

Rational Action in Protagoras' Theory of Punishment and Gorgias' *Palamedes*
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In the Platonic dialogue that bears his name, Protagoras argues for a conception of punishment that has often been understood as radically revisionary: proper punishment does not look to the past offense alone, but is directed at the future and practiced for the sake of ἀποτροπή, often translated as ‘deterrence.’ Recent debate about Protagoras’ view of punishment has largely centered on whether it is properly conceived as a ‘deterrence’ theory and on the extent to which we should regard it as ‘enlightened’ (Mackenzie 1981, Saunders 1991, Vlastos 1991, Stalley 1995). Less attention has been paid to the argument that Protagoras gives for his position. The tacit assumption is often that it is a normative or even a moral argument, as its modern analogues typically are. This paper argues to the contrary that Protagoras proceeds from an analysis of the practice of punishment insofar as it embodies genuinely rational action. Implicit in Protagoras’ argument is a conception of rational action as necessarily directed at an intelligible goal that guides the rational agent’s decisions. Though the analysis has normative implications inasmuch as it is presumably better to be rational than irrational, the argument is not intrinsically normative. A parallel to Protagoras’ view emerges from a series of arguments in Gorgias’ *Palamedes*: Palamedes’ intelligence excludes the possibility of his guilt because none of the goals that might render treachery intelligible could actually be attained through plotting against the Greeks. Gorgias thus associates practical intelligence with an ability to identify intelligible goals and the effective means to reach those goals. If Plato’s text reflects Protagorean thought to any significant degree, then it shows, in conjunction with the *Palamedes*, one important strand of sophistic thinking about human action and practical rationality.

Mackenzie, M.M. 1981. *Plato on Punishment*. Berkeley.

Saunders, T.J. 1991. *Plato’s Penal Code*. Oxford.

Stalley, R.F. 1995. ‘Punishment in Plato’s *Protagoras*’, *Phronesis* 40.1, 1-19.

Vlastos, G. 1991. *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*. Cambridge.