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Justice, Knowledge and Craft in Plato's *Gorgias*

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At *Gorgias* 460b-c, Socrates advances a brief and troublesome argument that concludes with Gorgias' admission that the orator can never aspire to act unjustly—an admission that contradicts Gorgias' earlier claim (at 457a-c) that orators are quite capable of injustice, and thus results in his final refutation.^[1] Socrates' argument begins with the seemingly trivial principle that a man who has learned a particular subject is the sort of man that the knowledge of this subject makes him (460b6-7). This principle is supported by what appear to be three equally trivial examples drawn from the various crafts: one who has learned carpentry is a carpenter, one who has learned music is a musician, and one who has learned medicine is a doctor. Socrates' ensuing extension of this principle, however, strikes the reader as far from trifling: a man who has learned what is just, he says, *is* a just man (b9-10), who does just things (b12) and necessarily wants to do just things (c1-2). And thus Gorgias, who has already admitted (at 460a) that oratory necessarily involves knowledge of what is just and unjust, is forced to acknowledge that the orator will necessarily be just, doing and wanting to do only just

things.

Commentators on this short passage have long been troubled by what looks to be an obvious disanalogy between the non-moral crafts Socrates initially mentions and the craft of justice. Olympiodorus, lecturing on the *Gorgias* in the 6th century A.D., remarks that we usually do not apply the same standards to doctors and medicine that Socrates here convinces Gorgias must be applied to orators and justice. 'It is worth inquiring,' he quips, 'why the doctor who transgresses his oath and dispenses harmful things is not accused of being a non-doctor, but is a doctor all the same, while the orator who concerns himself with injustice has his credentials questioned.'^[2] Contemporary scholars have found Socrates' use of the craft-analogy in this section no less problematic. E.R. Dodds points out that the step in the argument from the non-moral crafts to the craft of justice involves 'an assumption which Gorgias at once accepts, though to the modern reader it may appear a mere verbal quibble.'^[3] Terence Irwin maintains that the argument is 'illegitimate as it stands' because no support is given for the supposition that justice is a craft like any other, and we in fact have good reason to think otherwise:

We normally suppose that a virtue differs from a craft; a craft is a capacity which may or may not be exercised, while a virtue must, in the right conditions, be exercised. Someone who has learnt carpentry no doubt needed certain desires to acquire his craft; but he may have lost those desires now. If he does not want to make tables when they are needed, but could make them if he wanted to, he is still a skilled craftsman. But a just man is expected not simply to know what would be just to do if he wanted to, but to want to do it when it is needed.^[4]

And in a similar vein, John M. Cooper adequately captures the situation when he writes that readers of this passage 'are left with a strained analogy between knowledge of justice and knowledge of medicine, carpentry,

and music, decked out with an argument of what looks, in the context, simply like an unsupported Socratic dogma about moral knowledge and moral motivation.?[5]

Why does Socrates think that learning the craft of justice is sufficient for being just? Why isn't it rather the case, as Irwin suggests, that just as a person who possesses the craft of carpentry can cease making tables and still be a carpenter, a person who has learned the craft of justice can cease performing just acts and still be a just person? Each of the three contemporary commentators just mentioned offers a different explanation for how this problematic step in Socrates' argument is to be resolved. For Dodds, the Socratic identification of virtue and knowledge would have been far less troubling to the Greeks of his day than it appears to us in ours, and hence we have Gorgias' immediate assent to the claim that one who has learned justice *is* a just man.[6] For Irwin, on the other hand, Gorgias has been given no reason to accept either the view that justice is a craft or that learning this craft will necessarily make one just. Thus he sees Socrates' argument as elliptical, with three suppressed premises, two of which are defended later in the *Gorgias*, and one of which is not defended at all.[7] Cooper, for his part, follows Irwin in the position that the argument is elliptical, and likewise maintains that the questions raised by the argument are explored later in the dialogue, in the debate with Callicles, but nonetheless thinks that Plato does not satisfactorily work out the issues implied by the virtue/craft comparison until Book IV of the *Republic*. [8]

