

Selections from Plato's *Gorgias* and *Protagoras* on knowledge and
virture (Benjamin Jowett, tr.)

Gorgias (466e-468e, 476d-477e, 509c-510a)

Socrates. Well then, I say to you that here are two questions in 466d
one, and I will answer both of them. And I tell you, Polus, that
rhetoricians and tyrants have the least possible power in states, as I
was just now saying; for they do literally nothing which they will, 466e
but only what they think best.

Polus. And is not that a great power?

Socrates. Polus has already said the reverse.

Polus. Said the reverse! nay, that is what I assert.

Socrates. No, by the great—what do you call him?—not you, for
you say that power is a good to him who has the power.

Polus. I do.

Socrates. And would you maintain that if a fool does what he
thinks best, this is a good, and would you call this great power?

Polus. I should not.

Socrates. Then you must prove that the rhetorician is not a fool,
and that rhetoric is an art and not a flattery—and so you will have
refuted me; but if you leave me unrefuted, why, the rhetoricians 467a
who do what they think best in states, and the tyrants, will have
nothing upon which to congratulate themselves, if as you say,
power be indeed a good, admitting at the same time that what is
done without sense is an evil.

Polus. Yes; I admit that.

Socrates. How then can the rhetoricians or the tyrants have great
power in states, unless Polus can refute Socrates, and prove to him
that they do as they will?

Polus. This fellow—

467b

Socrates. I say that they do not do as they will;—now refute me.

Polus. Why, have you not already said that they do as they think
best?

Socrates. And I say so still.

Polus. Then surely they do as they will?

Socrates. I deny it.

Polus. But they do what they think best?

Socrates. Aye.

Polus. That, Socrates, is monstrous and absurd.

Socrates. Good words, good Polus, as I may say in your own pe- 467c
culiar style; but if you have any questions to ask of me, either
prove that I am in error or give the answer yourself.

Polus. Very well, I am willing to answer that I may know what
you mean.

Socrates. Do men appear to you to will that which they do, or to will that further end for the sake of which they do a thing? when they take medicine, for example, at the bidding of a physician, do they will the drinking of the medicine which is painful, or the health for the sake of which they drink?

Polus. Clearly, the health.

467d

Socrates. And when men go on a voyage or engage in business, they do not will that which they are doing at the time; for who would desire to take the risk of a voyage or the trouble of business?—But they will, to have the wealth for the sake of which they go on a voyage.

Polus. Certainly.

Socrates. And is not this universally true? If a man does something for the sake of something else, he wills not that which he does, but that for the sake of which he does it.

Polus. Yes.

467e

Socrates. And are not all things either good or evil, or intermediate and indifferent?

Polus. To be sure, Socrates.

Socrates. Wisdom and health and wealth and the like you would call goods, and their opposites evils?

Polus. I should.

Socrates. And the things which are neither good nor evil, and which partake sometimes of the nature of good and at other times of evil, or of neither, are such as sitting, walking, running, sailing; or, again, wood, stones, and the like:—these are the things which you call neither good nor evil?

468a

Polus. Exactly so.

Socrates. Are these indifferent things done for the sake of the good, or the good for the sake of the indifferent?

Polus. Clearly, the indifferent for the sake of the good.

Socrates. When we walk we walk for the sake of the good, and under the idea that it is better to walk, and when we stand we stand equally for the sake of the good?

468b

Polus. Yes.

Socrates. And when we kill a man we kill him or exile him or despoil him of his goods, because, as we think, it will conduce to our good?

Polus. Certainly.

Socrates. Men who do any of these things do them for the sake of the good?

Polus. Yes.

Socrates. And did we not admit that in doing something for the sake of something else, we do not will those things which we do, but that other thing for the sake of which we do them?

Polus. Most true.

468c

Socrates. Then we do not will simply to kill a man or to exile him or to despoil him of his goods, but we will to do that which conduces to our good, and if the act is not conducive to our good we do not will it; for we will, as you say, that which is our good, but that which is neither good nor evil, or simply evil, we do not will. Why are you silent, Polus? Am I not right?

Polus. You are right.

Socrates. Hence we may infer, that if any one, whether he be a tyrant or a rhetorician, kills another or exiles another or deprives him of his property, under the idea that the act is for his own interests when really not for his own interests, he may be said to do what seems best to him? 468d

Polus. Yes.

Socrates. But does he do what he wills if he does what is evil? Why do you not answer?

Polus. Well, I suppose not.

Socrates. Then if great power is a good as you allow, will such a one have great power in a state? 468e

Polus. He will not.

Socrates. Then I was right in saying that a man may do what seems good to him in a state, and not have great power, and not do what he wills?

...

Socrates. Then you would agree generally to the universal proposition which I was just now asserting: that the affection of the patient answers to the affection of the agent? 476d

Polus. I agree.

