorance, decide to engage in further conversation, and adopt certain conscious norms and values, and why would these methods work?

A fresh start on the question about shame would have us think about how shame comes up in the Gorgias. In that dialogue, shame is thematized in two main ways: as allegations of its use, and as part of an argument for the badness of doing injustice. So there is an argumentative-practical side—conversationally-situated claims that shame is happening—and a practical-theoretical side—conversationally-situated claims about the nature of shame. One must observe the differences here, and also strive to read them together. But the distinction between claims about use and claims about nature is not the only important distinction. Equally important, or perhaps even more given its relative neglect in the history of research on shame in Plato is the distinction between description and evaluation.

Consider shame as a descriptive term. One might wonder which techniques Socrates uses when talking to people. Does he use rely solely tricks to cause them to feel or worry about feeling shame, or does he cause them to make inferences from premises acceded to out of shame, or does he not intentionally depend on the experience of shame at all? Answers to these questions tell us what Socrates does in terms of a certain moral-psychological vocabulary we use (or have imported from our reading of the Greek). Being able to describe Socratic activity allows us to pose further questions: its sources, its justifications, its hopes, its variety, and its limitations.

Now consider shame as an evaluative term. Whenever reading a Platonic dialogue, whatever a reader’s particular interests, one wonders about the validity or soundness of the inferences Socrates brings an interlocutor to make. Granting that Socrates led someone through an argument, do we think the argument warrants rational assent? To allege that someone was shamed into some agreement suggests it does not warrant such assent. It suggests that agreement was won illicitly. Some internal compulsion caused a person to accept what does not, from a normative logical perspective, deserve acceptance. From this perspective, to say that Socrates shamed Polus into accepting that doing injustice is worse than suffering it is to call this argument invalid. Polus accepted it despite its invalidity. That acceptance of what would, under normal conditions, not be accepted requires an explanation. The powerful feeling of shame is the (partial) explanation, or even partial excuse, for the unexpectedness of the acceptance (and not for the acceptance itself).
A recent paper by Rebecca Bensen Cain (2008) operates from this evaluative perspective. She agrees with Callicles that Socrates played on Polus’ sense of shame when he brought Polus to give up the view that suffering injustice is worse than doing it (482d8-e2). Socrates argued fallaciously, and so Polus should not have accepted it. That he did anyway causes us to say Socrates shamed Polus into accepting it. It is like the exclamation point in algebraic chess notation, an evaluative remark. Defending the claim that Socrates shamed Polus requires Bensen Cain to analyze the argument, not to reconstruct emotional affect or Socrates’ use of shame. In analyzing the argument, Bensen Cain contributes to a long literature. This literature is full of controversy about the way the argument is invalid, if it is at all, and if it is, why Socrates would use it.

Bensen Cain’s argument comes out clearly when contrasted with Curtis Johnson’s (1989). Polus’ downfall comes from accepting a chain of reasoning that concludes that what is shameful (namely, doing wrong) is bad. This acceptance contradicts his earlier avowal, that suffering wrongdoing is bad, or at any rate more bad than doing it. What contributes to something’s shamefulness? To secure the contradiction, Socrates needs Polus to accept that what is shameful is bad. According to Johnson, Polus is unlikely to assert this directly. So, he argues, Socrates shifts the discussion to to aischron’s putative opposite, to kalon. Socrates analyzes to kalon, “the fine” or “the beautiful,” as either “the useful,” “the pleasurable,” or both. This is an interesting analysis. But when talking about “the useful,” Socrates slips freely into talk of “the beneficial” and “the good” as well, using the three terms synonymously. This allows Socrates to win Polus’ agreement that what is finer is either more good (not just more useful or more beneficial) or more pleasurable. And so, if opposites have strictly analogous properties, what is more shameful is either worse (rather than merely more useless or more harmful) or more painful. Since Polus already agreed that the shameful is not more painful, he must allow that it is worse.

Whereas Johnson locates the invalidity of Socrates’ argument in its equivocation between the shameful’s opposites, Bensen Cain finds it in Socrates’ use of inconsistent concepts of shame. When comparing the shamefulness of doing and suffering injustice, Socrates refers to a “conventional,” “moral” term. In this respect, Bensen Cain writes, “an act is morally shameful, in the conventional sense, if it is the object of other people’s moral approval” (219). But when defining shame in terms of pain or harm or both, Socrates is using a “natural,” “nonmoral” term (221). So though Socrates gets Polus to assent to contradictory statements involving the term “shame,” because the interlocutors use the term “shame” ambiguously in the two cases, the statements only appear to contradict. Thus Socrates’ seeming victory is not an actual victory.

