

Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy

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CHAPTER

1 Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*

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Abstract

Gorgias's Helen is one of the earliest and most enigmatic Greek philosophical texts. An epideoxis, or set-piece speech, it's a pioneering argument about moral responsibility and a fascinating Sophist argument for the power of language [logos]. In it, Gorgias attempts to show that the beautiful Helen of Troy, whose adultery and flight with Paris was the proximate cause of the Trojan War, should suffer no unjust blame for the war nonetheless. If either fate, the gods, logos, or eros (love) compelled her, she is blameless. Though rigorously argued, it is also playful and self-undermining (it can be either a narrow argument that Helen's act was irrational and self-destructive, or a claim that no one is ever responsible for anything). This paper attempts to do justice to all these different dimensions.

Keywords: Gorgias, sophists, logos, eros, moral responsibility, Helen of Troy

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Ever since their own day, the ancient Greek sophists have provoked outrage. Thanks to early enemies like Aristophanes and Plato, they stand perennially accused of "making the weaker argument the stronger," defending the indefensible by unfair means. The term "sophist" [*sophistês*] had negative connotations almost from the start, and over time has just come to mean "person who argues unfairly." But in a more neutral sense, "sophist" is simply the name we use to pick out an exciting and by no means indefensible intellectual movement—a loose group of fifth-century BCE Greek thinkers, writers, and teachers who included Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus, Gorgias, and perhaps Socrates himself. It is a controversial question who should count as one of the sophists and on what grounds, just as it is with "Enlightenment" thinkers or "postmodernists." In the case of the sophists, not only is there no one thing that all of them had in common, in most cases only tantalizing scraps of their works have survived. We can catch only a glimpse of what all the fuss was about.[1]

p. 2 Among the few complete sophistic texts that have come down to us, two stand out for their brilliance, complexity, and sheer nerve. These are a pair of *epideixeis* by Gorgias: the *On Not-Being* and the *Encomium of Helen*. An *epideixis* was a set-piece speech, a public demonstration of persuasive skill aimed at prospective

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students. And Gorgias was the greatest and most celebrated rhetorician (i.e., teacher of public speaking) of his day—indeed, the term "art of rhetoric" [*rhetorikê*] was probably coined by Plato in order to classify him.[2] In both the *On Not-Being* and the *Helen*, he gives a rigorous demonstration of a completely outrageous thesis. The *On Not-Being* proves that nothing exists; that if it did exist, we could not know it; and that if we did know it, we could not communicate it to each other. The upshot of this deadpan exercise in triple nihilism is left for the reader to decide. Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* is less ambitious but equally subversive. It is a logically valid proof that Helen of Troy—infamous adulteress, legendary provoker of a disastrous world war—should not be blamed for running off with Paris. And the upshot seems to be much broader—perhaps that, quite generally, nobody can ever be to blame for *any* action. But as with the *On Not-Being*, what Gorgias really intends is anybody's guess.

p. 3 In fact, one of Gorgias's principal intentions is probably to baffle us about his intentions. This can be seen most clearly in the frame of the *Helen*, which is a neat exercise in undermining the reader's expectations. Gorgias opens with a pious declaration:

> For a city, the finest adornment [*kosmos*] is a good citizenry, for a body beauty, for a soul wisdom, for an action virtue [*aretê*], and for a speech truth; and the opposites of these are indecorous. (1)[3]

Praise and blame should be distributed accordingly, Gorgias states; thus in speaking of Helen, "My only wish is to bring reason to the debate, eliminate the cause of her bad reputation, demonstrate that her detractors are lying, reveal the truth, and put an end to ignorance" (2). But then at the end of the argument, Gorgias waves goodbye with an air of self-satisfied amusement:

> With my speech I have removed this woman's ill repute; I have abided by the rule laid down at the beginning of my speech; I have tried to dispel the injustice of blame and the ignorance of opinion [*doxa*]; I wished to write this speech for Helen's encomium and for my own amusement [*paignion*]. (21)

That last phrase comes as a bit of a jolt. Where does it leave his earlier talk of truth and fairness? Which is the aim here, reason or entertainment? Does Gorgias *believe* what he has argued? Does he want *us* to believe it? If
p. 4 persuading us of Helen's innocence is not ↳ the point, then what *is* the point? A central theme of Gorgias's discourse, as we will see, is the persuasive power of *logos*, speech; but why exactly should we be impressed by that, if we are not in fact persuaded?

