Socrates' Ethical Argument for His Eschatology in the *Gorgias*

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[Penultimate draft. Final version forthcoming in *Phronesis*. Please cite that version once it is out.]

Abstract: Socrates has an implicit argument for his afterlife story that concludes the *Gorgias*, with two key premises. One is at 527a-c, where he summarizes the ethical position he has been arguing for through most of the dialogue, regarding the intrinsic goodness of justice, the intrinsic badness of injustice, and the desirability of rehabilitative punishments. The second occurs at 507e-508a, where Socrates asserts that the universe is held together by justice. This argument explains why Socrates regards his story as a *logos,* not merely a *muthos*. It also helps us understand the nature of the rewards and punishments in his story.

Keywords: Plato, Gorgias, afterlife, rehabilitation, punishment, myth

1. Introduction

At the end of the *Gorgias*, Socrates gives an 'account' (*logos*) of the afterlife, in which people are judged by the gods based solely on the quality of their souls and therefore receive their proper due, with good people going to the Isles of the Blessed and the wicked sent to Tartarus to be punished. Socrates says that Callicles will consider his account a mere 'tale' (*muthos*) and feel contempt for it, but that he himself is convinced by it and believes that it is true (523a-b; 526d-527a).

But why does Socrates declare that his afterlife story is a *logos*? Dodds suggests that the story is a *logos* because it 'expresses in imaginative terms a 'truth of religion'' (Dodds 1990, 377), and Socrates himself says that he regards his story as a *logos* rather than a *muthos* because "what I am about to say I tell you as true."[1] (523a) But merely expressing some truth seems a tenuous basis for declaring a statement a *logos* rather than a *muthos*.

[1] The full Greek sentence the last phrase comes from: "ἄκουε δή, φασί, μάλα καλοῦ λόγου, ὃν σὺ μὲν ἡγήσῃ μῦθον, ὡς ἐγὼ οἶμαι, ἐγὼ δὲ λόγον: ὡς ἀληθῆ γὰρ ὄντα σοι λέξω ἃ μέλλω λέγειν." ("Give ear then—as they put it—to a very fine account. You'll think that it's a tale, I believe, although I think it's an account, for what I'm about to say I will tell you as true.") Translations here and elsewhere from Zeyl in Cooper 1997, with minor modifications.

After all, Plato several times in his dialogues has people aver that *muthoi* can express truths, such as *Republic* 2 377a, where Socrates says that the *muthoi* told to children are on the whole false but have some truth in them, *Phaedo* 114b, where he says that while he won't insist on the truth of the afterlife *muthos* he has just told about the fate of our souls, nonetheless it is worth believing that it says something true, or close to the truth, and Timaeus' description of his creation account as an *eikos muthos*, a 'likely tale,' one that conveys a likeness of the truth. (*Timaeus* 29d) While some true *muthoi* may also be *logoi*—such as Timaeus' creation story, which is called both a 'likely tale' and a 'likely account'—not all of them would be, such as the tales told to children. The difference between the two is that the children's tales just happen to be true, whereas Timaeus has some justification for believing that his story expresses something like the truth.[2] Without any such justification, Socrates' afterlife story in the *Gorgias* would be like the mere true opinions he discusses near the end of the *Meno*. While such opinions lead to correct actions (97b-c), they are unstable and do not remain securely in the mind, "so they are not worth much until one ties them down with an account of the reason why."[3] By calling his story a *logos*, an account, Socrates raises the expectation that it is not merely true, but that he has good grounds for his confidence that it is true. (Plato has Protagoras characterize *muthos* and *logos* along these lines. When Protagoras offers the choice to Socrates at *Protagoras* 320c between *muthos* and *logos*, and subsequently gives examples

[2] For a good discussion of why Timaeus' story is both a likely story and a likely account, see Brisson 2012, and of what it means for it to be an *eikos muthos*, see Burnyeat 2005.
[3] ὥστε οὐ πολλοῦ ἄξιαί εἰσιν, ἕως ἄν τις αὐτὰς δήσῃ αἰτίας λογισμῷ. 98a, translation by Grube in Cooper 1997 with modifications.

of each, "the former turns out to be an imaginative tale, the latter logical arguments," as Fowler puts it.[4])

When Socrates first introduces the afterlife story to Callicles, however, he launches into it after claiming that it will show that 'to arrive in Hades with one's soul stuffed full of unjust actions is the ultimate of all bad things,' with no further justification. (522e) And after his initial statement of the myth's main idea—that the dead are judged based on the state of their souls alone, stripped 'naked' of all externals like their bodies, wealth and social position so that their judgment can be as just as possible—Socrates simply declares at 524b, 'This, Callicles, is what I've heard, and I believe that it's true,' with no further explanation of who told him this story, why they are trustworthy, or why he believes it to be true.