After establishing that Socrates got Polus to assent to an invalid argument, Bensen Cain explains why Socrates would argue fallaciously. Johnson (following Callicles) claimed that Plato wants to show “Socrates’ superiority in speech and argument over others who are known as experts in speech” (197). Bensen Cain argues instead that Socrates wants to parody the unscrupulous rhetoric of sophists. This would give Polus a taste of his own

---

5 This argument is in line with Archie 1984.
medicine. What is that medicine? Dubious argumentation that people nevertheless accept. To give Polus that lesson, Socrates needs to do what he can to get him to accept his dubious argument. In this case, he relies on Polus’ reluctance to claim that doing injustice is honorable. Polus is ashamed to admit it. But Polus’ particular emotion is only instrumental to Socrates’ purpose. Were Socrates willing to sacrifice the provocative connection between being shamed and talking about shame, he could presumably have incited other logic-muddying emotions with equivalent effect.

Moss’ position about Socratic shaming does not seem keyed to questions about Socrates’ use of invalid argument. Moss can try to explain why Socrates would appeal to shame, considered descriptively as a tool in Socrates’ quiver: it is to speak to Polus’ unreasoning part. But she would have a harder time explaining why Socrates would use invalid argumentation. Moss would have to say, it seems, that only by using an invalid argument could Socrates activate Polus’ sense of shame. Defending this view would be difficult.

The works on shame in the Gorgias mentioned above merely sample a large literature. (None of the works cited in this review are cited by Tarnopolsky.) They prompt some questions in ancient philosophy that range beyond inquiry into a certain feeling. How should we talk about interlocutors’ propensity to follow along with Socrates’ questions? What accounts for people’s concern for consistency? How might we interpret the acceptance of arguments we have diagnosed as fallacious? Into which categories should we classify the reactions people have to what is considered bad?

These questions develop Race’s original one, about how the rhetoric of “shame” might retain its critical sharpness. They may also augment Moss’ more general question about the nature of Socrates’ life project, how Socrates can engage with people who do not already have the philosophical virtues. We have to wonder how Socrates, and thus we as teachers and citizens, could and can overcome our interlocutors’, students’, and neighbors’ other interests and encourage them to think about the right sorts of things and develop the right sorts of virtues.

The question of shame is not a narrow question of the philosophy of emotion. It is not just about a particular psychological event, a rhetorical tool, or a part of the soul. What is it a question about? Even restricted to the context of Plato’s Gorgias, we might wonder about the following:

1. Assume that Socrates wants people to acknowledge their failures and then continue the discussion in a salutary way. How does he get them to feel ashamed at their badness but not so humiliated that they leave in a huff or blame him rather than themselves for their frustrations? How does Socrates (i) get people to answer as he wants them to, (ii) rely on these instances of answering to get some self-knowledge,

---

6 The book’s official publication date was May 2010, and the McGill website lists the manuscript as being accepted in 2006.
(iii) use this self-knowledge to want to improve themselves, and (iv) have faith that conversational engagement with Socrates will aid in this self-improvement?

2. What role do charges of “you (merely) shamed him” play in negotiating conversations? What are the usual effects of such pronouncements?

3. Aristotle demotes the disposition to shame from the realm of virtues because, in contrast to courage and generosity and friendship which are good when confronting unavoidable difficult situations, shame-proneness is good only in response to voluntary bad actions. A good person may have to confront difficult situations, but should never have done bad voluntarily. In the Charmides, Socrates gains Charmides’ assent that, unlike virtue, shame is sometimes inappropriate. So if Socrates thinks that the disposition to shame is not always a disposition to virtue, what does he think the relationship between shame and virtue is?

4. Plato and Aristotle wrote as if the disgraceful is the opposite of the fine, and shame the opposite of admiration (i.e., the experience of valuation). Might an analysis of disgrace and shame derive immediately from an analysis of fineness and admiration, or does the negative quality and attitude require independent inquiry?

5. Does the Gorgias deal with shame in any importantly different way than the Charmides, in which shame is both a matter of discussion and of drama? What about compared to the Phaedrus, Apology, and Republic? Would differences show that Socrates treats the topic differently depending on his interlocutors and the conversation topic, or that Plato wants to depict a range of reactions to (suspicions of) its occurrence?

Future work on shame in the Gorgias will have to address the earlier questions, these ones, and whatever else might allow the reader to see the significance of careful exegesis and interpretation of Plato’s writings about shame.

*Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants*

Tarnopolsky wants to know when shame is appropriate, especially so that we might arbitrate disputes in contemporary politics.

*Introduction*

Tarnopolsky opens her book, in the meandering Introduction, with a sweeping dialectic. Starting with a casually wide use of “shame,” one that includes stigmatization and humiliation, she says that “shame is a peculiar emotion.” It may help policing boundaries between self and other, but it serves as much to exclude people from the public realm. Thus many political theorists condemn shame. They do so both as a reaction to shame’s isolating effect and to other theorists’ vaunting of shame as protecting communal values. Plato knew, however, that “no emotion is a virtue in moral and political life,” even if all “have the

8 Such work is in progress by, for example, Christopher C. Raymond at Texas and J. Clerk Shaw at Tennessee.
possibility of becoming an integral part of our democratic virtues or vices.” Tarnopolsky turns to Plato to resolve some of the contemporary debate by see how he shows how shame can be good or bad.

This debate is somewhat factitious, based on widely divergent uses of a term. This means that the close analysis Plato could provide does not seem the first resource a contemporary commentator would need. Simply getting clear about what people really disagree about—the use of punishments that intend to humiliate the convict, for example, or the regulation of sexual activity—and what aspect of the emotion or disposition is being praised or worried about, would seem by far the most important.

It is also not clear why one should turn first to the complex works and interpretative problems due to Plato. She ignores the simple line that Aristotle takes in *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.9. The implication there seems to be that if an experience of shame really is responding to one’s recognition of having done something legitimately disgraceful, then it is better than nothing. Presumably there would be a bad excess relative to the mean of shame-prone-ness. This might involve being overly disposed to feeling shame, or feeling shame about inappropriate things or at inappropriate times. The instances of shame resulting from being extremely shame-prone would trouble us in the same way that instances of cowardice or prodigality do. We could also make sense of the ambiguity when we evaluate the shame an adult feels: good, on the one hand, that he recognizes the disgrace; bad, on the other hand, that he did what led to such disgrace.

An excellent new study, *In Defense of Shame* (2012), clarifies much of the rhetoric of shame without reading either Plato or Aristotle. It focuses on inconsistencies in the psychological, sociological, and philosophical literature about the attitudes, actions, and beliefs consequent to occurrent experiences of shame; the benefits and troubles associated with people with clinically-measured high propensities to feel shame; and the sorts of self-appraisal causally linked to moments of shame initiated by a range of factors. Julien Deonna, Raffaele Rodogno, and Fabrice Teroni, the study’s authors, both engage in careful conceptual analysis and review previous studies’ methodology. They give, repeat, explicate, and defend a definition of shame: “In shame, we apprehend a trait or an action of ours that we take to exemplify the polar opposite of a self-relevant value [i.e., a value that we take to impose a practical demand on us] as indicating our incapacity to exemplify this... value even to a minimal degree” (102). Shame is good when our apprehension of our incapacity motivates us to improve ourselves. Shame is bad when we are wrong about what we should value, wrong about how our actions reflect our abilities, or wrong about what we should do in response to our perceived moral poverty. Shame considered as humiliation or stigmatization is bad in whatever respects humiliation or stigmatization are rightly considered bad.

The appeal of writing about Aristotle or contemporary work does not detract from an author’s reasons to write about Plato, since Plato has strengths these other sources lack. Plato’s nuanced depictions of shame show how talking about shame and manipulating people’s dispositions to shame (that is, their norms of properly self-constituting behavior) play crucial roles in civic maturation and political participation. Socrates’ discussions of
shame, even if oblique, relate the disposition and emotion to important virtues, aspects of the good life, and thoughtfulness itself, in ways that Aristotle glosses over and that contemporary discussion may not feel prepared to go.

Still, clarification of the problem should precede dramatic descriptions of conflict or appeal to Plato’s insight, and Tarnopolsky did not take this route. Naturally, talking about shame is hard: there are so many “kinds.” There is the initial division between the disposition to feel shame, the feeling of shame itself, and making others feel shame (153). There are the opposites: being shameless, being unashamed, and avoiding those actions that would make one feel ashamed. There are the two Greek words, aidôs and aischune, and the related adjective aischros, disgraceful. There is the close connection between feeling ashamed (σκέψεωσθαι), being bashful (σκέγνυντηλός), and being humiliated. Recent commentators have proposed distinctions between “retrospective” and “prospective” shame; “concealing” and “transformative” shame; “primitive” and “constructive” shame; and “stigmatizing” and “reintegrative” shame. To this Tarnopolsky adds three kinds of shame (“flattering,” “Socratic respectful,” and “Platonic”); two moments of shame (“the moment of recognition” and “the moment of reaction”); two actual or imputed “others” causative of the shame (“individual” and “collective”); and two functions of shame (an “inward” diagnosis of the sufferer’s commitments and an “outward” assessment of the “moral truth contained in popular views”) (57-60, with n. 8). All the same, the Introduction—like the rest of the book—does not take enough efforts to ensure dialectical clarity from the beginning.