In what follows, I will make the case for the *Helen* as a groundbreaking and still important philosophical argument about moral responsibility—and as we will see, about the nature and powers of language [*logos*] as well. Gorgias's arguments are carefully constructed and merit close consideration; indeed, the *Helen* and the *On Not-Being* are probably the earliest complex, logically rigorous philosophical arguments to have survived in the Western tradition. At the same time, philosophy done Gorgias's way is very different from what we are used to —or for that matter, from what they were already used to in the fifth century BCE. That is part of what makes it exciting. The *Helen* offers a tantalizing glimpse of a road not taken—of a way of philosophizing which is playful and rhetorical, slippery and self-undermining, and whose results are deliberately left open for the reader to decide. Its arguments and ideas influenced Aristotle; but the spirit is closer to Derrida, and the combination is like nothing else on earth—except for Gorgias's *On Not-Being*, perhaps, its even more peculiar big brother.

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I. The Argument

The *Helen* is supposedly an *encomium*, or speech of praise; but as the later rhetorician Isocrates points out in a *Helen* of his own, Gorgias's version is really more of a defense speech (*apologia*, 14–15). It undertakes to defend Helen by proving that she should not be blamed for having run off to Troy with Paris, thus precipitating the
p. 5 Trojan War. Poets like Stesichorus and Euripides had already tried ↳ this contrarian stunt, but by a revisionist debunking of the ancient myths (following Herodotus, *Histories* 2.120): really, Helen never went to Troy at all! With typical sophistic one-upmanship, Gorgias sets himself a harder task. Taking as given the truth of the Homeric story, he aims to vindicate Helen nevertheless. He will do so by considering the different *causes* which might have led her to misbehave so dramatically; in each case, he will argue, she turns out not to be blameworthy.

The argument is transparent and cleanly structured. After some rhetorical warming up, Gorgias sets out the possibilities in the following schema:

> Either she did what she did because of the will of fortune and the plan of the gods and the decree of necessity, or she was seized by force, or persuaded by words <or captured by love>. (6)

The rest of the *Helen* works through these alternatives in the order announced. Thus the basic structure is as follows:

[1] Helen went to Troy either because of fate and the gods (I here simplify "the will of fortune and the plan of the gods and the decree of necessity") or because of force or because of persuasion by speech [*logos*] or because of *erôs*.

[2] If she went to Troy because of fate and the gods, Helen is not to blame.

[3] If she went to Troy because she was forced, Helen is not to blame.

[4] If she went to Troy because she was persuaded by *logos*, Helen is not to blame.

[5] If she went to Troy because of *erôs*, Helen is not to blame.

[6] Therefore, Helen is not to blame for going to Troy (from 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5).

p. 6 The argument is thus in "tree" or partition form, proceeding by the exhaustion of all possible alternatives. The beauty of this form of argument is that it can operate successfully against a background of almost complete ignorance or skepticism. That is, neither Gorgias nor the reader need have any antecedent view as to *which* of these possible causes is true or even most probable: all that matters is that the alternatives considered cover all the possibilities and that the rejection of each is adequately grounded. This display of how we can proceed securely from the unknown to something known is clearly an important part of the fun for Gorgias. (The Socratic elenchus has a similar something-from-nothing magic, albeit of a negative kind: by uncovering internal contradictions, Socrates can refute the positions of others without requiring any knowledge himself.)

A complication, which I here note only to set aside, is that Gorgias's crucial premise [1] is introduced with a significant qualification: "I will set forth the causes because of which it is likely [*eikos*] that Helen's journey to Troy took place" (5). Now *eikos* is a key term in Greek oratory, especially on legal questions where direct evidence is lacking: an orator in a lawsuit tries to persuade the jury that his version of the disputed events is *eikos*. (The precise meaning of *eikos*, which is also a key term in Plato's *Timaeus*, is much disputed by scholars: "likely," "plausible," "probable" (though not in any mathematical sense), and "reasonable" all get a piece of it.) So Gorgias is here placing the whole argument of the *Helen* under the sign of legal reasoning and the reconstruction of events which cannot be known with certainty. And logically speaking, if premise [1] is merely

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eikos, then Gorgias does not really claim to exclude all other explanations of Helen's flight; and the conclusions of the argument can at most be *eikos* as well. However, Gorgias seems to forget or ignore this major qualification as the argument proceeds; so I shall do the same.