My own view, which I will defend in the following pages, is that the argument at 460b-c, though indeed elliptical, is augmented by Socrates' characterization of craft in the succeeding portions of the *Gorgias*. When one considers the whole of what this dialogue has to offer on the issue of craft, Socrates' thesis that someone who has learned the craft of justice is necessarily just becomes more transparent. However, this is not to say that

his argument subsequently proves to be a successful one. In fact, while I agree with Cooper that the Socratic conception of virtue as craft in this dialogue does in fact anticipate later discussion in the *Republic*, I will make a further case that the argument at 460b-c taken in its own right generates virtually the same paradox that some commentators have found in Plato's conception of justice in Book IV of that work.

From Polus' unintentionally comical speech on craft and experience (448c) to Socrates' novel distinction between crafts and 'knacks' (464b-465d) to Callicles' sly mockery of the ubiquitous Socratic craft-analogy (490d-491a), it is not simply the nature of rhetoric or philosophy that is at stake in the *Gorgias*, but also the nature of craft itself. Throughout the dialogue, we are offered at least seven different features which are meant to characterize craft in general. These features are of varying degrees of importance for understanding Socrates' argument at 460b-c, and I will list them here in order of first appearance in the dialogue, including the previously mentioned principle from the argument itself:

- (1) Each craftsman, if so inclined, could give an account concerning why what his particular craft aims at is the best (452a-d, cf. 512c).
- (2) When the city needs advice about x , it should take this advice from the craft concerned with x (455b-c, cf. 514a-e).
- (3) A non-craftsmen will never be more persuasive about x than a craftsman whose craft is x among those who have knowledge of x (459a, cf. 517d-518a).
- (4) A man who has learned a particular craft is the sort of man this knowledge makes him (460b6-7).
- (5) A craft has an account of the nature of whatever things it applies by which it applies them, and thus is able to state the cause of each thing (465a4-5, cf. 501a).
- (6) Crafts have knowledge of what is good and what is bad, and aim at procuring the good (500b, d).

(7) A craftsman shapes his product, making it organized and orderly (503d-504a).

The first three features are of interest because they not only play a role in Socrates' initial refutation of Gorgias, but also turn up again late in his conversation with Callicles. None of these three attributes can be of much help to us in understanding Socrates' positive conception of the relationship between virtue and craft, however, since each is introduced by Socrates to serve the purely negative task of curbing the false pretensions of rhetoric. He deploys (1) only after Gorgias claims that the speeches of oratory are concerned with the greatest and best of all human pursuits (451d), and then again to criticize Callicles for "glorifying his occupation" (512c). This feature is also amplified by the long story of the helmsman (511c-512b), whose humble and unassuming nature in performing his craft Callicles is encouraged to emulate. Likewise, Socrates employs (2) first to disparage Gorgias' depiction of oratory as the preeminent producer of persuasion in large gatherings (452e, 454b), and then later to question Callicles' attempts to exert his influence on the business of the city (515a). And in the same fashion, (3) is utilized first to undermine Gorgias' assertion that the orator can out-persuade the doctor in questions of medicine (456b-c), and then is reused to censure Callicles' hero-worship of extraordinarily skilled orators such as Pericles and Themistocles. In each of these three cases, then, Socrates' purpose in introducing what is taken to be a feature of craft in general is largely critical. Moreover, each of these features is a description of a practical facet of craft rather than a theoretical characterization of its very nature. For both reasons, these first three attributes of craft can be of little importance for grasping the argument at 460b-c.

