

“Paying the Penalty”

Merlin CCC, August 2023

Early in Plato’s *Gorgias*, one of Socrates’ interlocutors, named Polus, asserts that anyone able to rise to the heights of tyrannical power would be the happiest of human beings, provided that he were able to avoid paying any penalty for his acts of theft, violence, and the like. Polus cites the case of Archelaus, who took absolute power in Macedonia by the simple expedient of murdering all those with a more legitimate claim to the throne, including a young boy whom he drowned in a well.

Socrates responds with an extended argument in three main parts. First, he contends that acting unjustly is the greatest of evils—even worse than suffering injustice at the hands of others! This is in explicit contrast with Polus’ claim that it’s only the prospect of punishment that makes acting unjustly bad for the agent who performs those unjust acts. Second, building on this, Socrates argues that once someone has acted unjustly, it is actually better *for that person himself* if he suffers punishment, “paying the penalty” for his unjust deeds rather than avoiding such consequences. Finally, in his summation of the argument, Socrates considers the value of the goods of the soul as compared to goods of the body or external possessions, in order to further corroborate the first two points, and make the case that paying the penalty for our unjust deeds is in fact one of the greatest human goods.

We’ll follow Socrates and Polus in examining each of these in turn.



Socrates begins with the first main claim: that it is worse to act unjustly, than to be acted upon unjustly by others. In the opening section of the passage, Socrates and Polus explore the relation between two pairs of Greek terms: *kalon* and *aischron*, and *agathon* and *kakon*, all of which are extremely challenging to capture in English. To help us get the sense of their full scope, here are several meanings of each (all of which we should try to hold in our minds simultaneously, to the extent we can):

Kalon can mean **beautiful, admirable, fine, or praiseworthy**.

Its antonym ***aischron*** can mean **base, shameful, disgraceful, or ugly**.

Both of these terms are used throughout classical Greek in ways which include, but are not limited to, what we today would consider a “moral” sense. In general, they have connotations of approval/disapproval, but where that approval or disapproval spans what the Greeks saw as a single, unified domain, but we would divide among the moral, political, and aesthetic domains (and perhaps still others as well).

Agathon can mean **good, beneficial, or advantageous**.

Its antonym ***kakon*** can mean **evil, bad, harmful, or injurious** to the agent himself (i.e., when applied to an action, it is harmful to the person performing the act, and not merely to some other person).

Once again, both of these terms can include, but go far beyond, what we could consider a “moral” sense.

As they enter into this exchange, Polus holds the view that some things could be both noble/praiseworthy and harmful/disadvantageous to the person doing them, and that other

things could be both shameful and beneficial to the person doing them (e.g., Archelaus drowning the emperor's child so that he could have political power for himself). Socrates demurs, and tries to demonstrate that whatever is beautiful/praiseworthy must also be good/beneficial, and that whatever is base/shameful must also be disadvantageous for the agent.

SOC.¹ Does it appear to you, Polus, worse to do an injustice, or to suffer an injustice?

POL. It appears to me it is worse to suffer an injustice.

SOC. But which is the more base? To do, or to suffer, an injustice? Answer me.

POL. To do an injustice.

SOC. Is it not, therefore, worse, since it is more base?

POL. By no means.

SOC. I understand. You do not think, as it seems, that the beautiful and the good are the same, and likewise the evil and the base.

POL. I do not.

SOC. But what will you say to this? Do you not call all beautiful things, such as bodies, colours, figures, sounds, and pursuits, beautiful, without looking at anything else? As, for instance, in the first place, with respect to beautiful bodies, do you not say that they are beautiful, either according to their usefulness to that particular thing to which each is useful, or according to a certain pleasure, if the view of them gratifies the beholders? Have you any thing else besides this to say, respecting the beauty of body?

POL. I have not.

SOC. Do you not, therefore, denominate other things beautiful after this manner, such as figures and colours, either through a certain pleasure, or utility, or through both?

POL. I do.

SOC. And do you not in a similar manner denominate sounds, and every thing pertaining to music?

POL. Yes.

SOC. And further still, things which pertain to laws and pursuits are certainly not beautiful, unless they are either advantageous or pleasant, or both.

POL. It does not appear to me that they are.

SOC. And does not the beauty of disciplines subsist in a similar manner?

POL. Entirely so. And now, Socrates, you define beautifully, since you define the beautiful by pleasure and good.²

1 Plato, *Gorgias* 474c–475e, translated by Thomas Taylor, slightly modified.

2 Given the context, we cannot forget the sense of “good” as “beneficial” or “having utility.” Likewise in Socrates’ next statement, remember that the “base” is the antonym of the “beautiful.”