Socrates. Then, as this is admitted, let me ask whether being punished is suffering or acting?

Polus. Suffering, Socrates; there can be no doubt of that.

Socrates. And suffering implies an agent?

Polus. Certainly, Socrates; and he is the punisher.

Socrates. And he who punishes rightly, punishes justly? 476e

Polus. Yes.

Socrates. And therefore he acts justly?

Polus. Justly.

Socrates. Then he who is punished and suffers retribution, suffers justly?

Polus. That is evident.

Socrates. And that which is just has been admitted to be honourable?

Polus. Certainly.

Socrates. Then the punisher does what is honourable, and the

punished suffers what is honourable?

Polus. True.

Socrates. And if what is honourable, then what is good, for the honourable is either pleasant or useful? 477a

Polus. Certainly.

Socrates. Then he who is punished suffers what is good?

Polus. That is true.

Socrates. Then he is benefited?

Polus. Yes.

Socrates. Do I understand you to mean what I mean by the term ‘benefited’? I mean, that if he be justly punished his soul is improved.

Polus. Surely.

Socrates. Then he who is punished is delivered from the evil of his soul?

Polus. Yes.

Socrates. And is he not then delivered from the greatest evil? 477b
Look at the matter in this way:—In respect of a man’s estate, do you see any greater evil than poverty?

Polus. There is no greater evil.

Socrates. Again, in a man’s bodily frame, you would say that the evil is weakness and disease and deformity?

Polus. I should.

Socrates. And do you not imagine that the soul likewise has some evil of her own?

Polus. Of course.

Socrates. And this you would call injustice and ignorance and cowardice, and the like?

Polus. Certainly.

Socrates. So then, in mind, body, and estate, which are three, 477c
you have pointed out three corresponding evils—injustice, disease, poverty?

Polus. True.

Socrates. And which of the evils is the most disgraceful?—Is not the most disgraceful of them injustice, and in general the evil of the soul?

Polus. By far the most.

Socrates. And if the most disgraceful, then also the worst?

Polus. What do you mean, Socrates?

Socrates. I mean to say, that is most disgraceful has been already admitted to be most painful or hurtful, or both.

Polus. Certainly.

Socrates. And now injustice and all evil in the soul has been admitted by us to be most disgraceful? 477d

Polus. It has been admitted.

Socrates. And most disgraceful either because most painful and causing excessive pain, or most hurtful, or both?

Polus. Certainly.

Socrates. And therefore to be unjust and intemperate, and cowardly and ignorant, is more painful than to be poor and sick?

Polus. Nay, Socrates; the painfulness does not appear to me to follow from your premises.

Socrates. Then, if, as you would argue, not more painful, the evil of the soul is of all evils the most disgraceful; and the excess of disgrace must be caused by some preternatural greatness, or extraordinary hurtfulness of the evil. 477e

Polus. Clearly.

Socrates. And that which exceeds most in hurtfulness will be the greatest of evils?

Polus. Yes.

Socrates. Then injustice and intemperance, and in general the depravity of the soul, are the greatest of evils?

Polus. That is evident.

...

Socrates. Seeing then that there are these two evils, the doing injustice and the suffering injustice—and we affirm that to do injustice is a greater, and to suffer injustice a lesser evil—by what devices can a man succeed in obtaining the two advantages, the one of not doing and the other of not suffering injustice? must he have the power, or only the will to obtain them? I mean to ask whether a man will escape injustice if he has only the will to escape, or must he have provided himself with the power? 509c
509d

Callicles. He must have provided himself with the power; that is clear.

Socrates. And what do you say of doing injustice? Is the will only sufficient, and will that prevent him from doing injustice, or must he have provided himself with power and art; and if he have not studied and practised, will he be unjust still? Surely you might say, Callicles, whether you think that Polus and I were right in admitting the conclusion that no one does wrong voluntarily, but that all do wrong against their will? 509e

Callicles. Granted, Socrates, if you will only have done. 510a

Socrates. Then, as would appear, power and art have to be provided in order that we may do no injustice?

Callicles. Certainly.

Protagoras (345d-e, 349a-d, 357a-361c)

[Socrates speaks here and is the narrator throughout.]

... Simonides was not so ignorant as to say that he praised those who did no evil voluntarily, as though there were some who did evil voluntarily. For no wise man, as I believe, will allow that any human being errs voluntarily, or voluntarily does evil and dishonourable actions; but they are very well aware that all who do evil and dishonourable things do them against their will....

...

