

# The art of the good life: Plato's *Gorgias* and the technicity of ethics

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## Abstract

Plato's *Gorgias* sees Socrates frequently compare justice to the practice of a *technē*. This comparison has traditionally been taken to express the so-called doctrine of Socratic intellectualism, according to which knowledge of the good necessarily leads to living a good life. But such interpretations overlook how crucial *technē* is to Socrates' conception of justice – justice is not merely analogous to *technē* but governed by the same *logos*. What we find is thus not so much an argument for a particular moral psychology, as it is an account of an inherent technicity of ethics. This article uncovers Plato's account of ethics' relationship with artifice, both in *Gorgias* and *The Republic* as well as in the ethical philosophy of Aristotle, suggesting that the question of ethics and artifice has always held high importance in Western philosophy, and that we should regard it with the same importance today.

**Keywords:** Plato; *Gorgias*; *technē*; ethics; artifice

I could not imagine a work of art that would prompt a person to do something bad.

Andrei Tarkovsky

## Introduction

At the end of Wolfgang Schirmacher's "On the world view of a *Vita Activa*", a reading of Hannah Arendt's famous work on human activity and the bearings it could have on our understanding of technics, artifice, the "art of life", and ethics, we encounter the following bold and hopeful prediction: "Technology will once more be identical with the knowledge of life [*Lebenswissen*]: outside of *technē*, there exists for humans no world at all."<sup>2</sup> It is this identity between *technē* and knowledge of life, or more precisely the identity of *technē*, justice, and the good life, that I aim to investigate here.

Schirmacher's path to concluding the existence of this identity is largely paved with the phenomenological insights of Arendt and Martin Heidegger, but as he himself remarks along the way, Arendt's investigation is

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<sup>2</sup>Wolfgang Schirmacher, "On the world view of a *Vita Activa*", *Poiesis*. 15 (2013): 33.

not only rooted in phenomenology, but is likewise “an analysis stemming from the Greeks”<sup>3</sup>. It is indeed also to the Greeks that this article will turn to show that there are other philosophical paths that lead us to such an identity, and that the question of this identity is not a new one. Specifically, this article will look to Plato and his dialogue *Gorgias*, in which Socrates frequently compares the concept of justice to the practice of a craft, of a *technē*. This comparison is usually regarded as a prime example of a particular doctrine of moral psychology, the so-called Socratic intellectualism; as an “analogy drawn between the learning of justice and the learning of a craft such as medicine, music, and the like in the ‘intellectualist’ passage at 460B.”<sup>4</sup>

My suggestion is that this is not in fact an analogy. Justice, the mastery of the art or the craft of the good life, at least as far as the *Gorgias* is concerned, is not *análogos* (ἀνάλογος) to *technē*, but is governed by the *same* logos. In other words, I wish to suggest the interpretation that Socrates is only a proponent of an ethical intellectualism insofar as he is a proponent of what I will call a technical intellectualism, and thus that he argues for the existence of an identity between the knowledge that constitutes a craft and the knowledge required by justice and the good life – an identity between *technē* and *Lebenswissen*, to paraphrase Schirmacher.

To this end, I will discuss the nature of both Socratic intellectualism and *technē* as they appear in *Gorgias*, and on the basis of this discussion suggest that intellectualism is not peculiar to knowledge of the good and just, but rather seems a proponent of the knowledge involved in any *technē*. Once this is established, I will very briefly turn to some passages of *The Republic* in order to show that this technical intellectualism is perhaps not even peculiar to the Socrates of *Gorgias* but can be traced in other parts of Plato’s works, and thus that an identity of ethics, technics, and artifice can be traced in more than one of Western philosophy’s most formative texts.