However, I think that Socrates does have a straightforward argument to support his afterlife account—and although he does not explicitly offer it as such, the elements for this argument are all present in the *Gorgias* itself. And so, while he initially introduces the afterlife story to Callicles without any argument for it, he does have grounds for regarding it as a true account and not merely a tale. In part 2 of this paper, I explain how this argument proceeds. In part 3, I show how identifying this argument for the afterlife story helps us to understand better the afterlife rewards and punishments and how they relate to the wellbeing of people in the afterlife. In part 4, I explain why Socrates emphasizes the pain awaiting the wicked in the afterlife even though that pain is not

[4] Fowler 2011 50. See section 6 of Partenie 2022 for a brief discussion of further passages in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist* that seem to characterize *muthos* and *logos* in this way, where philosophers' doctrines are called *muthoi* because they are not backed up by argumentation. Fowler 2011 is an excellent exploration of the relationship between *muthos* and *logos* from Homer and Hesiod through Herodotus, Plato, and beyond.

what makes the afterlife bad for them. And in part 5, I argue that Socrates thinks that there literally is an afterlife, *contra* some recent attempts to interpret his account as simply being a metaphor for justice and punishment in this life.

2. Socrates' Argument for His Afterlife Account

After he lays out the basic idea that in the afterlife people will be judged based on the state of their souls alone, Socrates goes on to give more details about what happens to these souls. The state of a person's soul is determined by how they treated their soul when they were alive, i.e., whether they acted justly or wickedly. Just people are sent to the Isles of the Blessed, whereas wicked people are sent to Tartarus to receive painful but beneficial punishments. Curably wicked people receive rehabilitative punishments which improve the state of their souls. Incurably wicked people themselves cannot be benefited by their punishments—after all, they're incurable—but their suffering provides a beneficial deterrent to others, because their example is a warning about the badness of vice. (524b-526d)

Then he tells Callicles that his confidence in this afterlife story comes from the fact that nobody has been able to refute his overall *ethical* position, which he laid out in much of the dialogue, and which he had claimed is 'held down and bound by arguments of iron and adamant.' (509a) Here is the passage:

> Maybe you think this account is told as an old wives' tale, and you feel contempt for it. And it certainly wouldn't be a surprising thing to feel contempt for it if we could look for and somehow find one better and truer than it. As it is, you see that there are three of you, the wisest of the Greeks of today—you, Polus, and Gorgias—and you're not able to prove that there's any other life one should live than the one which is clearly advantageous in that world, too. But among so many arguments this one alone survives

> refutation and remains steady: that doing what's unjust is more to be guarded against than suffering it, and that it's not seeming to be good but being good that a man should take care of more than anything, both in his public and his private life; and that if a person proves to be bad in some respect, he's to be disciplined, and that the second best thing after being just is to become just by paying one's due, by being disciplined; and that every form of flattery, both the form concerned with oneself and that concerned with others, whether they're few or many, is to be avoided, and that oratory and every other activity is always to be used in support of what's just. (527a-c)

This is quite puzzling: how would Socrates' ethical claims support his eschatology? If anything, we'd expect the argumentative dependency to run the other way around: terrible punishments await the wicked in the afterlife, because the judges there accurately discern the state of their souls and what they deserve, and that is why doing injustice is worse than suffering injustice, and why one should be good, not merely seem so. Socrates knows that Callicles has not yet been convinced by his description of the this-world consequences of injustice, and so he brings in the afterlife consequences to strengthen his ethical case.

But Socrates' ethical claims can support his eschatology, once we introduce another key premise of this argument, which occurs at 507e-508a. At this point in the dialogue, Callicles has largely withdrawn as an interlocutor, leaving Socrates to lay out his position at length alone.[5] Socrates claims that Callicles misunderstands nature—both human nature and nature more broadly—and this misunderstanding leads him to aspire to take more than his fair share.

Again, the whole passage is worth quoting:

> Yes, Callicles, wise men claim that partnership and friendship, orderliness, self-control, and justice hold together heaven and earth, and gods and men, and that is why

[5] It's worth noting, as Schofield 2017 does, that Callicles' absence as an active interlocutor is relatively short-lived—*contra* the way the dialogue is sometimes characterized—lasting only from 505c until 509c.