Setting this complication aside, Gorgias's argument is valid: *if* the premises are true, so too is the conclusion.
p. 7 This is not yet saying ↳ much, though, since one or more of the premises might be false. I will focus first on the all-important conditionals in [2]–[5], and begin by making the reasoning embedded within each premise a bit more explicit. Useful work can be done here by a phrase which I have already found indispensable, though no real equivalent was available to Gorgias himself: *moral responsibility*. By moral responsibility I mean the kind of behavioral control which we attribute to an agent in deeming him or her legitimately subject to praise or blame for an action. I don't praise or blame you for someone else's actions (unless your actions were somehow the cause of his) nor for purely physiological behavior (breathing, sleeping) nor for actions which I take to be in some other way beyond your control. Of course, how to tell which actions really *are* beyond our control is the hard part—a deep problem which has long engaged moral philosophers, psychologists, and legal theorists.

Two principles of Aristotle's are useful here. First, an agent can be deemed morally responsible (and thus blameworthy) only for what she does *voluntarily* [*hekôn*]. This again is not saying much, until we fill in what makes an action voluntary; but it stakes out the crucial idea that moral responsibility depends on the psychological state of the agent in relation to the action. (Whether to construe this in terms of a particular psychological entity called "the will" is a further question; nothing I say here will depend on that.) And second, an action is *not* voluntary—we might even say it should not count as an *action* of that agent at all—if it is produced by force or compulsion. As Aristotle points out, I might "do" something (say, knock down another person) because I was pushed by the wind (*NE* 1110a3). But this was involuntary on my part, and so I can hardly be blamed for it.

Both "Aristotelian" principles seem to be anticipated and embedded in Gorgias's premise [3]. (I scare-quote
p. 8 because of course Gorgias got there first.) If Helen was taken to Troy by force—if she ↳ was raped by Paris, dragged off, bundled into the boat kicking and screaming—then it follows that she is blameless. Intuitively, this seems impossible to deny—there seems to be no difference between this and the "pushed by the wind" case. (Of course, in many traditional cultures women *are* blamed for being raped, but I take that to represent either a kind of magical thinking about honor and cleanliness or a misogynistic assumption that their own behavior must have provoked the assault—either way, not a genuine alternative to the "Aristotelian" principles.) Force excludes voluntary action; therefore Helen is not morally responsible for behavior which is caused by it.

These principles hold the key to Gorgias's reasoning in the other premises as well. For in each case, his strategy is to liken the cause in question to physical force. Of the "fate and the gods" possibility, he notes that the gods are stronger than us; and, he argues, "by nature the stronger is not restrained by the weaker but the weaker is ruled and led by the stronger: the stronger leads, the weaker follows" (6). Of persuasion by *logos*, he says that it "has the same power, though not the same form, as compulsion [*anankê*]" (12), that the person who is persuaded is forced [*ênankase*] (12), and that speech "molds the mind as it wishes" (13). He also speaks of "the compulsions [*anankais*] of love" (19), and he asks, "if love is a god, with the divine power of gods, how could a weaker person refuse and reject him?" (19). In other words, the *erôs* option [5] collapses into the "fate and the gods" one [2], which has already been shown to render actions involuntary. The term repeatedly emphasized here is *anankê*, compulsion. This is not exactly the same thing as physical force or violence [*bia*]; but it is the more general category of which physical force is a species. Compulsion is *whatever* affects us irresistibly, overriding our voluntary decision making in just the way that physical force does. *Anankê* is commonly used
p. 9 for what is fated and inescapable, especially if it is unwelcome—and thus for torture ↳ in particular. In the *Timaeus* Plato uses it for the fixed natural forces of the elements, which even the creator God must work with rather than against (47e5–48a4).

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So Gorgias's argument in [2]–[5] is that divine intervention, persuasion, and *erôs* are, like physical force, kinds of compulsion; and as such, they exclude voluntary action and therefore moral responsibility. Modern readers —and for that matter ancient ones—are likely to have very different reactions to these different cases. That physical force counts as compulsion is almost a tautology. Divine intervention and fate? Well, maybe—that is something for believers to debate among themselves, and ancient thinkers took both sides of this question. Ancient Greek religious thought certainly provides some support for Gorgias's claim that divine power is irresistible. But an ancient reader might still reject Gorgias's inferences here; for in both Homer and the tragedians, divine power and human moral responsibility somehow coexist. In modern terms, most of the ancient Greek poetic tradition seems to have taken a *compatibilist* view of free will. Thus Achilles seems to be both fated and free when he chooses the destiny which fulfills his nature; and the fate of any person is somehow an expression of his character.

Where the alarm bells definitely go off is with premises [4] and [5]. For now I will briefly discuss Gorgias's arguments for these; I will return later to consider [4] in more depth. For his discussion of *logos* here is outsize and extravagant and clearly meant to stand out: the *Helen* as a whole may be just an elaborate frame for what Gorgias wants to say here about speech.