Finally, I will turn to Aristotle’s conception of the relationship between *technē* and ethics, a conception which is almost exactly the opposite of the one put forward by Socrates, since Aristotle explicitly argues against the notion of any identity between the two. This shows how the conception of this relationship appears to be one of the key differences between Socratic and Aristotelean ethics, and thus that the question of this relationship has been a fundamental ethical question and point of debate ever since the Greeks; that it is a question that continuously reappears and seemingly demands to be asked anew.

## 1. Socratic Intellectualism in *Gorgias*

First of all, I must establish what the doctrine of Socratic intellectualism is said to be. Gabriela Roxana Carone has summarized it as follows: “Socrates [...] is known for his claims that knowledge of the good is sufficient for virtue, and that no one does wrong willingly as everyone wills the good”<sup>5</sup>. Once an agent has proper knowledge, *epistēme* (ἐπιστήμη), of the good, just, or virtuous, she will never act unjustly, or as Thomas Blackson has put it: “The right action follows, given true beliefs, and this is the hallmark of Socratic intellectualism”<sup>6</sup>. Once I have true beliefs, i.e. knowledge, of the good, I the good.

In the context of *Gorgias*, this line of thought is first encountered in the above-mentioned “intellectualist passage” of 460b–c, where Socrates is trying to get Gorgias to explain what kind of *technē* rhetoric is. Socrates enumerates several crafts and how the people that have learnt (μεμαθεκώς) these are thus craftsmen: “[...] a man who has learnt building is a builder, is he not? [...] he who has learnt music, a musician [...] and so on with the rest on the same principle; anyone who has learned a certain art has the qualification acquired by his particular knowledge [epistēme]”<sup>7</sup>, to which Gorgias agrees (*Gorgias* 460b). Socrates then follows this same principle as he turns to discussing the case of the just man:

Socrates: And so, on this principle [κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον], he who has learnt what is just is just?  
 Gorgias: Absolutely, I presume.  
 Socrates: And the just man, I suppose, does what is just.  
 Gorgias: Yes.  
 Socrates: Now the just man must wish to do what is just? [τὸν δίκαιον βούλεσθαι δίκαια πράττειν;]  
 Gorgias: Apparently  
 Socrates: Hence the just man will never wish to act unjustly?  
 Gorgias: That must needs be so (*Gorgias* 460b–c)

This is a clear-cut example of Socratic intellectualism. According to Socrates, once someone has learnt justice,

<sup>3</sup>Schirmacher, “On the world view of a Vita Activa”, 29.

<sup>4</sup>Gabriela Roxana Carone, “Calculating machines or leaky jars? The moral psychology of Plato’s *Gorgias*” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 26, (2004): 61.

<sup>5</sup>Carone, “Calculating machines”, 57.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Blackson, “Two interpretations of Socratic intellectualism”, *Ancient Philosophy* 35, will always wish to do what is good, and never to do what is contrary to (2015): 27.

<sup>7</sup>English quotes from *Gorgias* rely on Lamb’s translation in Plato, *Gorgias* (1925).

which means having the particular *epistémē* of what is just, and has thus become a just person, she will always wish to act justly and never wish to act unjustly. Here we find, to quote Blackson once more, “the hallmark of Socratic intellectualism”.

We should already here note how Socrates reaches his intellectualist conclusions about justice. He does so by following a principle, a *logos*. This *logos* is the same for all crafts (τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον), and it is through this *logos* (κατὰ τοῦτον τὸν λόγον) that he arrives at the above quoted iteration of his intellectualist doctrine. This suggests that the doctrine of intellectualism is not peculiar to justice, but is rather a property of *technai* in general, and thus that Socratic intellectualism is a technical rather than ethical intellectualism. That suggestion is only strengthened when one takes a closer look at the account of *technē* that Socrates presents in *Gorgias*, which we will now investigate more thoroughly.

## 2. What makes a Craft?

The first and most important condition for being counted as a craftsman, a *technikós* or *demiurgós* as Socrates also calls it in *Gorgias*, is the knowledge that has already been discussed above. The craftsman is one who has learned the particular knowledge of her craft, and it is by virtue of having learned this that she is a craftsman; as Socrates put it, one who has learned carpentry is carpenter, one who has learned music a musician, and so on.

