

Blushing in Plato

Paul W. Gooch¹ filled a lacuna in Platonic studies in addressing the roles that blushing plays in the dialogues. Gooch starts with contemporary explanations of the psychology of blushing. He supplies a plausible account of the distinctions recognized nowadays between blushing, embarrassment, shame, humiliation, etc. So armed, he reads those contemporary distinctions into the psychologies of five Platonic blushers. (Gooch does not address Charmides' blush in the *Charmides* [158c5]). That methodology is wildly anachronistic, for Plato divided social reality with the cleanly cut and unequivocal distinctions of his age, not with those of ours.

Plato and Aristotle agree that shame is a kind of fear of ἀδοξία [ill-repute] at being seen doing or saying something dishonorable.² Hippocrates blushes for shame in the *Protagoras* at *Prt.* 312a2–7 in imagining the public disapprobation that he would arouse by presenting himself to the Greeks as a professional sophist. The six other blushings in Plato's recognized dialogues³ do not fit that definition well. I argue here that those blushes are not responses to public disapprobation. Instead, the blushers have fallen into an *impasse* (ἀπορία) at their inability to resolve a logical contradiction or quandary. Plato's interest is in individuals' cognitive processes

¹ "Red faces in Plato," *Classical Journal* 83 (1987–88), 124-127.

² *Laws* 1.646e10–647a2; *Nic. Eth.* 1128b10–13.

³ An instance of blushing occurs in the *Amatores* at 134b4. The first ἐραστής [lover] insults the second ἐραστής as an over-muscled and uneducated dolt. The second ἐραστής then insults the first ἐραστής back mocking the sedentary life-style of an intellectual that has led to his scrawny appearance. That mocking in the presence of their favorites makes the first ἐραστής blush. Blushing for shame at one's public disrepute for having done or said something dishonorable is represented as a serious matter in Plato and Aristotle. Blushing for shame at being ridiculed for one's scrawniness before others, on the other hand, is comical. At *Euthy.* 271b3–4, the scrawniness of Crito's son Critoboulos is no laughing matter to his father. The authenticity of the *Amatores* has been challenged by Stallbaum and others. According to the stylometric analysis of Plato's works by Gerard Ledger, *Re-counting Plato: A Computer Analysis of Plato's Style* (Oxford 1990), the *Amatores* shows a closer statistical match to the works of Xenophon than to recognized works of Plato.

rather than their reactions to the opinions of the many.⁴ Blushing for shame in the case of Kleinias, Lysis, Charmides, Dionysodorus, Hippothales and Thrasymachus is self-directed and autonomous.

Kleinias blushing

The association of blushing for shame and the inability to resolve a contradiction is established when Euthydemus asks Kleinias yet another trick question about the verb *μανθάνω* (*Euthy.* 275d3–6):

O Kleinias, regarding human beings who are learning, are they the wise or the unknowing?

And the youngster, faced with such a great question, blushed and in a state of *ἀπορία* looked to me.

Socrates presently explains to Kleinias that Euthydemus and Dionysodorus have been confusing him by exploiting the ambiguous meaning of the verb *μανθάνω*, pointing out that "the same word is used for people who are in the opposite conditions of knowing and not knowing."⁵ *In silence*, Kleinias blushes at his inability to answer a trick question. He looks to Socrates for help. He is not blushing at the disapprobation of others for doing or saying something dishonorable.

Lysis blushing

According to the principles applying to friendship that Socrates has examined,⁶ no one enjoys

⁴ At *Cri.* 44c6–7, Socrates advises Crito not to concern himself with the disapprobation of others.

⁵ Translation of Walter Rangeley Maitland Lamb, Loeb Classical Library, *Plato, with an English Translation* (Cambridge, MA 1924), 393. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the Greek are mine. I follow the text of John Burnet, *Platonis Opera* (Oxford 1901–1906).

⁶ Socrates examines "likeness" (τὸ ὅμοιον), "affinity" (τὸ οἰκειῖον), "opposition" (ἐναντία), "usefulness" (τὸ χρησιμὸν), "the good" (τὸ ἀγαθόν), "the bad" (τὸ κακόν), the self-sufficiency of the good (Ὁ δὲ γε

reciprocal friendship (*Lys.* 213c5–8):

"How then will we deal with it," said I, "if neither those befriending (*sc.* unilaterally) will be friends nor those being befriended (*sc.* unilaterally) will be friends nor those (*sc.* reciprocally) befriending and being befriended?"

The provisional theories about friendship that Socrates has examined, each severally and in sum, negate the fact that in real life, Lysis and Menexenus enjoy reciprocal friendship.