SOC. Must not, therefore, the base be defined by the contrary, namely, by pain and evil?

POL. Necessarily so.

SOC. When, therefore, of two beautiful things, one is more beautiful than the other, or when some other thing transcends in beauty either one or both of these, it must be more beautiful either through pleasure, or advantage, or both.

POL. Entirely so.

SOC. And when, of two things, one is more base, it must be more base through transcending either in pain or evil. Or is not this necessary?

POL. Entirely so.

SOC. Come then, what was it we heard just now about doing and suffering an injury? Were you not saying that suffering an injury is more evil, but doing it more base?

POL. I was.

SOC. But, in the first place, let us consider whether to do an injury surpasses in pain the being injured; and whether those suffer greater pain that injure, than those that are injured.

POL. This is by no means the case, Socrates.

SOC. The former, therefore, does not transcend the latter in pain.

POL. Certainly not.

SOC. Will it not therefore follow, that, if it does not transcend in pain, it will no longer transcend in both?

POL. It does not appear that this will be the case.

SOC. Must it not, therefore, transcend in the other?

POL. Yes.

SOC. In evil?

POL. So it appears.

SOC. Will it not therefore follow, that to do an injury, since it transcends in evil, is worse than to be injured?

POL. Evidently so.

SOC. If, therefore, something else were not admitted by the multitude of mankind, and by you formerly, it would follow that to do an injury is worse than to be injured.

POL. It would.

SOC. Now, however, it appears to be worse.

POL. So it seems.

SOC. Would you, therefore, admit that which is worse and more base, rather than that which is less so? Do not hesitate to answer, Polus (for you will not be injured by so doing), but answer generously, committing yourself to discourse as to a physician; and either admit or reject what I ask.

POL. But I should not, Socrates, prefer that which is worse and more base to that which is less so.

SOC. But would any other man?

POL. It does not appear to me that he would, according to this reasoning.

SOC. I therefore spoke the truth when I asserted, that neither I, nor you, nor any other man, would rather do an injury than be injured; for it would be worse to do so.

POL. So it appears.



Having secured Polus' agreement on this first point (however reluctantly), Socrates now proceeds to the second portion of his argument: that it is better for the person himself to be justly punished, rather than to evade such punishment:

SOC.³ But, after this, let us consider that which was the occasion of doubt to us in the second place, namely, whether it is the greatest of evils for him to be punished who acts unjustly, as you think, or whether it is not a greater evil not to be punished in this case, as I, on the contrary, think. But let us consider this affair in the following manner: Do you call it the same thing for him to suffer punishment who has acted unjustly, and to be justly punished?

POL. I do.

SOC. Can you therefore deny that all just things are beautiful, so far as they are just? Consider the affair, and answer me.

POL. It appears to me that they are, Socrates.

SOC. Consider also this: When a man performs any thing, must there not necessarily be something which is passive⁴ to him as an agent?

POL. It appears so to me.

SOC. Does it, therefore, suffer that which the agent performs, and of the same kind as that which he performs? But my meaning is this: If any one strikes, is it not necessary that something should be struck?

POL. It is necessary.

SOC. And if he who strikes, strikes vehemently and swiftly, must not that which is struck be in the same manner struck?⁵

POL. Yes.

3 Plato, *Gorgias* 476a–477a, translated by Thomas Taylor, slightly modified.

4 That is, the recipient of action, that which is acted upon.

5 That is, that which is struck is struck vehemently (i.e., forcefully) and swiftly.

SOC. A passion, therefore, of such a kind is in that which is struck, as the striker produces.

POL. Entirely so.

SOC. If, therefore, any one burns, is it not necessary that something should be burned?

POL. Undoubtedly.

SOC. And if he burns vehemently, or so as to cause pain, must not that which is burned be burned in such a manner as he who burns burns?

POL. Entirely so.

SOC. And will not the same reasoning take place if any one cuts? For something will be cut.

POL. Yes.

SOC. And if the cut is great or deep, or attended with pain, that which is cut will be cut with such a cleft as the cutter cuts.

POL. It appears so.

SOC. In short, see if you grant what I just now said respecting all things, namely, that such as the agent produces, such does the patient suffer.

POL. I do grant it.

SOC. These things, therefore, being admitted, whether is the being punished, to suffer, or to do something?

POL. Necessarily, Socrates, it is to suffer something.

SOC. Must it not, therefore, be by some agent?

POL. Undoubtedly. And by him who punishes.

SOC. But does not he who rightly punishes, punish justly?

POL. Yes.

SOC. Does he act justly, or not, by so doing?

POL. Justly.

SOC. Must not, therefore, he who is punished, in consequence of being punished, suffer justly?

POL. It appears so.