We learn more about what this knowledge is in 465a, where Socrates explains to Polus why he does not regard rhetoric as a craft: “and I say that it [rhetoric] is not an art [τέχνη], but a habitude [ἐμπειρία], since it has no account to give of the real nature of the things it applies, and so cannot tell the cause of any of them” (*Gorgias* 465a). This reveals two important things about the conception of a craft. For one, it requires a knowledge that is different from that of experience, *empeiria*. Secondly, it sheds light on what it is that the craftsman needs to know about, namely the nature of the techniques of her craft, the “things it applies”, which means to know the causes of these techniques and of why she is applying them. This is the particular knowledge of the craftsman that Socrates mentions in 460b.

But apart from necessitating a knowledge of its nature and its causes, there is another thing that seems to make something a *technē*: a craft is always governed by some kind of teleology, in the sense that a craftsman, when applying a *technē*, always aims at what is best for the object of her craft. This is made plain later in the dialogue, when Socrates is in conversation with Callicles, and once again addresses the theme of *technē*. Socrates here presents the example of “the good man, who is intent on the best when he speaks” (ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἀνὴρ καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ βέλτιστον λέγων) (*Gorgias* 503d). The good man always has a certain intent, “a view to some object”, and in this he is “just like any other craftsman” (δημιουργοί) (*Gorgias* 503d-e).

Apart from once again connecting the virtuous, the good, to the *logos* of a craft, we see that the knowledge that makes a person a craftsman also installs a certain aim in that person; a view to something, an intent on the best, on τὸ βέλτιστον. Once I have the knowledge of a *technē*, I will always aim to apply the techniques of my craft with a view to doing what is best in the context of said craft. Lee Franklin has provided a very clear explanation of this via the example of the *technē* of medicine and the technical procedure of cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR):

CPR is a procedure for restoring a healthy heartbeat to a patient suffering cardiac arrest. Therefore, CPR can be performed only in circumstances where the procedure would make a contribution to the health of the patient. To see this, imagine a ‘CPR practitioner’ who claimed to be an expert in CPR, but performed his procedure for anyone who would pay, without regard for health [...] there is an important sense in which she would not really be performing CPR; pounding on the chest of someone whose heart is already beating is not CPR. [...] Since the aim of health is the central factor in determining those conditions, one cannot pursue CPR expertly without expertise in the field that pursues health, Medicine [...] CPR is expertly performed only under the direction of Medicine.<sup>8</sup>

CPR is an application of the *technē* of medicine, and once you know medicine, you will only apply CPR in cases where it is the best (*béltiston*) course of action. If CPR is administered to someone who is not in need hereof it is not really CPR, and the person performing is no *iatrikós*, no physician. A *technē* requires knowledge of the nature and causes of its applications, and it is governed by a teleology that makes the craftsman act in the best way possible considering the object of her craft.

But the opposite seems to hold true as well, if we follow Socrates; the craftsman will never aim to act in ways that are opposed to what is best according to her craft. This is evident from the example above: a doctor will never want to perform CPR on a person with a beating heart. Socrates makes the same point earlier

<sup>8</sup>Lee Franklin, “Technē and teleology in Plato’s *Gorgias*” *Apeiron* 38, no. 4 (2005): 250–251.

in the dialogue, when discussing with Gorgias whether or not rhetoric is a craft. After finally getting an answer from Gorgias that satisfies him and having just gone over the connection between knowledge and craft, Socrates states that “it follows from our statements that the rhetorician must be just”. Gorgias concurs, and Socrates adds that “[h]ence the rhetorician will never wish to do what is wrong [ἀδικοῦν]” (*Gorgias* 460c); the rhetorician, by virtue of being just, will never wish to do what is unjust.