**Chapter One: Shame and Rhetoric in Plato’s Gorgias**

The first chapter has two goals: to claim that there are two Socrateses in the Gorgias, and to disprove the interpretation that in the Gorgias Plato “allegedly attack[ed] all forms of emotion, rhetoric, and persuasion.” Achieved, these goals together would allow Tarnopolsky to claim that Plato critiques Socrates’ method of engagement and introduces a genuinely useful form of speaking, what she calls “Platonic shaming.” The second of the goals should hardly be controversial by 2011. But the first one, on which much of the detail of the book’s argument depends, is highly problematic. Tarnopolsky does not prove that there are two distinct Socrateses, and by assuming it she severely limits her ability to make sense of the broad range of Socratic abilities.

There is one Socrates in the first part of the dialogue, a Socrates quite similar to the Socrates in what Tarnopolsky calls the “Group 1a: Socratic/Elenchic Dialogues.” At some indistinct point in the dialogue, Socrates is gradually replaced by a new one, this one a mouthpiece of Plato in a way categorically different than the earlier one was. Tarnopolsky says that the latter Socrates criticizes the earlier Socrates’ mode of shaming and presents a new and better mode of shaming. The earlier Socrates shamed his interlocutors in a way that caused too much pain (the problem Moss and Heath accepted) and not enough help going forward (a problem similar to the one raised by Clitophon’s eponymous critic). The later one saw these problems and tried out a new kind of shaming. An example of this new mode is Socrates’ recitation of the judgment myth: a presentation of pleasurable spectacle, memorable imagery, and beneficial models.
Tarnopolsky presents the form of shame proffered by this second Socrates, a form she calls Platonic, as a form salutary for democracy. This kind of shame “give[s] the audience a picture of the new way of life that would open up to them, if they were to transform themselves in accordance with the insights that come to light in the shaming situation” (138); it “present[s] these radically new ideas on the basis of older, more traditional motifs ... [to] meet or greet the audience on their own grounds” (139); and it “reflects [Plato’s] insight that... a certain amount of pleasure might also have its place in the curative aspects of a noble rhetoric” (140).

The primary evidence for this two-Socrates view is that the *Gorgias* is a transitional dialogue (35-38; cf. 135-6), that is, a dialogue written between an earlier “Socratic” period and a middle non-“Socratic” period. Her argument from scholarly consensus cites no literature later than 1992 or any literature skeptical of this dating or of dating in general.9

The argument that *Gorgias* has an earlier Socrates, to whom “Socratic respectful shame,” i.e., non-Platonic shame, is ascribed, depends on two considerations. The first is that the *Gorgias* is a direct rather than narrated dialogue; the second is that there is a “significant amount of elenchic exchange.” Neither is a reliable point. Of the nine “Socratic/Elenchic Dialogues” she lists, only five are direct (*Protagoras* is a hybrid).10 And all the “Transitional” dialogues except *Menexenus* have significant elenchic exchange, as do a number of the “Middle” dialogues.

The argument that *Gorgias* has a later Socrates, one who “espouses” things Plato believes but that the earlier Socrates would either not have believed or not have espoused, depends on a broader set of considerations: the *Gorgias* contains a myth, as the *Republic, Phaedo,* and *Phaedrus* do, and this myth speculates about future life; there is Pythagorean material, as in *Phaedo* and *Meno*; and the dialogue’s “doctrine of virtue as a kind of grace or order” requires partition of the soul (characteristic of Middle dialogues) and is incompatible with Socratic intellectualism. Unfortunately, it is not clear what Tarnopolsky means by “espouses,” since it is not obvious that Socrates asserts much at all in the *Gorgias*.11 She admits that when Socrates introduces what could be taken as doctrine, he disclaims authority, and this “suggests that Plato is explicitly signaling to the reader that these are new doctrines that were not held by the historical Socrates.” It would seem plausible to conclude that they are not held by the character Socrates either, and therefore not asserted by Plato—who is choosing to write about his character Socrates.