> they call this universe a world order [*kosmos*], my friend, and not an undisciplined world-disorder. I believe that you don't pay attention to these facts, even though you're a wise man. You've failed to notice that geometrical equality has great power among both gods and men, and you suppose that you ought to practice getting the greater share. That's because you neglect geometry.

More briefly, we can summarize the passage as follows:

> The universe is just.

(This summary is probably *too* brief—how can we account for the apparent injustices in this world?—but it will do as a shorthand for Socrates' conviction that justice is not merely a human contrivance, but that the universe as a whole is structured in accordance with the principles of justice, friendship, etc.)

And this premise, along with his ethical convictions, provide a simple argument for Socrates' afterlife account. Here is its start:

(1) The universe is just. (from 507e-508a)

(2) If the universe is just, then people receive their due in the afterlife.

(3) Therefore, people receive their due in the afterlife. (from 2 and 3)

The support for premise (2) is also not hard to find within the dialogue: as Socrates acknowledges in his myth, in this life, people often do *not* receive their due, because appearances are deceiving—people who are bad seem good, and vice-versa, and things that are bad often appear good, and vice-versa, and so people are treated in ways that don't fit with they what really deserve. (523b-d) Dramatically, this point is reinforced by the dialogue's allusions to Socrates' future unjust conviction and execution, e.g., at 485e-486b and 521e-522e. And bad people appear good, escaping the corrective

punishment that is their due. If the universe is just, people should receive their due. And if they do not receive their due in this life, they must do so in the afterlife.

But this establishes only that people receive their due in the afterlife, not what it is for people to receive their due—in particular, for people to receive the punishments they deserve. Socrates' theory of punishment is not retributive, but largely rehabilitative: just punishment (usually) benefits the person who is punished by improving the state of their soul, in a way analogous to how medical treatment, although it may be painful, improves the state of the body. And even when punishment cannot benefit the person who is punished, because they are psychically incurable, it aims at benefitting those who witness their suffering and thereby come to realize how injustice harms the unjust person. So Socrates' ethical convictions give him good grounds for believing in the *particular* afterlife story he tells Callicles:

(4) For people to receive their due is for the just to be blessed, and for the wicked to receive appropriate punishments—rehabilitative punishments for the curably wicked who can be benefited by such punishments, and deterrent punishments for the incurably wicked to benefit others. (from 527a-c)

(5) Therefore, in the afterlife, the just are blessed, and the wicked receive appropriate punishments—rehabilitative punishments for the curably wicked who can be benefited by such punishments, and deterrent punishments for the incurably wicked to benefit others. (from 3 and 4)

Because curably wicked people should receive rehabilitative discipline, it would be unjust and unfitting if they simply stayed corrupt and never received the treatment they

need in order to be redeemed. For people who are irredeemably wicked, their corrupt souls ensure that they will fare badly in this life, no matter how well they appear to be doing, and they will continue to fare badly in the afterlife. But in the afterlife, because their true nature is exposed for others to see and to learn from, at least some good comes from their incurable suffering, so that it is not totally futile.

3. The Rewards and Punishments in the Afterlife

A reaction people often have when they first encounter the closing afterlife story is that it seems incongruous with the main argument of the dialogue. Most of the *Gorgias* insists that, regardless of the ways in which the just seem to suffer and the wicked seem to prosper, having a well-ordered, just soul is intrinsically good for you and ensures that you will be happy, whereas having a disordered, wicked one is intrinsically bad for you and ensures that you will be wretched. But at the end of dialogue, Socrates seems to turn to the prospect of heavenly reward and the threat of hellfire to scare Callicles straight. While most of the dialogue gives intrinsic reasons to be just, the closing myth, as Julia Annas puts it, 'is giving us a consequentialist reason to be just.' (Annas 1982, 125)

Many scholars have tried to resist Annas' 'consequentialist' interpretation of the myth on grounds of charity, not wishing to have Socrates make crude appeals to hellfire or other extrinsic consequences of virtue.[6] However, it may not be immediately apparent

[6] I discuss some of these papers below, which I draw upon when laying out how to respond to the consequentialist interpretation.

what's uncharitable about the consequentialist interpretation. Let's look at the *Republic* for a parallel case. Socrates spends most of the *Republic* arguing for the intrinsic goodness of virtue and the intrinsic badness of vice. But in book 10, before he gives the closing Myth of Er, he says that now that he's established his main thesis, he feels free to give back to justice the merely extrinsic goods, such as the rewards of a good reputation and the favor of the gods, which he had bracketed and set aside for the sake of his main argument. (*Republic* 612a-d) And to be fair to Socrates, this move seems legitimate, in order for him to give a full account of the advantages of justice. If this is so, and if in the *Gorgias* Socrates believes that there are extrinsic afterlife reasons to be just, in addition to the intrinsic this-life ones he has been defending for most of the dialogue, to bring up these additional advantages may seem to be equally legitimate.