Gorgias announces premise [4] with a triumphant claim. "Speech [*logos*] is a mighty master, and achieves the most divine feats with the smallest and least evident body" (8); therefore—you can guess where this is headed
p. 10 —the person who is persuaded acts under compulsion. (*Logos* has a dizzying range of meanings ↳ in ancient Greek, including "account," "reasoning," "ratio," "argument," and even "rationality." But it is pretty clear that "speech" is the right translation here, both because the case at hand is Paris's sweet talk to Helen and because all Gorgias's other examples are of one person speaking to another.) Gorgias's examples of masterful speech come in two batches. First he cites poetry, incantations, and witchcraft—types of speech selected to display its urgent, positively uncanny power over our physical behavior. Poetry can make us shudder, laugh, gasp, and weep, all over the adventures and sufferings of nonexistent people. Incantations generate pleasure and pain; witchcraft and magic produce powerful illusions. From here Gorgias segues to a general explanatory point: the powers of persuasive speech stem from our dependence on opinion [*doxa*]. If we had certain knowledge of the past, present, and future, we would not be easily persuaded to change our minds; but opinion is all we have, and it is weak, unstable, and easily changed. At this point Gorgias can already draw the all-important inference:

> What reason is there, then, why Helen did not go just as unwillingly under the influence of speech as if she were seized by the violence of violators? For persuasion expelled her thought—persuasion, which has the same power, but not the same form, as compulsion [*anankê*] … . The persuader, then, is the wrongdoer, because he compelled her, while she who was persuaded is wrongly blamed, because she was compelled by his speech. (12)

The argument here involves a refinement or supplement to the second "Aristotelian" principle. What exactly makes something count as compelled, and so involuntary? Aristotle himself takes as such any action originated
p. 11 "outside" the agent; but this notoriously raises ↳ more questions than it answers. Gorgias is here pressing the case for a broader conception of involuntary action: if an action is caused by a condition of the agent *which is itself the result of force or compulsion* and therefore involuntary, then so is the action. This works well enough for the case of physical force: we might say that strictly speaking, what causes me to knock over the other person is my loss of balance; but what compelled me to lose my balance was the hurricane. Likewise (though more controversially) with "fate and the gods": if Phaedra loves Hippolytus only because Aphrodite has set a spell upon her, her love and the actions arising from it plausibly inherit their involuntary status from the forcible condition "being enchanted by a god." We might wonder exactly what *makes* the spell—or any kind of psychological condition—count as a case of compulsion; intuitively, it seems sufficient that, like a state caused by physical force, it acts on me without leaving me any choice about how to react.

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Gorgias now drives the point home with a second batch of examples of persuasive speech: scientific theories, public debates, and conflicting philosophical arguments. These deal with unseen and unknowable future events; so they can make the audience of a debate flip-flop from one ignorant opinion to another. Finally, by way of conclusion, Gorgias presents his scientific explanation for this phenomenon, already hinted at in the opening description of speech as a "body" (8):

> The power of speech has the same effect on the disposition of the soul as the disposition of drugs on the nature of bodies. Just as different drugs draw forth different humors from the body—some putting a stop to disease, others to life—so too with speeches: some cause pain, others joy, some strike fear, some stir the audience to boldness, some benumb and bewitch the soul with evil persuasion. (14)

p. 12 In short: speech actually *is* a physical force, acting on a psyche which is by implication itself a material part of the body. The argument here seems to be something more than a matter of metaphor or analogy; and we have evidence elsewhere that Gorgias (perhaps following the scientist-philosopher Empedocles) held a materialist theory of sensation. In Plato's *Meno*, Gorgias's former student Meno approves as a definition the claim that "color is an effluvium from shapes which fits the sight and is perceived." That is, sight takes place when tiny particles of color flow from an object into our eyes (Plato, *Meno* 76d). (We might wonder how to take this: how could the author of *On Not-Being*, which argues that *nothing exists*, really have held a scientific theory of perception? But then the *On Not-Being* is equally problematic for any claims or communication at all, if taken at face value.) However, nothing in the *Helen* really hangs on this scientific theory. It is offered as an explanation for effects which we can observe for ourselves, and it is these effects—human powerlessness and malleability in the face of persuasive speech—which are important to the argument.