The first element of Socrates' positive and theoretical conception of craft occurs in (5) above, wherein

craft, defined in opposition to 'knack,' is that which 'has investigated both the nature of the object it serves and the cause of the things it does, and is able to give an account of each of these?' (501a). What separates the doctor from the pastry-baker, for Socrates, is that the latter has no other recourse than guesswork in exercising his pseudo-craft (cf. 464c), and thus proceeds 'completely irrationally, with virtually no discrimination?' (501b). There is a further suggestion in Socrates' discussion that a person who has only a 'knack' confuses the proper object of his false pursuit with some other, with the result of much confusion to all involved. Sophists and orators, for instance, 'tend to be mixed together as people who work in the same area and concern themselves with the same things. They don't know what to do with themselves, and other people don't know what to do with them?' (465c). The doctor, on the other hand, has a well-defined object of study which he has thoroughly investigated, and thus is able to give some account of why he applies certain treatments and not others to the sick person. But what precisely is involved in giving such an 'account'?' Irwin makes the following comment: 'In demanding a rational account from a craft or science, Socrates relies on a further condition for knowledge besides truth, though it is not explicitly stated before the *Meno* [at 97b-98a].'^[9] On this point I respectfully disagree with Irwin, for although Socrates indeed never presents as broad a theory of an 'account' here as is later given with the *Meno*'s theory of recollection, he nonetheless depicts something of what is involved in the content of such an account in subsequent passages. In uncovering this content, we must examine in turn the last two features of craft listed above.

Hinted at in Socrates' initial craft/knack distinction (464d-465a), and then more fully explored in his discussion with Callicles, is the view that knacks are ignorant of what is good and bad, for they deal only with what is pleasant, whereas crafts have knowledge what is good and bad, and aim at procuring the good (500b, d). Socrates' argument supported by this claim is what concerns us in the attempt to understand the connection he makes in this passage between craft and virtue. He first gets Callicles to agree, contrary to his earlier view that the pleasant and the good are one and the same (495d), that are bad the pleasures that produce what is good are good, and those that produce what is bad (499d). Next Callicles, like Polus before him, concurs with Socrates'

thesis that we should "do all things for the sake of what's good" (499e). But how are we to know which pleasures that we should engage in because they lead us to what is good, and which we should avoid because they bring about what is bad? Socrates' answer is a straightforward one: it requires a craftsman (500a), because only a craftsman possesses such knowledge. Now it is important to note that Socrates countenances not only pleasures and pains of the body, but those of the soul as well (cf. 501b). And consequently, if virtue concerns what is best for the soul, then craft is a necessary condition for virtue.

It is no accident, then, that in the argument at 460b-c Socrates makes the seemingly paradoxical assumption that justice is a craft in precisely the same way that carpentry, music, and medicine are crafts. Yet it is my contention that Plato intends for this assumption to seem paradoxical. One theme in the *Gorgias* is that the Socratic link between craft and virtue is subjected to intense scrutiny, and the elliptical nature of Socrates' final argument against Gorgias draws attention to this fact. In this regard, for instance, Callicles expresses very well what every reader of a Socratic dialogue has probably felt at one time or another: "You simply don't let up," he says to Socrates, "on your continual talk of shoemakers and cleaners, cooks and doctors, as if our discussion were about them!" (491a) And likewise, Plato perhaps intends for his readers to share Polus' bewilderment when Socrates draws parallels between financial management and medicine, on the one hand, and justice on the other, to argue for the position that one who acts unjustly should immediately and voluntarily submit to his punishment—a position that many would agree with Polus is "absurd" (476a-481b). Yet the incommensurability between Socrates' conviction that virtue is craft and his interlocutors' incomprehension regarding this point is best expressed when, after Socrates' draws the fine distinction between craft and knack at 500a, he chides Callicles for thinking that his discussion of craft has all been in jest. "For you see, don't you," he pleads, "that our discussion's about this (and what would even a man of little intelligence take more seriously than this?), about the way we're supposed to live?" (500c). The implicit point is that Callicles, like Polus, misses the analogy entirely. Moreover, I believe that Plato intends this to be read as an honest confusion on both their parts, rather

than as a case of the rhetorician's haughty disdain for the precise sort of argumentation Socrates employs. For he wants his readers to realize the troublesome nature of the craft-analogy, and indeed to even ask the question, "What does all this talk of craft have to do with the way we're supposed to live?" (And with equal subtlety, we should note, Plato allows Socrates to suggest an ironic answer to this question. When Callicles once again complains that Socrates "keeps questioning people on matters that are trivial, hardly worthwhile, and then refutes them," Socrates responds perplexingly, "You're a happy man, Callicles, in that you've been initiated into the greater mysteries before the lesser" (497b-c).)