Socrates makes this point again soon after, stating that “since the speeches it [rhetoric] made were about justice [...] it is impossible for the rhetorician to use his rhetoric unjustly or consent to do wrong” (*Gorgias* 460e and 461b). Later in the dialogue Socrates will deny rhetoric the status of *technē*, but at this point he is still entertaining the thought for the sake of argument, and we can now make clear sense of his argumentation: the supposed craft of rhetoric aims at justice, and thus the rhetorician, insofar as he is a craftsman of rhetoric, will never wish to act unjustly, as this would be in conflict with the aim of his craft.

To sum up, we can now point out three properties of a *technē*: First, it requires a particular knowledge. Second, once this knowledge is obtained by an agent, she is a craftsman, which means that she will obey the teleology of her craft. Thirdly, this also means that the agent will never wish to act in a way that is contrary to the telos of her *technē*. These three components are exactly the same ones that mark out the doctrine of Socratic intellectualism: knowledge of the just leads to just actions, and she who knows justice will never act unjustly. We can now see that this doctrine, at least concerning the *Gorgias*, is not at all peculiar to justice – in fact it is exactly the same doctrine that governs *technē* in general. And thus, we can also see that the Socratic intellectualism of the *Gorgias* is a technical one, not one peculiar to ethics.

This can be further emphasized by returning to two passages that I have previously discussed. In section one, we saw that the clearest formulation of Socratic intellectualism in *Gorgias* is arrived at by first presenting a *logos* that is the same for all crafts (τὸν αὐτὸν λόγον), and then, following this *logos* (κατὰ τοῦτου τὸν λόγον), making conclusions about justice. In short, justice is treated by Socrates as a craft, not merely as something that resembles one. This is encountered again in the section of Socrates’ conversation with Callicles that I discussed earlier in section two, where “the good man” was said to be “just like any other craftsman”. It could seem then, that the ethical intellectualism present in *Gorgias* is a result of justice and ethics being species of *technē*, and when following Socrates in *Gorgias*, we thus seem to arrive at a position which is a reversal of Wolfgang Schirmacher’s credo that “[t]o live artificially means to be versed in the art of life”<sup>9</sup>. According to Socrates, it is rather the case that to be versed in the art of the good life means to live in accordance with the *logos* of a craft, the *logos* of artifice and technics.

### 3. Beyond the *Gorgias*

In the beginning of her already quoted article on Socratic intellectualism, Gabriela Roxana Carone describes how one of the most common readings of the phenomenon of Socratic intellectualism has been to

tak[e] the *Gorgias* as a transitional dialogue, the ‘Socratic intellectualism’ part of it portraying the views of the historical Socrates [...] and the, so to speak, ‘irrationalist’ part of it portraying views that Plato himself (as opposed to Socrates) is starting to consider in a way that anticipates the further developments of the *Republic*<sup>10</sup>

But what if Socratic intellectualism, and with it Socrates’ technical intellectualism and its stipulation of an identity between knowledge of a *technē* and knowledge of the good life, remains present in the *Republic*? This would not only reveal a problem for such a transitional or developmentalist approach to Plato’s works, but would just as importantly reveal that the conception of the good life as a craft and artifice is not the peculiarity of a single dialogue, but is an idea that exists across the works of Plato – even in a text as instrumental to Western thought as the *Republic*. In the following, I will attempt to show that such an intellectualism does feature in the *Republic*, but in the new technical iteration that has been described here.

In book I of the *Republic*, Socrates makes several remarks regarding the nature of a *technē*. For instance we learn that every craft produces a good: “[...] each craft benefits us in its own peculiar way, different from the others. For example, medicine gives us health, navigation [...] safety while sailing, and so on with the others” (*Republic* 346a)<sup>11</sup>. Why does every *technē* provide us with some good? Because, argues Socrates, “there is no deficiency or error in any craft” (*Republic* 342b). We also learn that a craft has “no further needs – but the advantage of that of which it is the craft” (*Republic* 342c). Just as we saw in *Gorgias*, a craft will never inspire error, and has no other aim than what is best for its object. Socrates adds to this that “anyone who intends to practice his craft well never does or orders what is best for himself – at least not when he orders as his craft

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Schirmacher, “Ethics and artificiality,” *Inscriptions*, no. 1 (2018).