SOC. But is it not acknowledged that just things are beautiful?

POL. Entirely so.

SOC. Of these, therefore, the one does, and the other (who is punished) suffers, that which is beautiful.

POL. Yes.

SOC. But if things are beautiful, are they not also good? For they are either pleasant or useful.

POL. It is necessary they should.

SOC. He therefore who is punished suffers that which is good.

POL. It appears so.

SOC. He is benefited, therefore.

POL. Yes.

SOC. Does it not, therefore, follow (as I understand advantage), that the soul becomes better if it is punished justly?

POL. It is probable.



Finally, Socrates builds on these two conclusions, arguing that it is not merely good, but one of the *greatest* human goods, for the soul to be purified through appropriate punishment. This good of purification seems to rank second only to remaining just, and thus free from the need for punishment in the first place.

SOC.⁶ The soul, therefore, of him who is punished is liberated from vice.

POL. It is.

SOC. And hence it is liberated from the greatest evil. But consider thus: In the acquisition of wealth, do you perceive any other human evil than poverty?

POL. No other.

SOC. But what, in the constitution of the body? do you call imbecility, disease, deformity, and things of this kind, evils, or not?

POL. I do.

SOC. Do you think, therefore, that in the soul also there is a certain depravity?

POL. Undoubtedly.

SOC. Do you not then call this injustice, ignorance, timidity,⁷ and the like?

POL. Entirely so.

SOC. Since, therefore, riches, body, and soul, are three things, will you not say that there are three depravities, poverty, disease, and injustice?

POL. Yes.

SOC. Which, therefore, of these depravities is the most base? Is it not injustice, and, in short, the depravity of the soul?

POL. Very much so.

6 Plato, *Gorgias* 477b–479e, translated by Thomas Taylor, slightly modified.

7 These are the vices which correspond to three of the four cardinal virtues: justice, wisdom, and courage. A few lines later in this passage, Socrates will complete the group when he adds intemperance, the vice which corresponds to the cardinal virtue of temperance/moderation.

SOC. But, if it is the most base, is it not also the worst?

POL. How do you say, Socrates?

SOC. Thus. That which is most base is always so either by procuring the greatest pain, or injury, or both, from what has been previously acknowledged by us.

POL. Especially so.

SOC. But is it not at present acknowledged by us, that injustice, and the whole depravity of the soul, are most base?

POL. It is.

SOC. Are not these, therefore, either most troublesome, and most base, through transcending in pain, or from the injury which attends them, or from both?

POL. It is necessary.

SOC. Is therefore to be unjust, intemperate, timid, and unlearned, the cause of greater pain than to be poor and diseased?

POL. It does not appear to me, Socrates, to be so, from what has been said.

SOC. Another depravity of the soul, therefore, transcending in a certain mighty detriment, and wonderful evil, is the most base of all things; since, according to your assertion, it is not so, from transcending in pain.

POL. So it appears.

SOC. But, indeed, that which transcends in the greatest of all detriments must be the greatest evil of all things.

POL. It must.

SOC. Injustice, therefore, intemperance, and the other depravities of the soul, are each of them the greatest evil of all things.

POL. So it appears.

SOC. What is the art, therefore, which liberates from poverty? Is it not that which procures money?

POL. Yes.

SOC. But what is that art which liberates from disease? Is it not the medicinal?

POL. Necessarily so.

SOC. And what is that which liberates from depravity and injustice? If you cannot answer this question with equal facility, consider thus: Whither, and to whom, do we conduct those that are diseased in body?

POL. To physicians, Socrates.

SOC. But whither do we conduct those who act unjustly, and live intemperately?

POL. You say, to the judges.

SOC. And is it not, therefore, that they may be punished?

POL. I say so.

SOC. Do not then those that punish rightly punish by employing a certain justice?

POL. It is evident they do.

SOC. The art, therefore, which procures money liberates from poverty; the medicinal art, from disease; and punishment, from intemperance and injustice.

POL. So it appears.

SOC. Which, therefore, of these do you consider as the most beautiful?

POL. Of what things are you speaking?

SOC. Of the art of procuring money, the medicinal art, and punishment.

POL. Punishment, Socrates, excels by far.

SOC. Does it not, therefore, again produce either abundant pleasure, or advantage, or both, since it is the most beautiful?

POL. Yes.

SOC. Is it, therefore, pleasant to be treated by a physician? and do those who are being treated rejoice?⁸

POL. It does not appear to me that they do.

SOC. But it is beneficial to be treated. Is it not?

POL. Yes.

SOC. For it liberates from a great evil: so that it is advantageous to endure pain, and be well.

POL. Undoubtedly.

SOC. Will the man, therefore, who is treated by a physician be thus most happy with respect to his body, or ought this to be said of him who has never been diseased?