Such a question, in any event, anticipates Socrates' final and most important characterization of craft in the *Gorgias*, in which a link is drawn between the order with which a practitioner of a non-moral craft endows his object and the order with which a practitioner of the craft of virtue endows the soul. The painter, the housebuilder, and the shipwright, says Socrates, do not do whatever they do randomly, but rather so as to "give shape" to their products: "[E]ach one places what he does into a certain organization, and compels one thing to be suited for another and to fit to it until the entire object is put together in an organized and orderly way" (503e-504a). This conception of the craftsmen as one who endows order is already hinted at in Socrates' earlier conversation with Polus, wherein knacks are associated precisely with disorder, and comically so at that, with the suggestion that practitioners of knacks bring about an almost Anaxagorean state of affairs, causing all things to be "mixed together in the same place" (465d). The upshot of the present discussion, however, is that just as the doctor and physical trainer "give order and organization to the body" (504a) and thus endow the body with its good, which is health, so too is there a state of organization for the soul that is good for it. Actually, Socrates names two such states of the soul: justice and self-control (504d3). As Cooper points out, at this point one cannot help but think of Plato's demarcation of the tripartite soul in Book IV of the *Republic* "for if the soul is

to have order and organization, it must necessarily consist of parts which are to be ordered and organized.^[10] Unfortunately, this issue is not further explored in the *Gorgias*. Nor is there any explanation offered as to why there are only two states of organization for the soul. But at the very least, Socrates here describes both justice and self-control in terms of an orderly and organized soul, presaging their similar characterization in the *Republic* (cf. 434d-e, 442c).

Now we must relate all of this back to Socrates' contention in his refutation of Gorgias that the man who has learned what is just is a just man. Since, as we have seen, justice is a craft that like any other aims at procuring the good for its object, and this good consists in giving the object its proper order and organization, justice is necessarily concerned with a certain state of organization of the soul. But is this state of organization sufficient for a person to be virtuous? Clearly Socrates thinks it is sufficient, as he claims that a just man will inevitably both perform and want to perform just actions. As was noted above, however, he gives no argument for this conviction at 460b-c, but simply assumes that it is so. What about the state of organization comprised by self-control? Is this state also sufficient for being virtuous? Socrates once again contends that it is, for the self-controlled man turns out, upon investigation, to be "a completely good man" (507c). But his argument for this latter claim (507a-c) involves two premises that are questionable at best. The self-controlled man is completely good because he acts justly toward his fellow human beings and piously toward the gods, and because he is brave. But he acts justly and piously only because, well, this is simply how the self-controlled man acts: "And surely a self-controlled person would do what's appropriate with respect to both gods and human beings. For if he does what's inappropriate, he wouldn't be self-controlled" (507a). The same goes for his bravery: Socrates simply asserts that he is necessarily brave because "it's not like a self-controlled man to either pursue or avoid what isn't appropriate" (507b). Thus, in the case of each state of organization of the soul,

there is no argument for the supposition that being in this state necessarily entails acting virtuously.