<sup>10</sup> Carone, “Calculating machines,” 55.

<sup>11</sup> All quotes from the *Republic* are from Grube’s translation in Plato, *The Republic* (1997).

prescribes – but what is best for his subject” (*Republic* 347a). To be a proper craftsman means to always do what is best in the context of one’s *technē*, and we thus see that the teleological element of craft is still present in the *Republic*.

To this we can add the requirement of knowledge, as Socrates goes on to say in book II that “[n]o [...] tool makes anyone who picks it up a craftsman [...] unless he has acquired the requisite knowledge” (*Republic* 374d). And finally, the *Republic* also contains the notion that justice and virtue are to be regarded as *technē*. Returning again to book I, we find Socrates asking the following question: “[...] what does the craft we call justice give, and to whom or what does it give it?” (*Republic* 332d). Being just is still regarded as a *technē*, which in the context of the *Republic* also still means having a particular knowledge, being governed by a telos of what is best for the object of one’s craft, and never willingly erring.

This obviously does not mean that we should now regard technical intellectualism and its claims as the central theme of the *Republic*. But it does mean that technical intellectualism and the idea of justice as a craft cannot be disavowed as mere ‘transitional’ folly; the conception of justice and the good life as a kind of *technē*, the conception of justice being of the same *logos* as any other craft, is clearly of consequence to Plato’s ethical thinking, which – it is now evident – is always also a thinking concerned with technics and artifice.

#### 4. Beyond Plato

One could argue though, that the question of an identity between ethics and *technē* is perhaps not a transitional issue in Plato’s thinking, but nevertheless only a *Platonian* issue – that Plato may very well have been preoccupied with it, but that this should only be a matter of concern for those that are interested in the peculiarities of Plato’s ethical philosophy. There is, however, an easy way to dismiss such viewpoint, and so I will end this article by taking a brief look at the notion of *technē* and its relationship to ethics in the works of Aristotle. This will show that *technē* plays an important role in especially the *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE), and that Aristotle denies both that a *technē* is intellectualist in nature, and that justice, or any virtue for that matter, should be regarded as a *technē*. Since this is the case, I want to suggest that the conception of *technē* and its relation to ethics is a more important cause of the differences between Socratic and Aristotelean ethics than we have previously thought, and importantly also that the question of an identity between the two is a crucial ethical question that reaches beyond the work of Plato.

Aristotle and Socrates both take knowledge to be a necessary condition for mastering a craft. As Tom Angier has remarked, “Aristotle certainly follows his predecessor in affirming the epistemic grounding of the crafts, for *technē* and *epistémé* are strongly associated, and often identified with each other in his works”<sup>12</sup>. Like in *Gorgias*, this knowledge is also taken to be one that regards the nature and the causes of one’s craft. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle points out that the mark of craftsmen is that they have knowledge of “the why and the cause” of what they are doing, whereas the man of experience (*empeiria*) simply proceeds through trial and error (*Metaphysics* 1.1.981a 24–30)<sup>13</sup>. Even though Aristotle does not seem to defend as strong a schism between crafts and experience as Socrates, they both fundamentally agree that knowledge is what sets the craftsman apart.