But these charges against Tarnopolsky’s dating are moot. The dialogue’s transitional status is irrelevant unless the transition happened, not just over some period of Plato’s career, but *in the middle* of Plato’s writing of the dialogue. Tarnopolsky assumes that Plato wrote the first part of the dialogue in the time of his life during which he wrote about a historical

10 Thesleff 2003’s claim that *Gorgias* was originally written as in narrated form and only later rewritten in direct form makes judgments based on formal structure relatively valueless.
11 Cf. Peterson 2011
Socrates, and wrote the second part at a time in his life when he did not do so (and did not revise the first half after making this radical departure). This is an implausible and unsubstantiated assumption. Worse, Tarnopolsky assumes that Plato would significantly change the character of his protagonist in the course of the several-hour action of the dialogue, without depicting any cause of this change. It is preferable not to explain variety in a dialogue by appeal to external causes (e.g., an author’s mercurial commitments) before trying to explain it by appeal to the drama and discussion itself.

The consequence of these incautious assumptions is that Tarnopolsky has not established the existence of two Socrateses. This does not undermine her remaining claims about, for example, Platonic shame, since aspects of them can be attributed to the character Socrates, and thereby to Plato. But it limits how much Tarnopolsky can learn from this dialogue about Socrates. By dividing Socrates’ actions into two distinct and contentious quantities, Tarnopolsky cannot see what a practice that involves all of those actions might amount to. Neither of the two Socrateses, with their respective uses and attitudes toward shame, will be as interesting or flexible as the one that Plato actually depicts.

**Chapter Two: Shaming Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles**

The second chapter reconstructs Socrates’ exchanges with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, each of which elicits shame. The reconstructions challenge the view that shame plays the same role in each exchange. They also question the assumption that shame has only two possible effects, forcing a person either to admit what they believe or to dissemble to save face.

Polus says that Gorgias contradicted himself because of his sense of shame. (Tarnopolsky reminds us that we do not see whether Gorgias feels shame because he contradicted himself; Polus interrupts before Gorgias reacts.) Gorgias said out of concern for his reputation what he did not believe. His insincerity prevents him from making any argumentative contributions. But he stays with the conversation, later asking clarifying questions and encouraging Callicles’ participation. Tarnopolsky concludes that Gorgias experiences a salutary form of shame. It is not very clear what she means; presumably it is that by getting Gorgias to speak insincerely, he has contradicted himself, and this self-contradiction has opened Gorgias’ mind. But Tarnopolsky treats this exchange too briefly to establish how we can say “shame” as the beneficial propaideutic function (rather than some other moment of the conversational interaction), or whether Gorgias really spoke insincerely about his teacherly beliefs. She has shown instead that personality determines the usefulness of talking with Socrates.

Unlike the refutation of Gorgias, the refutation of Polus does not obviously show dissembling, but neither does it show the unearthing of the young man’s mostly deeply-held beliefs. It reveals instead, Tarnopolsky argues, “genuine perplexity” and dynamic self-

---

12 Tarnopolsky gives odd formal outlines of the first two (62, 68-9).
13 Doyle 2010 decides that Gorgias doesn’t really even know what he thinks here, and so can’t be called insincere or sincere; Barney 2010a, with a careful analysis of Gorgias’ argument, comes to a similar conclusion.
discovery (66-7). The role of shame differs, too; rather than saying the sense of shame prevented Polus from saying something, Tarnopolsky accepts Callicles’ contention that Socrates shamed Polus into accepting an logically-unacceptable argument. In evaluation of Callicles’ contention, she focuses on three purportedly fallacious maneuvers, choosing them from the literature of the last several decades.

First, Socrates appears to equivocate about the perspective from which judgments of an act’s shamefulness are made, between the agent and a bystander (69). Tarnopolsky observes that in fact this ambivalence has some suggestive value, since in our experience of shame, the deliberator and the observer could be the same person: we judge our actions as potentially shameful or not in terms of what an external third-party might think. When Polus misses the ambiguity, he reveals his tendency to think about outside authority instead of his own experience (72-4).

Second, Socrates uses an uneasy medley of examples when identifying the opposite of the disgraceful as the fine (to kalon) and that which is beneficial or pleasant or both. He moves indiscriminately between material and non-material goods. Whereas aesthetically fine material objects seem to confer pleasure or benefit to the spectator, fine (non-material) laws, practices, and sciences seem not to confer pleasure or benefit in the same way (68-71). Tarnopolsky says this ambivalence reveals the value to Polus even of non-material goods. “Polus wants the esteem and honor that he gets from gratifying his audience more than he wants the goods he would obtain through killing and torturing them, but he has not fully reconciled these desires in his own life.” Polus’ experience of shame, by which Tarnopolsky apparently means perplexity, could start him toward self-knowledge and Socratic goodness: “His own life does (at least weakly) embody the Socratic principle that doing injustice is worse than suffering it because Polus himself doesn’t do the very acts of injustice which he attributes to the tyrant” (76).