Taken as a whole, this argument about the powers of *logos* is usually found quite unpersuasive (an irony I return to in section III), not to mention morally outrageous. But where exactly does it go wrong? I have found that when students are asked to provide a critique of the *Helen*, what they write often amounts to "*but we do so* hold people morally responsible for actions caused by persuasion!" This is what the psychologists and experimental philosophers call "dumbfounding"—the stuttering repetition of an intuitively held position as if it were an argument for that position. It is not good enough here. Gorgias knows perfectly well that we standardly praise and blame people for actions performed because of persuasion (or for that matter, because of *erôs*). He is arguing that we are wrong. He is the ancient ancestor of contemporary authors like Daniel Dennett
p. 13 (1984) and Owen Flanagan (2002), who argue that ↳ we need to revise traditional ideas of freedom and moral responsibility and accept more restricted versions of these concepts, given what we now know about neuroscience and the physical causes of human action.

We might object to Gorgias that the drug model is a distortion: the effects of a drug on me are involuntary, but whether I am persuaded or not *is* a matter of choice. But this claim is not so obvious as we might think. The mere fact that attempts at persuasion often fail does not show that being persuaded is voluntary when it *does* occur. Attempts at medication often fail, too, because the dosage is wrong or ineffective given an individual's physical makeup—the failure does not show that the patient somehow "chose" not to be affected. So Gorgias does not need to claim that persuasive speech always works on us, only that when it *does* work, it is because of a physical chain of causes and effects which is independent of our choice. Nor need he claim that this chain of causes and effects bypasses all rational thought. On the contrary: our capacity for judgment must be precisely the organ on which the forces of persuasion typically have their effect. Indeed, the thought that there might be something *especially* coercive about rational argument, though hard to make precise, is intuitively powerful: think of phrases like "logical force," "compelling reasoning," "knockdown argument" (an image that may well go back to the sophist Protagoras), "inescapable conclusion," and so forth. Gorgias's own examples of the compelling power of *logos* include scientific and philosophical discourses, and his own activity of persuasive

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"enslavement" (see section III), at least in works like the *Helen* and *On Not-Being*, proceeds through rigorous rational argument.

Still, it is useful for Gorgias that persuasion *sometimes* seems to bypass not only reason but conscious thought altogether—as when we are (unconsciously) influenced by propaganda or advertising which we (consciously)
p. 14 repudiate. For in these cases it does seem ↳ plausible that persuasion bypasses our free choice as well. And if it can do that in some cases, how can we be sure that the conscious and reason-dependent cases of persuasion are essentially different? Recall the audience being whipsawed by conflicting speeches from politicians or scientists: are their flip-flopping reactions really freely chosen? Come to think of it, do I *ever* freely choose what to believe? We believe whatever appears true or most plausible to us, and we don't seem to have much choice about what does so—a point Gorgias will soon make in relation to how sight causes *erôs*. To take a favorite example of later authors, just try *deciding* to believe that the number of stars is odd or even (cf. Epictetus, *Discourses* I.28).

So Gorgias's argument synthesizes two very plausible modern ideas: that the mind is a part of the body (and thus subject to material pushes and pulls which do not leave much room for free choice as we usually conceive it) and that we are a lot more susceptible than we would like to think to the coercive powers of discourse. The well-documented powers of modern advertising and political propaganda suggest that, if anything, Gorgias's argument here is too narrow: for (as any competent modern tyrant knows) *visual* imagery manipulates our beliefs and behavior at least as powerfully as words. And his final argument, for premise [5], brings out just this point. For Gorgias's starting point here is that *erôs* is induced by *seeing*: specifically, by the sight of the body of the beautiful beloved. And as he notes, there is nothing voluntary about what we see: "whatever we see has a nature, not the one we wish, but whatever each happens to have" (15). Seeing is a kind of "invasion" (20) by a material effluvium adapted to the eyes, just as persuasive speech involves the reception of particles through our sense of sound. So sight too has its effects physiologically and independent of our will. A sign of this is that these effects are often ones we would not choose: the sight of a formidably armed enemy makes men panic and
p. 15 run, and other visions of terror even cause madness. Paintings, on the other ↳ hand, cause delight; so "by nature sight grieves for some things and longs for others, and many things make many people desire and long for many deeds and many bodies" (18). (Gorgias is very fond of these alliterative repetitions of related words—they work better in ancient Greek.) Gorgias concludes with a dilemma: "If love is a god, with the divine power of gods, how could a weaker person refuse and reject him?" On this understanding the *erôs* option [5] collapses into divine necessity [2]. But we are also offered an alternative explanation: "if love is a human sickness and a mental weakness, it must not be blamed as a mistake, but claimed as misfortune" (19). This again gives Gorgias's argument a modern, scientific air—and must have done the same in his own day. The roughly contemporary Hippocratic text *On the Sacred Disease* likewise argues that mysterious diseases such as epilepsy have purely physical explanations rather than being sent by the gods.

