The Interpretation of ‘No one does wrong willingly’ in Plato’s Dialogues

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I propose to examine the meaning given to it when the sense of ‘willingly’ is governed by the special sense of ‘wish’ (βουλήσις) stipulated in the Gorgias, where the thesis is appealed to as one which provides an answer to the problem of the sufficiency of ‘wish’ as a defence against wrongdoing. The stipulation yields two possible meanings for the thesis, and I will consider them in detail, noting the differences between the two. I will then contrast the interpretation adopted from these alternatives by Plato in the Gorgias with the interpretation of the thesis which is found in the Protagoras. Finally, I will argue very briefly (i) that in the Gorgias the thesis first appears in a distinctively Platonic form, and that the meaning given to it here is the basis of Plato’s interpretations of it in all later dialogues; (ii) that the form which the thesis takes in the Protagoras is most probably its original Socratic form.

At Gorgias 509d-e the following problem is raised. Is wish or desire (βουλήσις) not to do wrong a sufficient condition of not doing wrong? Or is βουλήσις insufficient? To achieve one’s aim, is there not need also of a certain power or capacity (δύναμις) and skill (τέχνη)? An answer to these questions can be given, Socrates suggests, if it is granted that no one does wrong willingly. The truth of this proposition, he says, has been accepted in an earlier part of the discussion. Callicles too now accepts it. What answer, then, does it yield?

The reference at 509e to the earlier part of the discussion is a reference to 466d-468e. This passage does not explicitly formulate the thesis that no one does wrong willingly. It does, however, discuss the meaning of βουλήσις. And Socrates’ reason for referring back to it at 509e is that he considers that the meaning which it stipulates for βουλήσις gives to the thesis that no one does wrong willingly (βουλό-μενος) a significance which will yield an answer to the questions raised about the sufficiency of βουλήσις. That this is his reason is indicated
by his substitution of \( \textit{boul\acute{m}enos} \) for the normal \( \textit{ek\acute{on}} \) in his statement of the thesis at 509e.

Three points are made at 466d-468e about the meaning of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \). Each concerns the object of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \). The first is that only what is desired for its own sake (not as a means to an end) is properly called an object of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \). The second is that only objects of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \) in this sense can be described as good. The third is that only what is 'really' good for the agent is an object of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \); thus if what the agent thinks is good for him is 'really' bad for him, then it is not an object of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \).

The connexion of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \) with \( \textit{d\acute{on}e} \) and \( \textit{t\acute{e}chn} \) is indicated by the context. Socrates is challenging the claim that the political orator has the greatest power in the state. He maintains that truly great power is the ability to attain what is good for one (466e6-467a10). And his third stipulation about the use of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \) allows him to contrast the object of \( \textit{boul\acute{h}} \) (what is 'really' good for one) with 'what seems good to one' (466d4ff.). It also allows him to argue that, since one cannot attain what is good for one without an understanding \( \textit{no} \) of what is good for one, then the political orator has no true power. For it has already been argued that rhetoric is not a genuine \( \textit{t\acute{e}chn} \). This is now taken to imply\(^2\) that the political orator has no understanding of his true good, and hence does only what seems good to him. Finally, it is implicitly assumed that understanding what is good for one is both a necessary and a sufficient condition of the ability to achieve it. Hence, by definition, the political orator has no true power.

This final implicit assumption is a basic assumption of the thesis that virtue is knowledge, which is the thesis that knowing what is good for one is a necessary and a sufficient condition of achieving it. A passage in the \textit{Hippias Minor} (365dff.), which illustrates the meaning of \( \textit{d\acute{on}e} \) in the sphere of professional skills, is a useful starting-point in considering to what extent the thesis is based on the analogy of professional skills. In this passage it is established that ability implies knowledge, and that in any professional skill the able man is the good man (365d-368a). \( \textit{D\acute{on}e} \) means ability to achieve one's aim, to succeed in what one wishes to do. Given the aim, the good man is able to achieve it. E.g., the good runner is able to win the race, and hence satisfy his wish. The bad runner loses. What he achieves is bad. It does

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1 For Aristotle's discussion of Plato's stipulation, see \textit{E.N.} III, iv.
2 Note the association of \( \textit{no} \) with \( \textit{t\acute{e}chn} \) at 466e13-467a1.