However, if I am right about Socrates' argument for his afterlife account, we do have good reason on grounds of charity to resist the consequentialist interpretation. That's because Socrates' confidence in his account of what the afterlife will be like is based upon the ethical position he has been defending through most of the dialogue. And so his account of the afterlife should appeal to the same sorts of ethical considerations regarding the benefits of justice and the harms of wickedness appealed to earlier in the dialogue, rather than bringing in new and extraneous considerations. If it does not, it would be hard to understand how Socrates' ethical position could help justify his eschatology. Fortunately, it's not hard to give interpretations where the same ethical considerations *are* appealed to in both this life and in the afterlife, for the cases of (a) the just, (b) the curably wicked, and (c) the incurably wicked.

a. The Just and the Isles of the Blessed

The wonderful fate awaiting the just is given little airtime compared to the descriptions of the sufferings of the wicked. Still, to say that you should be just because you'll get to go to the Isles of Blessed may seem to be an appeal to extrinsic rewards, to the various luxuries and pleasantries awaiting the just there. But as Russell 2001, 563 notes, there is simply no textual support 'for the widespread assumption that the virtuous in the Isles of the Blessed are rewarded with such bonuses as pleasures and various luxuries.' Instead, he says, the only hint we have of what will happen to such people is given by Socrates when he claims at 526d that he will practice truth and live as a very good person both in this life and when he dies. And so, says Russell, 'Socrates will proceed to the Isles of the Blessed, and it is there that he will continue to pursue truth and moral goodness after his death. And this is exactly what we should expect the rewards for the virtuous to be.' (Russell 2001, 563–4) I think that this is spot on. And so, what makes the lives of the virtuous go well in the afterlife is precisely what makes them go well in this life.[7]

Now, Vlastos 1991 argues that according to the ethical theory of Socrates in the *Gorgias* and other dialogues, virtue is not the *sole* constituent of happiness, although it is the predominant one, and possessing it is sufficient for happiness. Instead, there are other intrinsic 'mini-goods,' such as bodily health, pleasure, etc., which when used rightly can

[7] Such a position would be similar to the hope Socrates expresses in *Apology* 40e-41b, that if there is an afterlife, he would be judged justly and would get to wander around among the famous dead continuing his mission of cross-examining people—in fact, that there could be no greater blessing than this (40e). We can contrast this with the afterlife hope expressed by Socrates in the *Phaedo*. While Socrates does express his belief in *Phaedo* 63b-c that in the afterlife he will get to meet good people, his fundamental reason for longing for the afterlife is that it is only in the afterlife, when separated from the body, that the philosopher's thirst for knowledge can be quenched, and thus that this life is fundamentally incomplete. (64a-68b)

increase the happiness of the virtuous person. If you buy Vlastos' position, you are free to add that in the Isles of the Blessed the virtuous will be rewarded with these 'mini-goods' also, and that these extra bonuses are consistent with the overall ethics of the dialogue. But this would not undercut Russell's point that the *primary* reward that the virtuous receive, and the only one mentioned in the dialogue, is to be able to continue to live virtuously. (Furthermore, in the disincarnate state of the blessed in the afterlife, it's not clear how they would be able to receive such bonuses—perhaps the best we could say, along Vlastos' lines, is that they would not suffer from 'mini-evils' such as bodily disease and discomfort.)

b. The Curably Wicked and Rehabilitation

It's true that Socrates says that curably wicked people, if they knew what was good for them, would prefer to be just and thus to avoid the punishments awaiting them in the afterlife. But it does not follow that Socrates is thereby appealing to extrinsic consequences for them to be just, if we keep in mind that the punishments they will receive are rehabilitative and that Socrates does not identify what is evil with pain, but with having a diseased soul.

In this life, what makes the lives of the curably wicked wretched is that they have a diseased soul. They often do not receive the punishment they should, but this is bad for them, as it's better for you to receive the punishment you need and deserve rather than to 'get away' with your wrongdoing. (476a-479d; 527b-c) Likewise, the curably wicked will arrive in the afterlife with a corrupted soul, and it is being in that state that is bad for them. They will receive painful punishments, but these punishments will be beneficial—

the prospect of painful rehabilitation should make the afterlife more *hopeful* for the curably wicked than it would otherwise be, rather than giving them an additional reason to avoid wickedness above the intrinsic badness of vice.

