

**Recension de: Tarnopolsky C.H., Prudes, Pervers, and Tyrants. Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame. Pp. xvi + 218. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010**

Olivier Renaut

► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Renaut. Recension de: Tarnopolsky C.H., Prudes, Pervers, and Tyrants. Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame. Pp. xvi + 218. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. 2016, pp.55-57. 10.1017/S0009840X15002772 . hal-01551198

**HAL Id: hal-01551198**

**<https://hal-univ-paris10.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01551198>**

Submitted on 7 Dec 2017

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

SHAME IN THE *GORGIAS*

TARNOPOLSKY (C.H.) *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants. Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame*. Pp. xvi+218. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. Paper, £16.95, US\$24.95 (Cased, £30.95, US\$45). ISBN: 978-0-691-16342-0 (978-0-691-12856-6 hbk).

doi:10.1017/S0009840X15002772

Our contemporary views on the role of shame in our democracies seem sometimes to be reduced to a distorted opposition between the condemnation of this conservative emotion in societies, which leads to humiliation and exclusion, and a praise of a sense of shame crucial for instilling respect and openness to differences. T.'s monograph is, on this point, a promising book in contemporary political philosophy, for it shows how the complex, yet well stated, view on the role of shame in the *Gorgias* could illuminate our understanding of shaming acts and sense of shame in our own democracies. Indeed, the *Gorgias* accounts for the difficult distinction between a 'shame that is grounded in respect for others, and a shame that stigmatizes others' (p. 11). This potential renewal of our understanding of the role of shame forms the second part of the book 'Plato's *Gorgias* and the Contemporary Politics of Shame' (Chapters 5 and 6), which this review will not discuss. Let us notice for the moment an important (and very controversial) presupposition that leads T. to transfer Plato's analysis of shame to contemporary politics: according to T., Plato himself would also be concerned with the use of a certain kind of shame to get his own contemporaries improving their own democratic behaviours, for Plato would not be the anti-democratic philosopher we are accustomed to in commentaries (pp. 13, 33, 166, 169).

The first part, 'Plato's *Gorgias* and the Athenian Politics of Shame', consists of four chapters, whose thesis is always clearly stated and documented. Many footnotes interestingly situate the exact position of T. compared with other important commentators (although J. Moss, 'Shame, Pleasure and the Divided Self', *OSAP* 29 [2005] is missed). However, the relative absence of textual quotations from Plato sometimes makes the reading painful, given the complexity of the interpretation, and the nuances T. wants to highlight. The overall thesis could be summed up as follows: Plato offers a multi-levelled account of the shaming process and the sense of shame in the characters it reveals, in order to discard a potential misuse of the act of shaming, and to instil in the characters Socrates refutes a respectful sense of shame. Plato hints at a clearer knowledge of the object in relation to which shame is used or experienced, and of the real and beneficial effects of this emotion, both in psychology and politics, in order to settle a real and noble rhetoric.

For the first step of the demonstration (Chapter 1, 'Shame and Rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias*'), T. contends with a traditional view, according to which Plato totally discards the possibility of a philosophical rhetoric. T. claims that Plato wants 'to perform an immanent critique of both the Socratic elenchus and the flattering rhetoric . . . involved in imperialistic Athenian democratic politics' (p. 33). The *Gorgias*, considered as a transitional dialogue (p. 36), would account for the way shame (*aidôs* and *aischunê*) is best used in the framework of Plato's moral psychology (pp. 38, 48), just as other dialogues would deal with the role of desire, love, appetites, spirit, etc. Surprisingly enough, the *Gorgias* would pave the way from Gorgianic rhetoric to an ideal Platonic one, through the various Socratic uses of shame. Shame would then not be merely a means to manipulate a

multitude, but could be used, individually, to make the interlocutor see what he is committed to, whether universal human concerns, or traditional norms or ultimately an ideal of the self (p. 40).

The second chapter analyses the process of ‘Shaming Gorgias, Polus and Callicles’. The Socratic elenchus is not only a logical tool; it is directed to a complex psychological relation between the interlocutor and his beliefs, a relation upon which the refutation leads to success or failure. T. argues that shame has different meanings and effects for Gorgias, Polus and Callicles, making a stand on McKim’s and Kahn’s analysis. Gorgias is caught in being insincere during the refutation, and asserts what he believes to be false (p. 63), but none the less happens to be a good interlocutor hereafter (pp. 64–5). By contrast, the outcome of Polus’ shaming should not be reduced to mere insincerity or plain sincerity when he says that doing injustice is more shameful than suffering it – he is ‘perplexed’ and ‘confused’ (pp. 67, 75). T. shows quite convincingly that the refutation of Polus aims at showing how shame could be an ambiguous experience, depending on how the interlocutor succeeds in uniting different perspectives (pp. 69–70), in defining what is good, and how different norms (social, rational, personal) may relate what is beautiful to what is seen as shameful (esp. pp. 71–4, 77). The refutation of Callicles, though quickly analysed, reveals ‘deepening reflections on the psychology of shame’ (p. 79). Callicles incarnates different levels of shame: a deep commitment to what he really believes in, but also a reflective sense of shame for avoiding contradictions; ‘competing feelings of shame’ can indeed occur (p. 81).

In her third chapter, ‘Plato on Shame in Democratic Athens’, T. analyses the Platonic use of the Athenian ideal of *parrhêsia* in order to show how the use of shame could lead to a corrupt or healthy democratic politics. *Parrhêsia*, T. claims, ‘is integral to the shaming experience of the Socratic elenchus’ (p. 99), for it requires courage, both from the agent and the hearer, to settle a real intersubjective and reciprocal practice of speech. Against tyranny and flattery, Socrates’ *parrhêsia* requires the interlocutor to ‘remain open to the possibility of being rightfully shamed out of one’s conformity and complacent moralism by an other [*sic*] in the ongoing and mutual project of collective self-examination’ (p. 108). One may object, however, that there is no need to call this ‘collective project’ either ‘philosophy’ or ‘ideal democracy’.

This latter conclusion seems to be entailed by the final and controversial interpretation of the myth in Chapter 4, ‘Socratic vs. Platonic Shame’. T. asserts that the retributive myth is altogether revealing of the limits of the Socratic use of this double-edged emotion (pp. 120–6), and exemplifies a Platonic ‘respectful’ shame. In the myth, being exposed, naked and alone before a judge, is a painful experience that refers to Socratic shaming; telling a myth is then a proof that the ‘Socratic elenchus is insufficiently therapeutic’ (p. 125). But this myth would also transcend itself; against a traditional interpretation (Vlastos and Nehamas) on Socratic and Platonic irony, T. claims that the myth is in a way an acknowledgment of the sufferings of the ones who are shamed, presenting in a more pleasant way the benefits of practising philosophy (pp. 138–40). Little is said, however, on why we should consider this myth as something other than a failure to persuade stubborn souls. However tempting this thesis could be, it would have been necessary to give a fuller account of the way an emotion such as shame is related to a more rational and reflective conception of one’s way of life. A more precise account of the ‘cognitive’ power of shame is required before attempting to save Plato against himself. In other words, T. is right in stressing the political importance of shame in the Platonic city; but the link (or more probably the disjunction) between shame and philosophy remains obscure. T.’s monograph brilliantly shows that shame is an essential tool in Plato’s psychology and politics – but

the question of why this emotion is essential (or not) to practising philosophy remains, at the end, open and unresolved.

*Université Paris Ouest – Nanterre-La Défense*

OLIVIER RENAUT  
[olivier.renaut@u-paris10.fr](mailto:olivier.renaut@u-paris10.fr)