This discussion is the only place in the book Tarnopolsky brings up the issue of the fine (to kalon) and the good (to agathon). One wonders whether her line of thinking would benefit from recent work distinguishing the fine from the good. Tarnopolsky acknowledges that questions of attractiveness and gratification—in the context of cosmetics, pastries, and the tyrannical power that appeals to Polus—are at the heart of the Gorgias’s inquiry. But she, like most other authors on shame, doesn’t pursue the issue with the rigor found in the seemingly more austere and less psychological analysis of the positive evaluative terms.15

Third, Socrates uses for the only time in the corpus, so say commentators, a disjunctive definition of shamefulness and fineness (71). This gambit shows that the shameful and the fine are not always virtues; they are only if what is pleasurable is also beneficial (77-8).

The reading of the Polus exchange is clever, and floats some nice ideas about why Socrates goes about refuting Polus in the way he does. Unfortunately, it does not really decide whether Socrates in fact has argued invalidly and unjustifiably, per Callicles’ contention.

14 Of course, Johnson 1989 and Bensen Cain 2008 think this is not really a problem.
The section on Callicles’ shame is the book's most rewarding section because it deals with the relationship between a sequence of attempted refutations. There is no analysis whether Socrates argued illicitly, but the implication is that Callicles, like Gorgias and Polus before him, benefits from his feelings of shame evoked here.

Socrates’ first attempt to undermine Callicles’ hedonism, the leaky jar-asceticism gambit, does not work. Since “Callicles does not honor ascetics, ... he will not feel ashamed to learn that his hedonistic thesis is inconsistent with such a life” (80). Since he does honor “courageous warriors and political leaders,” Socrates next tries to show the incompatibility between those lives and the shameful life hedonism entails, as the life of the catamite would show. But this second attempts fails as well. Callicles cannot acknowledge defeat because, although he would feel ashamed to claim that the catamite lives well, he would feel just as ashamed to lose in discussion to Socrates. Callicles withdraws his hedonism thesis only once he sees that it would require him to believe that “cowards are actually better individuals than courageous men” (83). Presumably this causes him to feel shame, and he wants to stop talking. But Socrates has not gotten himself into a dead end. Callicles’ expression of shame actually reveals, as Tarnopolsky points out, the confused views of many Athenians. After all, a person feels shame having internalized the views of an actual or imaginary audience, and large swathes of society may have internalized the same views.

Chapter Three: Plato on Shame in Democratic Athens

Athenian society already practices a form of Socratic shame, Tarnopolsky claims. Its institution of parrhêsia, speaking frankly to authorities despite the risk of harm, involves a hope those authorities will feel ashamed. Socrates engages in a sort of parrhêsia when he aims to get his interlocutors to see the shameful tyrannical image they project for themselves. Plato’s interest in Socratic shame, then, reveals his commitment both to democratic procedure and to good democratic character.

Since many people have already argued that Plato critiques democracy immanently, as a willing participant, the value of Tarnopolsky's contribution depends on further insight into the puzzles of parrhêsia in democratic activity. But this section includes no new research on parrhêsia. It rehashes the standard sources—Foucault, Monoson, Saxonhouse—and mentions no instances of “parrhêsia” outside Plato, or indeed outside Gorgias, and even for the six instances in the Gorgias, does not treat them systematically. It leaves some crucial philosophical work undone. The justification for parrhêsia is that you say what you sincerely believe and ignore the consequences. But to make sense of the esteem the institution garnered one must be able to answer the following: Why should the parrhêsiastês have confidence in her pleadings? How can she differentiate herself from

16 This section would be much richer if it dealt with Woolf 2000.
17 It lacks Markovits 2008, a very useful source, especially 48-61 (on the range of modes of democratic accountability), 65-73 (on parrhêsia itself), and 74-80 (on problems with the right of parrhesia); Roberts 1982, on other democratic institutions, like dokimasia and euthunai which Tarnopolsky mentions, potentially connected to shame; and the collection of papers in Sluiter and Rosen 2004. See now also Foucault 2011.
ignorant complainers or cynical sycophants? How does she learn the most effective way to address her chosen authority?