This state of affairs that we are left with in the *Gorgias*, then, is eerily close to the situation in Plato's *Republic* that David Sachs claims to be a fallacy.^[11] Sachs distinguishes two conceptions of justice in the *Republic*. The "vulgar" conception consists of a number of ordinary moral proscriptions—restraining from embezzling, thieving, breaking one's oaths, disrespecting one's parents, etc. (cf. 442e-443b)—and is shared (though not championed) by all of Socrates' interlocutors in Book I and the beginning of Book II. In order for Plato's response to the challenges raised by these interlocutors to be successful, Sachs contends, he must show that the person who acts according to this conception of injustice is happier than the person who does not. Instead, however, he shows that a person who exemplifies his own "Platonic" conception of justice, i.e. the person who has an ordered soul, is happier than the person who does not (444e6-445b7). But this claim taken by itself, says Sachs, is completely irrelevant. In order to make it relevant, Plato must (1) show that the person who has an ordered soul will act according to the vulgar conception of justice, and (2) show that the person who exemplifies the vulgar conception of justice has an ordered soul. Sachs then maintains that Plato assumes, but never gives an argument for, requirement (1), and that he isn't even aware of requirement (2). Thus Plato commits a "fallacy of irrelevance."

Similarly in the *Gorgias*, all three of Socrates' interlocutors recognize such a conventional or vulgar conception of justice. This conception is implicit in Gorgias' speech about orators who use their skill unjustly and thus bring disrepute upon their teachers (456c-457c), in Polus' recitation of the heinous deeds of the tyrant Archelaus (471a-d), and in Callicles' lengthy polemic against the laws instituted by "the weak and the many" (483a-484c). When Socrates tells Gorgias at 460b that the man who has learned what is just *is* just, Gorgias

surely understands him to mean justice in the conventional sense of the word. But in order to adequately support this claim, Socrates needs to subsequently show that learning the craft of justice is indeed sufficient for being just in this sense. Instead, however, he goes on to show only that someone who possesses the craft of justice will be able to give an account of his soul with reference to what is good and bad for it, and will also have the capacity to endow his soul with order and organization. But these things seem beside the point. In the same way, in order to effectively convince Callicles of his thesis that the life of the self-controlled man is better than the life of the man who pursues only what is pleasant, he needs to show that the former, because he possesses an orderly and organized soul, will necessarily act accordingly. In place of such an argument, however, we are given the circular sort of reasoning mentioned above.[\[12\]](#)

The gap in Socrates' argument at 460b-c, then, is not a result of a misplaced disanalogy between virtue and craft. As we have seen above, once it is granted that we do all things for the sake of what is good, that only the appropriate craftsman knows what this good is, and that there is such a good for the soul, then it necessarily requires craft to distinguish what this good is. The problem is rather that, just as we can never be sure that one who has learned medicine will always tend to the sick, and want to tend to them, Socrates leaves us with no guarantee that learning virtue will always be sufficient for doing and wanting to do just acts.

[1] All references to and quotations from the *Gorgias* are taken from the translation by Donald J. Zeyl found in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.).

[2] Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias*, tr. by Robin Jackson, Kimon Lycos, and Harold Tarrant (Boston: Brill, 1998), 114-115.

[3] E.R. Dodds, *Plato: Gorgias; A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 218.

[4] Terence Irwin, *Plato: Gorgias* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 127.

[5] John M. Cooper, *Reason and Emotion: Essays on Ancient Moral Psychology and Ethical Theory* (Princeton University Press, 1999), 44.

[6] Dodds, 218-219. So too Richard Robinson, in "Plato's Consciousness of Fallacy," *Mind* 51: 202 (Apr., 1942), 97-114. Robinson makes the following comment on our present-day misapprehensions about Plato's analogy between craft and virtue: "What happens in this case is that because of the difficulties of thinking ourselves into Plato's strange world, and of remaining in it in spite of the pull of our modern conceptions, we fall back on the modern equivalents for his conceptions, and unfortunately they are not equivalent! And this is the explanation of many of the fallacies that we think we find" (99).

[7] Irwin, 126-127.

[8] Cooper, 45-46; cf. 65-66, 74.

[9] Irwin, 135.

[10] Cooper, 65-66.

[11] David Sachs, "A Fallacy in Plato's *Republic*," in *Plato's Republic: Critical Essays*, ed. by Richard Kraut (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 1-16. The summary in this paragraph refers to pp. 9-13 of the article.

[12] For a comparable view of Socrates' chain of reasoning at 507a-c, see Irwin, 220.

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