To use the sort of medical analogy Socrates is fond of in the *Gorgias*: let us imagine a land in which many people develop serious dental problems, with their teeth getting terribly rotten, but they're able to use cosmetic procedures to cover up the rot. But at age 50, every inhabitant of this land is sent off to Dentaltopia, where experts diagnose the true state of their teeth, and everybody with rotten but salvageable teeth will get the dental work done that they need. Now, it's true that these people are not going to enjoy the root canals and drillings they're going to receive, and we'd advise them to keep their teeth healthy to avoid them. But the real problem these people will be having in Dentaltopia isn't that they'll be undergoing painful dental work, but that they'll be arriving there with their teeth in such bad shape that they'll need it.

My overall argument doesn't hinge on precisely what these painful corrective punishments will consist in, but it's worth briefly exploring the issue. At 480c-d, Socrates mentions whipping, prison, fines, imprisonment, exile, and execution as punishments a person's unjust behavior might merit. But whether or not Socrates actually endorses these as forms of rehabilitative punishment,[8] they obviously cannot be meted out to bodiless

[8] Rowe 2007 argues that, because of his motivational intellectualism, for Socrates, punishment consists solely of refutation via the *elenchus*, whereas Brickhouse and Smith 2002 state that Socrates does approve of corporal punishment, and hence that Socrates is not a strict motivational intellectualist. Shaw 2015 argues that Socrates does not approve of corporal punishment, but he does approve of exile, confiscation of property, and execution, in addition to 'punishment' by *elenchus*. Most recently, Möbus 2023 argues that Socrates does include whipping as a type of punishment, but (*contra* Brickhouse and Smith) that doing so is consistent with his motivational intellectualism.

souls in the afterlife. An attractive suggestion is that the curable souls will receive a treatment similar to the one Socrates gives to some of his interlocutors. Because his speeches aim at what is best, rather than at merely flattering people, Socrates describes himself as one of the few Athenians to engage in the true political craft, whose goal is to maintain and improve the health of people's souls. (521d-e) He accomplishes his healing work though his use of the *elenchus*, uncovering and then refuting the false and unjustified opinions about what is good and bad that pollute people's souls. It's highly plausible that the souls of the curably wicked will undergo a similar treatment, as what is afflicting their souls is the same as what afflicts the souls of wicked people in this life.[9]

c. The Incurably Wicked and Deterrence

A non-consequentialist interpretation of what is going on with the incurably wicked will, by and large, follow the same lines as the one given for the curably wicked. Certainly, Socrates vividly describes the fate of the incurably wicked to scare his interlocutors straight. But because evil consists in having a diseased soul, not in pain, what really explains why these poor creatures will be so badly off in the afterlife isn't the pain they'll be experiencing, but what they've made of themselves.

Still, the case of the incurably wicked poses challenges of its own. For the curably wicked, their punishments are philanthropically justified by the benefits they will receive from this disciplinary treatment. But the incurably wicked are unable to be benefitted in this way. Rowe 2012, 196 suggests that in the afterlife 'the unjust will already have

[9] Shaw 2015, 85–7 makes this suggestion, as do Edmonds 2012, Rowe 2012 and Sedley 2009, although the latter three take the description of 'afterlife' punishments to be primarily a means of expressing truths about punishments in *this* life. I discuss this view of Socrates' afterlife account below.

punished themselves; if Rhadamanthus and the other judges add anything, it will be the realization by the 'defendants' of their own condition, and of the damage they have already done to themselves.' This is attractive, but it doesn't quite work as stated. The defendants are the cause of their own psychic damage, but, as Shaw 2015, 94 points out, at 525b the *punishments* are said to be inflicted *by another* (ὑπ' ἄλλου). So why inflict these punishments, and what are these punishments?

Socrates says that these punishments are justified by their benefits for onlookers, as a warning not to become incurably wicked. But this rationale may seem problematic, for two reasons. The first is that inflicting horrific suffering on a person unable to benefit from it, in order to help others, seems ethically wrong. Irwin 1979, 245 raises this worry, saying, 'incurables do not cease to have interests; and so why should these interests not be considered, as they are for curables? … [S]urely they are harmed if they are tormented after death without regard for their interests? Socrates might argue that they have chosen to act unjustly and become unjust, and therefore deserve all they get. But then he must appeal to retributive views.' The second is that, if Socrates is saying that the suffering that the incurables undergo as a result of their punishment will serve as a deterrent to others not to become incurable, that would be an appeal to extrinsic consequences to motivate being just: don't become this sort of person, or you will have these horrific pains inflicted upon you, ones that will do you no good.