[Socrates speaks to Protagoras] ... And I should like once more to have my memory refreshed by you about the questions which I was asking you at first, and also to have your help in considering them. If I am not mistaken the question was this: Are wisdom and temperance and courage and justice and holiness five names of the same thing? or has each of the names a separate underlying essence and corresponding thing having a peculiar function, no one of them being like any other of them? And you replied that the five names were not the names of the same thing, but that each of them had a separate object, and that all these objects were parts of virtue, not in the same way that the parts of gold are like each other and the whole of which they are parts, but as the parts of the face are unlike the whole of which they are parts and one another, and have each of them a distinct function. I should like to know whether this is still your opinion; or if not, I will ask you to define your meaning, and I shall not take you to task if you now make a different statement. For I dare say that you may have said what you did only in order to make trial of me.

I answer, Socrates, he said, that all these qualities are parts of virtue, and that four out of the five are to some extent similar, and that the fifth of them, which is courage, is very different from the other four, as I prove in this way: You may observe that many men are utterly unrighteous, unholy, intemperate, ignorant, who are nevertheless remarkable for their courage.

...

[Again, Socrates is speaking to Protagoras.] Well then, my friends, I say to them; seeing that the salvation of human life has been found to consist in the right choice of pleasures and pains,—in the choice of the more and the fewer, and the greater and the less, and the nearer and remoter, must not this measuring be a consideration of their excess and defect and equality in relation to each other?

This is undeniably true.

And this, as possessing measure, must undeniably also be an art and science?

They will agree, he said.

The nature of that art or science will be a matter of future consideration; but the existence of such a science furnishes a demonstrative answer to the question which you asked of me and Protagoras. At the time when you asked the question, if you remember, both of us were agreeing that there was nothing mightier than knowledge, and that knowledge, in whatever existing, must have the advantage over pleasure and all other things; and then you said that pleasure often got the advantage even over a man who has knowledge; and we refused to allow this, and you rejoined: O Protagoras and Socrates, what is the meaning of being overcome by pleasure if not this?—tell us what you call such a state:—if we had immediately and at the time answered ‘Ignorance,’ you would have laughed at us. But now, in laughing at us, you will be laughing at yourselves: for you also admitted that men err in their choice of pleasures and pains; that is, in their choice of good and evil, from defect of knowledge; and you admitted further, that they err, not only from defect of knowledge in general, but of that particular knowledge which is called measuring. And you are also aware that the erring act which is done without knowledge is done in ignorance. This, therefore, is the meaning of being overcome by pleasure;—ignorance, and that the greatest. And our friends Protagoras and Prodicus and Hippias declare that they are the physicians of ignorance; but you, who are under the mistaken impression that ignorance is not the cause, and that the art of which I am speaking cannot be taught, neither go yourselves, nor send your children, to the Sophists, who are the teachers of these things—you take care of your money and give them none; and the result is, that you are the worse off both in public and private life:—Let us suppose this to be our answer to the world in general: And now I should like to ask you, Hippias, and you, Prodicus, as well as Protagoras (for the argument is to be yours as well as ours), whether you think that I am speaking the truth or not?

They all thought that what I said was entirely true.

Then you agree, I said, that the pleasant is the good, and the painful evil. And here I would beg my friend Prodicus not to introduce his distinction of names, whether he is disposed to say pleasurable, delightful, joyful. However, by whatever name he prefers to call them, I will ask you, most excellent Prodicus, to answer in my sense of the words.

Prodicus laughed and assented, as did the others.

Then, my friends, what do you say to this? Are not all actions honourable and useful, of which the tendency is to make life pain-

less and pleasant? The honourable work is also useful and good?

This was admitted.

Then, I said, if the pleasant is the good, nobody does anything under the idea or conviction that some other thing would be better and is also attainable, when he might do the better. And this inferiority of a man to himself is merely ignorance, as the superiority of a man to himself is wisdom. 358c

They all assented.

And is not ignorance the having a false opinion and being deceived about important matters?

To this also they unanimously assented.

Then, I said, no man voluntarily pursues evil, or that which he thinks to be evil. To prefer evil to good is not in human nature; and when a man is compelled to choose one of two evils, no one will choose the greater when he may have the less. 358d

All of us agreed to every word of this.

Well, I said, there is a certain thing called fear or terror; and here, Prodicus, I should particularly like to know whether you would agree with me in defining this fear or terror as expectation of evil.

Protagoras and Hippias agreed, but Prodicus said that this was fear and not terror. 358e

Never mind, Prodicus, I said; but let me ask whether, if our former assertions are true, a man will pursue that which he fears when he is not compelled? Would not this be in flat contradiction to the admission which has been already made, that he thinks the things which he fears to be evil; and no one will pursue or voluntarily accept that which he thinks to be evil?