In the middle of this chapter (101-104), and for the second of three times in this book (also 84-88, 153-160), Tarnopolsky gives a partial analysis of shame, on each occasion spending much of the discussion dealing with the topic in what she always later acknowledges to be an overly vague manner.18

The chapter ends with a definition of “flattering shame,” the worst of the three forms of shame Tarnopolsky takes the Gorgias to thematize. It is the desire to avoid a bad reputation at all costs. Its price is the failure to benefit others, since doing so may take paining them and suffering blowback. The oddness of the term Tarnopolsky uses here, “flattering shame,” is finally explained: it “does not refer to the occurrent emotion produced in the audience or experienced by the orator, but rather to the disposition or sense of shame that reciprocally motivates both the audience and orator to avoid ever saying anything that might be painful to their respective audience, even when this involves the truth” (106).

Chapter Four: Socratic vs. Platonic Shame

Having articulated the bad kind of shame, Tarnopolsky proceeds to put the two other kinds of shame in hierarchy. The middling variety, “Socratic respectful shame,” is dialogical, critical, and dialectic. Its vehicle is always “elenchus.” It brings out an interlocutor’s inabilities and inconsistent-beliefs, is painful, and has the goal of rectifying his perspective. The best variety, Platonic shame, treated as the outcome of Plato’s long reflections on the weaknesses of the Socratic model, is, surprisingly enough, monological, non-critical, and image-presenting. Its vehicle is often traditional myth-telling. It gives a pleasing vision of a possible post-shamed self (116).19 The myth puts into imagistic form the doctrinal outcome of Socrates’ elenchic arguments, in particular about what kind of life one ought to live.

Socratic elenchus is too weak, Tarnopolsky argues: it lacks “the power to fully cure and turn many souls” (125-6). She gives four reasons for her indictment. First, limitations in an interlocutor’s soul prevent proper uptake of Socrates’ refutative treatment. Second, whereas elenchus shows people their contradictions, it does not show them how to change their lives or provide a new ideal. Third, elenchus is too harsh. Fourth, elenchus is not memorable. This four-pronged attack is nevertheless a hasty indictment of what many see as the heart of the Socratic project. None of Tarnopolsky’s charges stand up to scrutiny.

18 Even at 151, Tarnopolsky is asking questions like “Do we need shame at all? Or should we wage an all-out war on shame?” Even though she goes to disclaim the usefulness of such general questions, she seems dazzled by them. At 152, Tarnopolsky remarks: “In fact, I have intentionally not provided a definition of what I mean by shame in the previous paragraphs because I wanted to illustrate the many (and perhaps inexhaustible?) ways in which we use ‘shame’ in English and in contemporary debates about this emotion”; but by this point three-quarters into the book, this is unnecessary.

19 The argument for the positive effect of images depends on citations to Danielle Allen’s “Envisioning the Body of the Condemned: The Power of Platonic Symbols”; it is rather less convincing in this book than it is in Allen’s 2011.
Tarnopolsky's first complaint, like Moss’ and many before them, is that Socrates cannot get everyone into a contradiction that adequately stuns and reforms them. Put more precisely, Plato does not depict Socrates only succeeding in getting his interlocutors into such contradictions. But should we not think that Socrates’ charm and enduring appeal comes from the fact that he neither forces nor manipulates people into talking with him and undergoing examination? He relies on standard conversational means when he endeavors to get his conversation partners into the right state. Maybe it is a false ideal to expect perfect and unanimous conversions from any talking-method. A further problem with Tarnopolsky’s complaint is evidentiary. Plato does not depict everything that happens: we do not see the aftermath of Socrates’ interactions. It would be a surprising method that gets people to change their worldviews in a mere few hours, the elapsed time of the dialogues. That later fifth-century Athenian history records the wayward deeds of Socrates’ interlocutors undercuts Socrates’ method only if one assumes that Socrates succeeds only when he puts people permanently on the path of uncontroversial justice.

The second complaint is that Socratic refutation provides no alternative way to live. This view looks false from three perspectives. Socrates, in his philanthropy and curiosity, models the ideal for all those around. Those partaking in Socratic conversation find that they already have an ideal within, and it is precisely that ideal that Socrates always asks them about and on which he builds the necessity for continued philosophizing. Finally, the engagement itself provides the ideal: listening, reason-providing, effort, stamina