These problems can be overcome if we suppose that the punishment of the incurably wicked is not different in kind from the punishment of the curably wicked. Both of them receive rebukes and refutations, as their false and damaging beliefs about what is valuable

are uncovered, cross-examined, and shown to be contradictory and indefensible. The curably wicked are able to take this treatment to heart and shed their damaging beliefs, whereas the incurably wicked cannot.

In this life, for instance, some of the people Socrates cross-examines see the error of their ways, such as Polus. On the other hand, while Callicles is never explicitly declared to be incurable, there are ominous signs. He boasts that he will not be held back by shame, unlike Socrates' earlier interlocutors, and Socrates agrees with him. (482c-483c; 487b) He refuses to engage in the *elenchus* in good faith, complains constantly about Socrates' questions, and withdraws from the conversation. (505c-d) And even though he is unable to defend himself against Socrates' refutations of his positions, he is often unwilling or unable to change his mind. After Socrates has beaten Callicles down, he presents him with an argument that, in order to gain the favor of the Athenian *demos*, Callicles would have to make himself akin to the *demos*, and he asks Callicles if he has anything to say in reply to this argument. (513a-c) Callicles responds, 'I don't know, Socrates—in a way you seem to me to be right, but the thing that happens to most people has happened to me: I'm not really persuaded by you.' (513c)

Whether or not Callicles is incurable, he doesn't appear to gain much from Socrates' intervention, although of course it's possible to speculate about the effects it might have had after their encounter. (My own speculation is that the most likely outcome of the encounter is that it reinforces Callicles' resentment of effete, logic-chopping philosophers.) As readers of the dialogue, what is more clear is the effect Socrates' cross-examination may have on many of the *onlookers*. (*Gorgias* 458b-c makes it clear that

Socrates and the other participants in the dialogue are not only interacting with one another, but also performing in front of an audience.) When Callicles first bursts into the conversation, some people may see him as a suave, eloquent Alpha Male who is willing to tell it like it is. But by the end of the encounter, Socrates has exposed Callicles as a whiny, confused, and ugly man-baby. It is evident that Callicles finds his humiliation at the hands of Socrates deeply unpleasant. But the takeaway of those observing their conversation will not be that they shouldn't emulate Callicles because they don't want to be humiliated by Socrates, but that they shouldn't do so because they don't want to be like Callicles.[10] We can presume that the afterlife punishments of the incurably wicked would serve as deterrents in a similar manner, that they help make evident the effects of vice on a person's soul. If this is right, we have a solution for the second problem mentioned above, that the afterlife punishments of the wicked seem to appeal to extrinsic consequences to motivate being just.

As far as the first problem is concerned, it depends on the supposition that the afterlife punishments of the incurably wicked set back their interests for the sake of benefitting others. But this is not so clear. It's important to keep in mind that what is bad, according to Socrates, is not pain, but having a corrupted soul. So if the punishments do not worsen the state of their souls, it seems to follow that they do not harm them.

Even if we grant, along Vlastos' lines, that suffering pain is a 'mini-evil,' a case can be made that the punishments are not on balance bad for the incurably wicked. In this life,

[10] Sedley 2009, 66 also argues along these lines regarding Callicles as a potentially incurable person, and the benefits of his cross-examination.

tyrants like Archelaus are utterly unaware of how corrupt they are. And, for Socrates, this state of blissful ignorance is *bad*—and bad for its own sake, not only because it prevents them from doing what they must to heal themselves. In the afterlife, such former tyrants will realize who they really are, and this knowledge will be painful. While it cannot lead to them being healed, as they're incurable, they're better off having this painful self-knowledge rather than being utterly deluded about themselves as they were in life, because of the intrinsic value of self-knowledge.[11]

4. Afterlife Pain and Deterring Unjust Actions

On my understanding of Socrates' afterlife account, it does not state that the reason to avoid wickedness is the pain awaiting the wicked. Instead, his account appeals to the same ethical considerations put forward in the rest of the dialogue, concerning the intrinsic goodness of psychic health and the intrinsic badness of psychic disease. However, if the message of the afterlife myth is that arriving at the afterlife with a damaged soul is the 'ultimate of all bad things' (522e) because one will continue to exist after death in such a bad condition, then why does Socrates focus so much on the painfulness of the punishments that await the wicked? Doesn't such a focus tell against my interpretation of the myth, and instead help support the idea that Socrates *is* appealing to extrinsic consequences of vice to scare people straight?[12]

[11] The *Gorgias* does not make it clear why some people are incurable. For an attempt to give such an explanation, see Brickhouse and Smith 2002.
[12] I thank Allison Piñeros Glasscock for raising this worry.