That also was universally admitted. 359a

Then, I said, these, Hippias and Prodicus, are our premisses; and I would beg Protagoras to explain to us how he can be right in what he said at first. I do not mean in what he said quite at first, for his first statement, as you may remember, was that whereas there were five parts of virtue none of them was like any other of them; each of them had a separate function. To this, however, I am not referring, but to the assertion which he afterwards made that of the five virtues four were nearly akin to each other, but that the fifth, which was courage, differed greatly from the others. And of this he gave me the following proof. He said: You will find, Socrates, that some of the most impious, and unrighteous, and intemperate, and ignorant of men are among the most courageous; which proves that courage is very different from the other parts of virtue. I was surprised at his saying this at the time, and I am still more surprised now that I have discussed the matter with you. So I asked him whether by the brave he meant the confident. Yes, he replied, and 359b

the impetuous or goers. (You may remember, Protagoras, that this was your answer.) 359c

He assented.

Well then, I said, tell us against what are the courageous ready to go—against the same dangers as the cowards?

No, he answered.

Then against something different?

Yes, he said.

Then do cowards go where there is safety, and the courageous where there is danger?

Yes, Socrates, so men say.

Very true, I said. But I want to know against what do you say that the courageous are ready to go—against dangers, believing them to be dangers, or not against dangers? 359d

No, said he; the former case has been proved by you in the previous argument to be impossible.

That, again, I replied, is quite true. And if this has been rightly proven, then no one goes to meet what he thinks to be dangers, since the want of self-control, which makes men rush into dangers, has been shown to be ignorance.

He assented.

And yet the courageous man and the coward alike go to meet that about which they are confident; so that, in this point of view, the cowardly and the courageous go to meet the same things. 359e

And yet, Socrates, said Protagoras, that to which the coward goes is the opposite of that to which the courageous goes; the one, for example, is ready to go to battle, and the other is not ready.

And is going to battle honourable or disgraceful? I said.

Honourable, he replied.

And if honourable, then already admitted by us to be good; for all honourable actions we have admitted to be good.

That is true; and to that opinion I shall always adhere.

True, I said. But which of the two are they who, as you say, are unwilling to go to war, which is a good and honourable thing? 360a

The cowards, he replied.

And what is good and honourable, I said, is also pleasant?

It has certainly been acknowledged to be so, he replied.

And do the cowards knowingly refuse to go to the nobler, and pleasanter, and better?

The admission of that, he replied, would belie our former admissions.

But does not the courageous man also go to meet the better, and pleasanter, and nobler?

That must be admitted.

360b

And the courageous man has no base fear or base confidence?

True, he replied.

And if not base, then honourable?

He admitted this.

And if honourable, then good?

Yes.

But the fear and confidence of the coward or foolhardy or madman, on the contrary, are base?

He assented.

And these base fears and confidences originate in ignorance and uninstructedness?

True, he said.

360c

Then as to the motive from which the cowards act, do you call it cowardice or courage?

I should say cowardice, he replied.

And have they not been shown to be cowards through their ignorance of dangers?

Assuredly, he said.

And because of that ignorance they are cowards?

He assented.

And the reason why they are cowards is admitted by you to be cowardice?

He again assented.

Then the ignorance of what is and is not dangerous is cowardice?

He nodded assent.

But surely courage, I said, is opposed to cowardice?

360d

Yes.

Then the wisdom which knows what are and are not dangers is opposed to the ignorance of them?

To that again he nodded assent.

And the ignorance of them is cowardice?

To that he very reluctantly nodded assent.

And the knowledge of that which is and is not dangerous is courage, and is opposed to the ignorance of these things?

At this point he would no longer nod assent, but was silent.

And why, I said, do you neither assent nor dissent, Protagoras?

Finish the argument by yourself, he said.

I only want to ask one more question, I said. I want to know whether you still think that there are men who are most ignorant and yet most courageous? 360e

You seem to have a great ambition to make me answer, Socrates, and therefore I will gratify you, and say, that this appears to me to be impossible consistently with the argument.

My only object, I said, in continuing the discussion, has been the desire to ascertain the nature and relations of virtue; for if this were

clear, I am very sure that the other controversy which has been carried on at great length by both of us—you affirming and I denying that virtue can be taught—would also become clear. The result of our discussion appears to me to be singular. For if the argument had a human voice, that voice would be heard laughing at us and saying: ‘Protagoras and Socrates, you are strange beings; there are you, Socrates, who were saying that virtue cannot be taught, contradicting yourself now by your attempt to prove that all things are knowledge, including justice, and temperance, and courage, —which tends to show that virtue can certainly be taught; for if virtue were other than knowledge, as Protagoras attempted to prove, then clearly virtue cannot be taught; but if virtue is entirely knowledge, as you are seeking to show, then I cannot but suppose that virtue is capable of being taught. Protagoras, on the other hand, who started by saying that it might be taught, is now eager to prove it to be anything rather than knowledge; and if this is true, it must be quite incapable of being taught.’ Now I, Protagoras, perceiving this terrible confusion of our ideas, have a great desire that they should be cleared up. And I should like to carry on the discussion until we ascertain what virtue is, whether capable of being taught or not....