This final argument, by being broader in its potential scope, is perhaps even more alarming than the account of *logos*. It is the nature of each thing which makes the sight of it cause pain or pleasure, fear or desire, in us; and these emotional reactions are what cause our actions. (Again, the idea is that if the psychological experience or state which causes some action is involuntary by being caused by compulsion, then the action itself is involuntary, too.) But what action could *not* be attributed to one of these four basic emotions, and what instance of them could not count as being caused by input from the senses? Oddly, Gorgias does not use the language of "appearance" [*phainesthai, phantasia*] or "seeming" [*dokein, doxa*] here, preferring to speak strictly of sight [*horân*]. But within a generation philosophers like Plato will be arguing that we always pursue what appears or seems [*phainetai, dokei*] good to us (*Meno* 77b–78b, *Gorgias* 466b–468e). And Aristotle seems to be worried about Gorgias and Plato both when he frantically refutes the suggestion that we cannot be blamed for doing so (*NE* III.5).

p. 16 We can now step back and look at the argument as a whole. Again, Gorgias's argument is valid: if [1]–[5] are true, then so is [6]. And I have tried to show that it is not so easy as we might think to refute the reasoning

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embedded in [2]–[5], for these premises follow from widely accepted general ("Aristotelian") principles about responsibility and compulsion, together with a conception of the human psyche (as material and malleable) which looks more plausible than ever. The crucial remaining question is whether [2]–[5] really cover all the possibilities—that is, whether the all-important premise [1] should be accepted as true. I turn now to this, together with a larger question which can no longer be put off: what on earth, when all is said and done, is Gorgias trying to prove?

II. Moral Responsibility

Most readers of the *Helen* uneasily sense that the scope of the argument is, at least potentially, broader than just Helen. After all, Gorgias's reasoning holds equally well for *any* action caused in one of these four ways; and what action could we *not* attribute to fate, say, or to something looking attractive to the agent? Moreover, Gorgias's four options are introduced as exhaustive in [1] without any discussion or support; so presumably he must think—and must expect us to agree—that the list captures all the relevant possibilities.

The *Helen*, then, seems to be intended as a *paradigm case argument*: what it shows for Helen is meant to apply to some broader class. But the scope of the argument so read is indefinite, since we are not told what Helen's action is a paradigm case *of*. If we prod at this indeterminacy, several possible readings emerge. One I have already hinted at: Helen's action is a paradigm case of *all* human action, simply as such, and its upshot is that
p. 17 nobody is ever morally ↳ responsible for anything at all.[4] This is indeed how the argument is most often understood by scholars and interpreters.[5] But it is not our only option. Helen's flight to Troy is, after all, not just any old action, picked at random from the philosopher's hat. It is a paradigm case of a *wrong* action, one for which the agent is cursed by posterity forever. Anyone familiar with the *Iliad* would also see Helen's action as a paradigm of self-destructive, irrational, even prima facie inexplicable action. Helen may not have known that ten years of world war would ensue; but she cannot seriously have believed it would end well.

Call the no-one-is-ever-to-blame-for-anything interpretation the *broad* reading of the *Helen*. I am suggesting that Gorgias also leaves us the option of a comparatively *narrow* reading, on which Helen's action is offered as a paradigm case of an irrational, self-destructive, and/or wrong action. Such a narrow reading has several advantages. First, it becomes far easier to see why Gorgias might expect us to accept premise [1]. After all, why *should* we accept that these four explanations are the only possibilities for every action? Surely many actions are caused by other factors: above all, by that obvious default explanation of human choice, *rational self-interest*, which is never here raised as a possibility. If the scope of the argument is meant to extend to all actions,
p. 18 including everyday choices in ↳ pursuit of the agent's advantage or happiness, this looks like a fatal flaw. Gorgias's argument only stands a chance if we restrict it to *actions like Helen's*, that is, to ones with such predictably disastrous results that rational self-interest can safely be excluded as their cause. This is perhaps the point of the *eikos* in premise [1]: though the true cause of Helen's flight cannot be known, the options considered here plausibly cover all the possibilities, as they might not with an action of a different sort.