It must be admitted that Socrates stresses *both* the terrible condition of the wicked person's soul *and* how intense their suffering will be. He says, of some king arriving in the afterlife, that Rhadamanthus saw that

> …there's nothing sound in his soul but that it's been thoroughly whipped and covered with scars, the results of acts of perjury and of injustice, things that each of his actions has stamped upon his soul. Everything was warped as a result of deception and pretense, and nothing was straight, all because the soul had been nurtured without truth. And he saw that the soul was full of distortion and ugliness due to license and luxury, arrogance and incontinence in its actions. (524e-525a)

But he doesn't simply state how ugly the souls of the wicked are, he goes on to emphasize the pain of their punishments. Of the curably wicked, he states, 'their benefit comes to them, both here and in Hades, by way of pain and suffering, for there is no other possible way to get rid of injustice.' (525b-c) And of the punishments of the incurably wicked, he says, 'Others … do profit from it when they see them undergoing for all time the most grievous, intensely painful and frightening sufferings for their errors, simply strung up there in the prison in Hades as examples, visible warnings to unjust men who are ever arriving.' (525c)

However, the fact that Socrates emphasizes both the damaged state of the souls of the wicked and the intense painfulness of the punishments awaiting them does not, I think, undercut my interpretation of myth, if we take care to distinguish between what the myth itself states versus what moral message a person hearing the myth might take away from it, depending on the moral presuppositions they bring to it.

On my interpretation of his account, Socrates advances the following two assertions about the afterlife:

(i) Those who are unjust will arrive at the afterlife with horribly mutilated and disfigured souls.

and

(ii) Because the universe is just, those who are unjust will receive their due in the afterlife, i.e., extremely painful but beneficial punishments.

Socrates believes both (i) and (ii), and he himself takes (i) to be the correct reason for why arriving 'in Hades with one's soul stuffed full of unjust actions is the ultimate of all bad things.' (522e) Assertion (ii) actually makes the afterlife *better* for the unjust, at least for the curably unjust. And this is how readers or listeners who agree with Socrates' earlier arguments about justice, injustice, and punishment should understand his account. However, some people who hear his account, such as Callicles, are hedonists who do not agree with Socrates that being unjust is intrinsically bad. These people, if they were to accept Socrates' afterlife account, would mistakenly take (ii) as the reason to avoid injustice, given their own moral beliefs.

This outcome would not be ideal, but it is still preferable for somebody to do the right thing for the wrong reasons than to engage in unbridled injustice. Socrates says that tyrants and others with political power are most often among the ranks of the incurably wicked, because they're in a position to commit the most grievous errors and have 'ample freedom to do what's unjust,' whereas ordinary people avoid this fate because didn't have that freedom and instead remain in the ranks of the curably wicked. (525e-526a) That is, because of his supposed impunity from punishment for his wicked deeds, the unrestrained tyrant disfigures his soul much more than the ordinary person who is held back from

wickedness by the fear of bad consequences. Likewise, being held back from wickedness by the fear of afterlife punishment can benefit a person.[13]

So, Socrates does not soft-pedal the pain awaiting the wicked in the afterlife, and some people will believe that this pain is the reason for avoiding wickedness. It does not follow from this, however, that the take-home message of Socrates' account is that what makes the fate of the wicked in the afterlife undesirable really is the pain they'll suffer.

5. The Afterlife as a Metaphor for This Life?

One final benefit of discerning that Socrates does have an argument for his afterlife account is that it lets us see that the afterlife rewards and punishments he describes are supposed to literally occur in the afterlife. Several scholars have recently expressed doubts about this. Edmonds 2012, for example, argues that '[t]he myth does not supplement a deficient argument for the philosophic life; rather, Plato makes use of the narrative and the traditional aspects of the myth to depict the examination of the unexamined life in the here and now.' (166) He compares the myth to Socrates' metaphor of the water-carriers in Hades with leaky jars (493a-494a), which we should not take to be expressing literal truths about what happens in the afterlife; instead, it's a vivid way of illustrating the effects of a lack of self-control on the soul. Likewise, the main function of the concluding afterlife myth is to 'to illustrate more clearly several different aspects of the

[13] This is similar to Socrates' description of merely apparent virtue in *Phaedo* 68c-69d, where people engage in temperate or courageous actions simply for the sake of avoiding pain. While it does not qualify as genuine virtue, that doesn't mean it's worthless. See Reed 2020, 130 for more on this issue, and the whole article for an account of deficient virtue in the *Phaedo*. See Shaw 2015, 87–92 for how restraining people from wrongdoing by punishment and the fear of punishment can be ethically beneficial.