Menexenus declares with an oath that "there is no good way through for me (*sc.* to resolve that contradiction between theory and reality)" (οὐ πάνυ εὐπορῶ ἔγωγε). Lysis comes to the same conclusion and blushes (*Lys.* 213d2–3):

"Nor to me, Socrates, does there seem (*sc.* to be a way to resolve that contradiction)," said Lysis, and as he spoke he blushed.

Recognizing his inability to resolve the contradiction between theory and the fact of his reciprocal friendship with Menexenus in real life, Lysis blushes. He is not blushing because he is embarrassed before others that he spoke though he did not intend to. Aside Plato's authorial omniscience, Lysis cannot imagine that others are privy to his intention.

Charmides blushing

Charmides blushes when Socrates asks him a trick question (*Chrm.* 158c3–d6):

So tell me yourself whether you agree with him (*sc.* Critias), and that you affirm that you are already sufficiently provided with σωφροσύνη [prudence], or are you deficient in it?

Unlike Kleinias' mute appeal to Socrates for help, Charmides has no need of a third party to

ἰκανὸς οὐδενὸς δεόμενος κατὰ τὴν ἰκανότητα [*Lys.* 215a7–8]), the infinite regress of the first friend (πρῶτον φίλον), and the intermediate (τὸ οὐτ' ἀγαθὸν οὔτε κακόν).

understand and explain why Socrates' question is unanswerable:

At this Charmides blushed . . . and said "Were I to deny that I am σώφρων [prudent], it would be an odd thing to say and I would be calling Critias and many others liars to whom I seem to be σώφρων, as he (*sc.* Critias) says. Were I to claim it and praise myself, it will likely be seen as hateful. So I am unable to answer you."

Charmides blushes for shame and explains why he is unable to answer Socrates' question. Charmides has not aroused ἀδοξία, for he has kept *stumm*, neither claiming to possess σωφροσύνη nor denying that he possesses it. He blushes for shame, a somatic affect that accompanies the realization that he is unable to answer Socrates' trick question, just as Kleinias blushed for shame because he was unable to answer Euthydemus' trick question.

Hippothales blushing

In the *Lysis*, Hippothales blushes twice at 204b5 and 204c and does not name the boy he loves. Socrates' insistent questioning has cast him back into an existential *contretemps* which he is unable to resolve, that the boy he loves hates him.⁷

Hippothales turned all sorts of colors

Hippothales is said to have changed color at *Lys.* 222b2 when he heard Lysis and Menexenus begrudgingly acknowledge that social necessity devolved on them to be friendly to a lover, be he ever so uncongenial. Hippothales' suit had been rebuffed by Lysis because the boy found him hateful. Lysis does not find Hippothales οἰκεῖος [congenial]. The faces of Caucasians redden in

⁷ Ktesippos alleges that aforesometimes Hippothales spoke and sang the boy's name at every opportunity. Perhaps Ktesippos is referring to a time *before* Lysis rejected Hippothales. We do not know whether his companions mocked Hippothales or consoled him when they heard of his failure. Perhaps only Ktesippos knew of Hippothales' failed courtship having been informed thereof by his *paidika* Menexenus who is Lysis' best friend. It is not said whether Lysis ever heard Hippothales' encomnia of Lysis' ancestry.

anger,⁸ for shame, and in sexual arousal.⁹ Hippothales is not angry. Nor is he blushing for shame. It may be inferred from his altered coloring and the pleasure accompanying it that he is sexually aroused by the prospect of successfully renewing his courtship of Lysis, and having his way with a beautiful boy.¹⁰ As Hippothales is not feeling shame, the verb ἐρυθρίαώ would be the wrong word to designate his coloring, so Plato must make do with a circumlocution.

Thrasymachus blushing

It is hard to believe that Plato intended Socrates' negation of Thrasymachus' description of unjust rulers in history to be taken seriously.¹¹ Thrasymachus blushes because Socrates' analogy of the doctor, a λόγος [theory] which the sophist grudgingly accepts as proved, contradicts his historically accurate description of the unjust ruler who "takes more" than other would-be rulers and subjects alike. If it is true that a knowing and excellent (ἀγαθός) doctor *qua* doctor is not in competition with and does not "take or have more" (πλεονεκτεῖν) than other competent doctors, and advantages patients by perscribing medicines and effecting therapies according to best medical practice, it is no less true that knowing and excellent wrestlers, runners, competitors in every category at the Games, generals, admirals, soldiers all intend to prevail

⁸ Cf. A. Merla & G. L. Romani, "Thermal Signatures of Emotional Arousal: A Functional Infrared Imaging Study," *Proceedings of the 29th Annual International Conference of the IEEE EMBS Cité Internationale, Lyon, France* (2007), 248–249; Tarja Peronmaa & Maria Oikkonen, "Red color facilitates the detection of facial anger—But how much?" *Plos One* 14 (2019), 1–13.