The third complaint is that Socrates’ treatment, his “absolute negativity” (139), is too harsh. Tarnopolsky claims that Socrates does not care adequately for Callicles. Her evidence is Socrates’ calling Callicles a touchstone, “i.e., a worthless metal to measure the world of his own golden soul.” Socrates’ sense of shame “prevents him from ever uttering any pleasantries at all.” Socrates “might well be guilty of failing to acknowledge the experiences or sufferings of his victims in a way that might begin to assuage their pain and perplexity” (138). But regarding the “touchstone” example, Socrates presents himself also as a measure, so Socrates can hardly mean what he says as an insult. In general, this complaint seriously underplays what Socrates is about, the range of actions he engages in. He is not “absolutely negative,” given the range of questions, speeches, and quips he makes in every Platonic dialogue, early or late. That Socrates speaks only painful is disproved by the same texts. He maintains conversations, piques his interlocutors’ interests, asks easy and even gratifying questions, suggests answers that his respondents want readily to accept, identifies and praises what his audience-members care about most deeply so that they build their future practices on their hopes for the identities they already accept. Nicias says that he finds Socratic examination not unpleasant (La. 187e8-188c1); plenty of interlocutors, far from running away from Socrates, beseech him to talk with them again.

---

20 Four times in the book Tarnopolsky quotes Callicles saying that Socrates’ reasoning would “literally turn their worldview upside down” (481c) (68, 118, 137, 168); on the four occasions the “literally” is absurd and does not translate anything from the Greek; but more importantly, we need not think that accepting an inversion of a worldview would take simply being convinced once by Socrates’ arguments.
The fourth complaint is that the results of elenchus will not endure, and that memorable imagery has longer-lasting effects. This is a weak point. To the extent Socrates accepts it, he also suggests going over and over the key parts of conversations. But it is not clear that the hard-to-remember details even matter. The most important outcome is the shameful feeling of self-contradiction or aporia, and these two experiences, I would think, are very easy to remember. The framing-devices of Plato’s dialogues suggest the opposite of what Tarnopolsky claims: Socrates can remember the twists and turns of his conversations (as in the Republic, Charmides, Protagoras, and Theaetetus), as can all those who retell Socratic conversations (in the Symposium, Phaedo, and so on). Indeed, present-day teachers and students can remember passages quite well. This is made so because the refutative conversations aren’t merely logical deductions but sequences of quirky analogies, inferences, and zingers.

Tarnopolsky could admit that she misjudged Socrates’ refutative conversations elenchus but still think that she has found two ways to provoke shame and that Plato prefers the latter. But this view is hermeneutically impoverishing. It prevents us from looking hard enough at the salutary effects of Socrates’ conversational style, a style which might itself include image-making. It prevents us from thinking that Plato might be presenting Socrates as combining a range of activities. This should not be put as Socrates combining the purely negative with something else, but rather as what it is for Socrates to engage in conversation with people is to do all these things.

There are two more problems. It never becomes very clear how Platonic shaming is a way to get people to feel shame. Tarnopolsky speaks of Platonic shame as a way to give people a way to think about themselves. But so that has been the problem with educating people to philosophy the whole time. The other problem is that it is hard to see why Plato would introduce a new pattern of shaming without explicitly overturning an old one.

The chapter ends with a discussion of Socratic irony (harmful) and Platonic irony (better), in terms of Vlastos and Nehamas. The discussion is not compelling given its ignorance of the most important work from the last decade.21

Chapter Five: Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato and the Contemporary Politics of Shame and Civility

What in this chapter concerns Plato mostly repeats what preceded; the new material concerns statements about the social relevance of shame by Michael Warner and Jean Bethke Elshtain. The upshot is the salutary self-knowledge won by good forms of shame. Tarnopolsky ends the chapter by showing how she has used what she has theorized: “I have calmly but passionately tried to respectfully shame Elshtain and Warner by showing them that their disagreements actually occur against a surprisingly similar, albeit weak, background consensus. I hope I have shocked the reader by suggesting that Warner and

Elshtain actually make pretty good, though misrecognized, bedmates on the topic of queer politics” (170).

**Chapter Six: What’s So Negative about the “Negative” Emotions?**
The final chapter argues that “no emotion can simply be classified as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ for democratic politics or legal judgments” (178), mostly by working through Antonio Damasio’s *Descartes’ Error* and Martha Nussbaum’s *Hiding from Humanity*.

The benefits of this book
The role of shame in education, for toddlers, children, and even adult-age college students is a very live question, and Plato’s depictions of Socrates talking with people from pre-adolescence till old-age is perfect for thinking about this. We ought never stop thinking about what will get people to become better citizens, and especially what is the minimal amount of manipulation necessary for the maximum amount of self-motivated reformation. Plato never stopped thinking about this. Tarnopolsky’s book on the “politics of shame,” though lacking in execution, is the kind of project that we need.

The Pennsylvania State University

**Bibliography**