Socratic *elenchos*.' (183) Similarly, Sedley 2009 says that 'myths of afterlife punishment serve as allegories for moral truths about this life.'(53) These include both the operations of the *elenchus* and the inadequacy of current systems of punishment. Sedley is agnostic about whether the myth expresses further truths, saying, 'It could well include the conviction, which Plato was to develop in the *Phaedo* and subsequent dialogues, that whatever short term injustices there may seem to be, in the long run there is indeed justice in the world, and that to delay death is at most to postpone justice, not to lessen its inevitability.' (67) But it's also possible to conclude 'that the true core of the closing myth does not depend on belief in the soul's survival after death.' (68) Rowe 2012 follows Sedley. Once we see that the myth's main message is to contrast the ordinary and inadequate Athenian method of punishing people with Socrates' method of 'punishing' people via the *elenchus* and improving their souls, 'it is no longer clear whether the 'myth' is really about Hades, or about this world.' (190)

These interpretations have something to be said for them. They're certainly right that one of the functions of the myth is to express truths about ethical matters in this life. And each paper pays close attention to the details of the myth, showing how they help shed light on the earlier material. Furthermore, if you take seriously Socrates' claim at 527a-c that the ethical positions he defended earlier give him confidence in the truth of his afterlife story and even make it a *logos*, it's not unreasonable to conclude that he makes this claim precisely because the function of the myth is to restate allegorically those very same positions.[14]

[14] Sedley 2009 53–4 says something roughly along these lines.

But these interpretations don't fit comfortably with other things said in the dialogue. One is Socrates' statements at 524b-d (i) that death is the separation of the soul from the body, (ii) that the soul continues to exist after its separation from the body, and (iii) that the state of the soul upon death depends on how one treated it during life. All of these statements seem to be made literally, and to indicate his confidence that there is indeed an afterlife, before he resumes his mythical description of what this afterlife is like. Second is Socrates' repeated exhortations, after he gives the myth, that the account he has just given shows that the person who acts justly will live well and be happy both in this life and in death.[15] If the myth is supposed to express allegorically truths about this life alone, these exhortations would be highly misleading.

And once we see that Socrates' confidence in his afterlife account is not based only on his ethical convictions, as he says at 527a-c, but also on his confidence that justice holds together the universe—heaven and earth, and gods and men (507e-508a)—we can conclude that his account is supposed to express truths about what will happen in the world to come, as well as ethical truths about this life.

[15] The first exhortation is at 527c: 'So, listen to me and follow me to where I am, and when you've come here you'll be happy both during life and at its end, as the account indicates.' (ἐμοὶ οὖν πειθόμενος ἀκολούθησον ἐνταῦθα, οἷ ἀφικόμενος εὐδαιμονήσεις καὶ ζῶν καὶ τελευτήσας, ὡς ὁ λόγος σημαίνει.) The second is at 527e: 'So let's use the account that has now been disclosed to us as our guide, one that indicates to us that this way of life is the best, to practice justice and the rest of excellence both in life and in death.' (ὥσπερ οὖν ἡγεμόνι τῷ λόγῳ χρησώμεθα τῷ νῦν παραφανέντι, ὃς ἡμῖν σημαίνει ὅτι οὗτος ὁ τρόπος ἄριστος τοῦ βίου, καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην καὶ τὴν ἄλλην ἀρετὴν ἀσκοῦντας καὶ ζῆν καὶ τεθνάναι.)

6. Conclusion

Even if the argument of this paper succeeds, it leaves open how to understand many of the details of the afterlife story—for instance, that Aeacus judges people from Europe, Rhadamanthus people from Asia, with Minos rendering a final judgement if Aeacus or Rhadamanthus are perplexed.[16] But I hope it has shown (i) why Socrates believes his story is a *logos* and not merely a *muthos*, (ii) what the afterlife rewards and punishments described in the myth are like, so that they can be consistent with his views about the value of justice and of wickedness in this life, (iii) why Socrates can stress the painfulness of afterlife punishments even though he does not believe that this pain is what makes it bad to enter the afterlife as a wicked person, and (iv) that these rewards and punishments do literally take place in an afterlife.[17]

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[16] Fussi 2001 contains a good exploration of the significance of many of these sorts of details.

[17] I'd like to thank Allison Piñeros Glasscock, Hal Thorsrud, and the anonymous reviewer for *Phronesis* for their helpful comments, and Yun-Cheng Wang, whose question about how the *Gorgias'* ethics could support its afterlife myth prompted this paper.

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