⁹ Cf. Amanda C. Hahn, Ross D. Whitehead, Marion Albrecht, Carmen E. Lefevre & David I. Perrett, "Hot or not? Thermal reactions to social contact," *Biol. Lett.* 8 (2012), 864–867. Characteristically of the period, Charles Darwin omits sexual arousal from his account of blushing in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, Chapter 13, 1872.

¹⁰ The phenomenon of sexual arousal is also represented at *Chrm.* 155d3–4: (*sc.* the body of) Socrates became enflamed and his soul seemed to bound from his body when beautiful Charmides' cloak fell open and Socrates saw his genitals (εἶδόν τε τὰ ἐντὸς τοῦ ἱματίου καὶ ἐφλεγόμην καὶ οὐκέτ' ἐν [*sc.* οἴκῳ] ἑμαυτοῦ ἦν). Cf. this author's "A note on *Charmides* 168e9–169a1," *Hermes* 109 (1981), 126–128.

¹¹ Cf. Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's "Republic"* (Oxford 1981), 52: "But of course the reader is not satisfied that Socrates has in fact won the argument."

over those against whom they strive. And unlike the doctor's concern for her patients, knowing and excellent game-hunters, fishermen, herdsman and cooks all exploit the objects of their sciences. Unjust rulers would seem to fall naturally into that class of profession. Having formally accepted the tendentious analogy about the practice of excellent doctors, Thrasymachus blushes at finding himself in the cognitive *impasse* of being unable to resolve the contradiction between his historically accurate description of unjust rulers prevailing over others and the prescriptive proposition that Socrates has argued him into. The extremely self-confident Thrasymachus has never been ashamed by the disapprobation of others, as Socrates reports. His blush for shame here accompanying his recognition of a unresolvable cognitive quandary is self-directed and autonomous.

Dionysodorus blushing

Euthydemus expounds a novel epistemology that postulates knowing as an absolute condition of an individual transcending time and space. If Socrates knows all things now, it follows that he knew all things when a child and before he was procreated and before the earth and heaven came to be, if Euthydemus wills it.¹² To sabotage the brothers' λόγος, Socrates introduces the *problématique* of an all-knowing individual uttering a falsehood (*Euthy.* 296e3–297a2):

"How am I to assert that I know certain things, Euthydemus? For instance, that good men are *unjust*? Tell me, do I know that or do I not know that?" "You know it indeed," he said. "Precisely what?" I said. "That good men are *not* unjust." "That is well known of old," I said. "But I am not asking you that. Rather (*sc.* I am asserting) that good men are *unjust*. Where did I learn that?"

Unlike his brother, Dionysodorus clearly heard Socrates uttering a falsehood. Euthydemus mishears Socrates' falsehood conforming the words to his understanding of the matter. When

¹² The sophists' λόγος is a broad-brush parody of Plato's own great λόγος which notoriously privileges absolute knowledge and deprecates the real world. It would have occurred to Plato that his theory of the ideas might be a self-willed mental construct.

not philosophizing, Euthydemus and Dionysodorus both know that in the real world good men are just. Dionysodorus observes correctly that Socrates' words are false, that Socrates has nowhere learned that good men are unjust. Euthydemus points out that to say so destroys their λόγος. Dionysodorus blushes. He is not blushing in fear of public ill-repute for having said or done something dishonorable. He is blushing at the unresolvable inherent contradiction of an all-knowing Socrates uttering a falsehood.

Socrates asks Euthydemus whether his brother seems to him to speak correctly in denying that good men are unjust. Dionysodorus jumps back into the conversation denying that Euthydemus is his brother. That is to deny that individuals born to the same parents are related to their parents and one another by nature and bear the names of those relationships. Dionysodorus is more daring than his younger brother. In asserting that Socrates possesses an absolute knowledge that knows all things at all times, Euthydemus does not deny the existence of the generations of mankind and heaven and earth. In denying that Euthydemus is his brother, Dionysodorus calls into question the existence of the natural generations of mankind. Unlike the other blushers, Dionysodorus is a philosopher.¹³ By removing himself from and refusing to acknowledge the real world,¹⁴ a stance which represents additional parody of Platonic philosophy, he resolves the quandary he blushed at earlier: the contradiction of a theoretically all-knowing Socrates uttering a falsehood about something in the real world.

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¹³ Cf. this author's "Good and bad philosophers in Plato's *Euthydemus*," 2019, 2–4
<http://www.charlesumlauf.com/Euthydemus.htm>

¹⁴ Cf. the picture of the philosopher at *Tht.* 174b1–3: "For in fact it escapes the notice of such a one (*sc.* the philosopher) of his next door neighbor. Not only does he not know his (*sc.* neighbor's) occupation, but his ignorance extends little short of not knowing whether (*sc.* the neighbor) is a human being or of some other species."