This thought connects in a curious way with a third *epideixis* by Gorgias which has come down to us, the *Defense of Palamedes*.[6] The *Palamedes* is not so odd or ambitious as Gorgias's two major works; but it makes an interesting companion piece to the *Helen* (and seems to have had an influence on Plato's *Apology of Socrates*). Palamedes too is a legendary figure associated with the Trojan War; in the ancient stories, he is unjustly accused of betraying his Greek comrades to the enemy. So the *Palamedes* is, like the *Helen*, a defense, this time in the first person: Palamedes argues, first, that he *could* not have betrayed the Greeks to the enemy and, second, that he *would* not have done so even if he could. In the course of the argument Palamedes announces a basic explanatory and predictive principle that still gets put to work by the social scientists: "Only two motives lie behind every human action: either to gain profit or avoid loss." He adds: "To commit a crime for any other

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reason is madness" (19).[7] This qualification seems to allow that some actions *do* have other motives—but those agents can be dismissed as mad, whereas Palamedes's accusers otherwise acknowledge him as clever (25–26).

Putting together the general principle and the restriction, we get the following thesis about the causes of
p. 19 human behavior: every ↳ human action is caused *either* by the desire to obtain some gain or avoid some loss *or* by madness. And if we put this together with the causal claims of the *Helen*, we get some interesting results. If Helen's action is a paradigm case of self-destructive or irrational action—one that *cannot* be understood as aiming at some gain (or the avoidance of some loss)—then Helen must have been "mad" in Palamedes's sense. (What Palamedes had in mind by "madness" is left unexplained; but his contrast with actions for profit or loss-avoidance suggests that "irrational and self-destructive" would be a good proxy.) And the causes adduced in the *Helen* must be those available for explaining "mad" actions; so the upshot of the *Helen* is that such actions turn out to be, in every case, involuntary. Putting the two works together, then, we get the following hypothesis: when people act irrationally and self-destructively they will always be found, on closer examination, to have been compelled by some external force which renders the action involuntary and the agent not morally responsible.

This dovetailing with Palamedes's principle seems to me to support the narrow reading on which Helen's action is a paradigm case of irrational and self-destructive action. Alternatively, we might be attracted by a narrow reading on which the relevant class is morally *wrong* actions—for this is certainly the most obvious class to which Helen's action, as traditionally understood and evaluated, belongs. This reading, intriguingly,
p. 20 would take Gorgias into philosophical territory usually assigned to Socrates.[8] According to Plato's ↳ Socrates, all desire is for the good; no one does wrong (or more precisely, does injustice) voluntarily (*Gorgias* 509e). The *Helen* on this reading would argue just the same. The difficulty with this reading is that it's hard to see how Gorgias's partitioning in [1] could be intended as adequate for *all* wrong actions. How could he simply ignore the possibility of cold-blooded, rationally self-interested injustice?

Still, neither narrow reading can really be excluded; nor can the broad one. This indeterminacy comes naturally to arguments in paradigm case form; and Gorgias is evidently happy to leave our options open. For that matter, we are free to take the *Helen* merely as a mythological jeu d'esprit offered for our amusement. And if we do prefer to read it as a serious philosophical argument, we may or may not see moral responsibility as its real subject; as I will now suggest, it can be read as having a different agenda altogether.

III. *Logos* and Persuasion

Like many a Hollywood movie, the *Helen* has a subplot which seems more vivid and compelling, closer to the heart of its creator, than its official storyline. This is the praise of *logos*, already discussed as premise [4], which occupies roughly the middle third of the whole. This is not only the longest step of the argument: it is also extravagantly written, with a complex internal structure, heightened language, and clever and funny self-referentiality—all adding up to give a powerful impression that Gorgias is here launching into his main theme. The self-referentiality is reinforced by the way that Helen and *logos* have been described in similar terms: just as *logos* is a "mighty master" despite consisting of a small body, Helen had effects on many bodies with just her
p. 21 own (4). It would be too crude to reduce the *Encomium* to one gigantic metaphor, with ↳ Helen = *logos*, but Gorgias certainly means to hint at the identification (cf. Worman 1997). That makes the *Helen* an encomium of itself.

So we may well take Gorgias's argument for premise [4] as a freestanding argument in its own right for the supremacy of the rhetorician's craft—a thesis dear, unsurprisingly, to the author's heart. We have strong evidence from outside the *Helen* for Gorgias's deep concern with the nature and powers of language. In Plato's *Gorgias*, the historical Gorgias is, on the whole, portrayed somewhat dismissively: a complacent grand old man, unconcerned with the moral implications of his teaching and helpless in the face of Socratic dialectic. But one

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claim or pair of claims made here do stand out as both important and likely to represent his real views. Under pressure by Socrates to define his craft, Gorgias states that it is the art of *logoi*, with persuasion as its object or end (449e1).[9] And persuasion, he boldly claims, "is in truth the greatest good, cause at once of freedom for human beings as such and of rule over others in each person's own city" (452d; my translation).