POL. Evidently of him who has never been diseased.

SOC. For, as it seems, a liberation from disease would not be felicity; but, on the contrary, this is to be asserted of the non-possession of it from the first.

POL. It is so.

SOC. But what? Which of two men is the more miserable, he who is diseased in body, or in soul - he who is treated by a physician, and liberated from disease, or he who is not treated, and remains diseased?

POL. He who is not treated, as it appears to me.

SOC. Will it not, therefore, follow, that to suffer punishment will be a liberation from the greatest of evils, depravity?

POL. It will.

8 Socrates is here referring to those who are in the midst of treatment, not to those who have already completed their course of treatment and are now cured.

SOC. For punishment produces a sound mind, makes men more just, and becomes the medicine of depravity.

POL. It does.

SOC. He, therefore, is most happy who possesses no vice in his soul, since this appears to be the greatest of evils.

POL. It is evident.

SOC. But he doubtless ranks in the second degree of felicity, who is liberated from vice.

POL. It is likely.

SOC. But this is the man who is admonished, reprov'd and suffers punishment.

POL. He is.

SOC. He, therefore, lives in the worst manner who possesses injustice, and is not liberated from it.

POL. It appears so.

SOC. Is not, therefore, such a one, a man who, having committed the greatest injuries, and employing the greatest injustice, causes it to come to pass, that he is neither admonished, nor restrained in his conduct, nor punished; just as you said was the case with Archelaus, and other tyrants, rhetoricians,⁹ and powerful noblemen?

POL. It seems so.

SOC. For the conduct of these, O best of men, is nearly just as if some one afflicted with the greatest diseases should prevent the physicians from inflicting on him the punishment of his bodily maladies, fearing as if he were a child to be burned and cut, because these operations are attended with pain. Or does it not appear so to you?

POL. It does.

SOC. And this through being ignorant, as it seems, of the nature of health and the virtue of body. For, from what has been now acknowledged by us, those who escape punishment, Polus, appear to do something of this kind; namely, they look to the pain attending punishment, but are blind to its utility; and are ignorant how much more miserable it is to dwell with a soul not healthy, but corrupt, unjust and impious, than to have the body diseased. Hence they do every thing that they may escape punishment, but are not liberated from the greatest evil; and procure for themselves riches and friends, and the ability of speaking in the most persuasive manner. But if we have assented to the truth, Polus, do you perceive what

⁹ The rhetoricians in question are those people who speak persuasively, but without knowledge of what is genuinely good. In a memorable passage earlier in the dialogue, Socrates compares such rhetoricians with pastry cooks who make food which is wonderfully appealing but dreadfully unhealthy. The child who does not know any better will prefer the food offered by the pastry cook, over that offered by the skilled and knowledgeable dietitian. Likewise, those who have not inquired carefully into matters of justice will be persuaded by the rhetorician rather than those who actually have knowledge of what is just and good.

consequences follow from our discourse? Or are you willing that we should collect them?

POL. I am, if agreeable to you.

SOC. Does it, therefore, happen that injustice and to act unjustly are the greatest evil?

POL. It appears so.

SOC. And it likewise appears that to suffer punishment is a liberation from this evil.

POL. It does appear.

SOC. But not to suffer punishment is a continuance of the evil.

POL. Yes.

SOC. To act unjustly, therefore, ranks in the second degree of evils, as to magnitude; but, when acting unjustly, not to suffer punishment is naturally the greatest and the first of all evils.

POL. It is likely.

SOC. Are we not, therefore, my friend, dubious about this thing? You consider Archelaus as happy, who commits the greatest injustice, and suffers no punishment; but I on the contrary think, that whether it is Archelaus, or any other man whatever, who when acting unjustly is not punished, it is proper that such a one should surpass in misery other men; and that always he who does an injury should be more wretched than he who is injured, and he who escapes should be more wretched than he who suffers punishment. Are not these the things which were said by me?

POL. Yes.

SOC. Is it not, therefore, shown that these assertions are true?

POL. It appears so.



It appears, then, that paying the penalty for our unjust acts—that is, suffering the appropriate punishments for them—is a great benefit and good for us, something that we should willingly embrace. Incidentally, this is one of the reasons why, in the traditional curriculum of Late Antiquity, the *Gorgias* was read just prior to the *Phaedo*, whose subject matter is the cathartic or purificatory virtues.

This passage also raises the question of what an *appropriate* penalty is. One way or another, given the arguments presented by Socrates here, such penalty must be one which purifies the soul, leading her from vice to virtue. While the *Gorgias* itself veers off in other directions after this point, we might consider this aspect of the problem in our conversation as well.