But regarding the teleology of a craft, a crucial difference appears. From the opening line of NE, we learn that “[e]very skill [τέχνη] and every inquiry, and similarly every action and rational choice, is thought to aim at some good” (NE I.1 1094a)<sup>14</sup>. All crafts have an aim then, and they all aim at some good: “[...] the end of medicine is health, that of shipbuilding, a ship, that of military science, victory, and that of domestic economy, wealth” (NE I.1 1094a). This can so far seem to look very similar to what we have seen Socrates argue about the teleology of a craft, but for Aristotle, knowing a craft does not necessitate that the craftsman will always wish to do what is best: “a science [...] enables us to do a thing that is not the object of the science” (EE II 1227a)<sup>15</sup>. For Socrates, we saw that it was impossible for the rhetorician to do what was unjust, if we granted that he was just qua his craft. This is not so for Aristotle: “In skill [τέχνη] the person who misses the mark voluntarily is preferable, but with practical wisdom, as with the virtues, the reverse is true” (NE VI.5 1140). It is possible, and even preferable, for the skilled person to willfully act contrary to her aim. Aristotle does not share the Socratic conception of crafts as governed by a teleology, and thus he can neither share the notion of a technical intellectualism.

What the above also shows is that Aristotle distinguishes between crafts and what is concerned with virtue. Not only does he deny any thought of a technical intellectualism, but he also denies that justice, the good, or any virtue, can be regarded as a craft in any other way. This happens in NE’s book six, chapter five, where

<sup>12</sup>Tom Angier, *Technē in Aristotle’s Ethics* (2010), 38.

<sup>13</sup>All quotes from *Metaphysics* are taken from the translation by Lawson-Tancred in Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (1998).

<sup>14</sup>All quotes from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are taken from Crisp’s translation in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (2004).

<sup>15</sup>All quotes from the *Eudamian Ethics* are taken from the translation by Rackham in Aristotle, *Eudamian Ethics* (1935).

Aristotle dedicates four arguments to this end. Here, I shall only take a closer look at one of them, as it suffices to establish how Aristotle's conception of *technē's* relationship to ethics and virtue differs markedly from that presented in the *Gorgias*: "practical wisdom cannot be [...] skill because action and production are generically different. [...] For while production has an end distinct from itself, this could not be so with action, since the end here is acting well itself" (*NE* VI.5 1140b).

As we have seen, this is not the case for Socrates, for whom just actions are the product, the end, of a *technē* called justice, following the same logos that makes music the end of a musician, etc. Furthermore, we saw that the good man, in virtue of being like any other craftsman, had a view to some object: doing what is best. The difference appears subtle at first but is substantial – for Socrates, living a good and just life is a *technē* that has the objective of producing good and just action and which will never allow the good and just agent to act unjustly. For Aristotle, a good and just act is not the product of a craft, since they are their own end – if they were the ends of a craft, an agent would be able to willfully act unjustly and be commended for this.

Their differing opinions on craft thus create two different ethical doctrines, but more importantly the difference between them seems to largely hinge on their approach to the relationship between ethics and artifice, revealing that the question of an identity between the two is not some Platonian idiosyncrasy, but has been a question of utmost importance to the possibility of thinking about ethics since at least the earliest days of Western philosophy. As such, and to the degree that Nietzsche was right in claiming that our way of thinking, like that of Plato himself, remains "under the pressure of the daemonic Socrates"<sup>16</sup>, this question remains with us today, and has been re-posed and answered again several times, most recently but not least by thinkers like Wolfgang Schirmacher and Bernard Stiegler. And while this article began with the premise that I would try to follow the path of the Greeks rather than that of phenomenology, I do think that the reappearance and importance of this question means that we would do well by approaching it in a Heideggerian manner. Not Heideggerian in the sense of staging it as *the* fundamental question in philosophy, nor Heideggerian in the sense that the method must be phenomenological, but in the sense that we ought to think about *how* this question is asked, whether we ask it properly, and what path(s) to follow in our search for answer and response. That is at any rate what this article has attempted to do, by showing that the question can be posed and addressed from within the works of the Greeks, and not only from the works of their phenomenologically minded students.

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<sup>16</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (2000), 78.

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