Scholars have debated the implications of this odd pairing: how can persuasion be at once a source of freedom *and* of "rule" or domination? I believe that Gorgias is here depicted by Plato—probably accurately—as genuinely torn between two conceptions of rhetoric, which we might term the *cooperative* and the *manipulative* (see Barney 2010). The cooperative conception is more fully articulated by the later rhetorician Isocrates, when he explains why his "art of *logoi*" makes possible free and civilized public discourse (*Antidosis* 253–257). This is
p. 22 how rhetoric naturally defends itself in public, ↳ especially in a democracy. But in advertising his craft to the prospective students gathered round in the *Gorgias*, Gorgias also likens rhetoric to a martial art, letting slip that his students may go on to abuse it unjustly and to dominate the practitioners of all the other crafts (452a–452b). That this disturbing claim to powers of "enslavement" is seriously meant—and is Gorgias's own—is confirmed by a remark in Plato's *Philebus* (a very late dialogue with no obvious anti-sophistic agenda): Protarchus says that he has often heard Gorgias insist that the art of persuasion is better than all the others because it enslaves them all with their own consent (58a–58b).

This conception of rhetoric as "enslaving" both depends on and subverts the traditional Greek dichotomy between persuasion, *Peithô* (used with friends and fellow citizens for mutual benefit), and force, *Bia* (used on enemies and inferiors for one's own advantage). For persuasion is here said to accomplish exactly what force does: it makes others serve your private ends rather than their own. The fact that it involves the consent of the enslaved just makes it all the more effective. The *Helen* seems at once to endorse this manipulative conception of persuasion and to go further: the "consent" rhetoric involves is not really freely given at all. Persuasion is compulsion all the way down.

At this point it is worth bringing in a line of argument from Gorgias's *On Not-Being*. As I mentioned earlier, the third part of the *On Not-Being* argues that even if something did exist and could be known, we would not be able to communicate it to each other. For (to oversimplify some confusing arguments, which have come down to us in two quite different versions) words are different in kind both from our thoughts and from the objects we use them to represent. So language cannot really be a matter of conveying to others *either* what we think *or* the objects we perceive in the world. What is left for it to do? Perhaps at this point the *Helen* advances on the *On*
p. 23 *Not-Being* (as it does on the *Palamedes* regarding the causes ↳ of human action). For here we get an answer: speech is by nature a physical force in its own right, to be understood "behaviorally," that is, in terms of its effects on its audience rather than any representational or communicative properties. As Alexander Mourelatos puts it, "the crucial function of *logos* in argument—whether in a court of law or in disinterested friendly debate —is not to represent reality and not to establish or defend truth, but simply to bring about a change of opinion" (Mourelatos 1987, 157).[10]

But this raises a further puzzle. On Gorgias's theory, what are we to make of a text like the *Helen* itself? Few readers have ever been wholly convinced by Gorgias's arguments here, after all, and by the arguments about *logos* in particular—even if we are left uncomfortably uncertain as to how to refute them. Likewise in the case of the *On Not-Being*, Gorgias's avowed theses are not only triply self-refuting but flat-out impossible to believe. So perhaps these showpieces (unlike the everyday speeches in the law courts or assembly which would be the practical end product of a rhetorical education) are not really designed to persuade in the end. Perhaps Gorgias is here performing for us the *limits* of persuasion as well as its powers.[11] In that case there is a slippage between the ostensible aim and the real one: these are samples of rhetoric at its highest pitch, but they are also heroic, self-aware failures. And that twist too must be part of what Gorgias himself finds so amusing. Just as some Nabokov novels have unreliable narrators, the Gorgias of the *Helen* and *On Not-Being* —their authorial persona —is an unreliable arguer. As his readers, we find ourselves baffled and misdirected, prodded again and again to
p. 24 wonder what really follows from his reasoning, ↳ whether he actually believes it himself, what we ourselves

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should conclude, and what the point of it all is. These are questions Gorgias enjoys teasing us with; he has no intention of providing the answers.

IV. Sophistic Philosophy

So the *Helen* presents a bold thesis about the nature of language and persuasion, nested within a valid and disturbing argument about moral responsibility, wrapped up in a spectacularly self-undermining showpiece of rhetorical display. I have tried to show that both inner levels of argument still have some philosophically important points to make. The third level—the *Helen* as a whole — defends by exemplification a third claim which is just as striking: that philosophizing need not be a crudely assertoric business, invariably consisting in the formulation of doctrines asserted as true. Gorgias here exemplifies a practice of philosophy as joke, as game, as glittering objet d'art—above all, as *provocation* and challenge. In the end, enslavement is the very opposite of what Gorgias practices. He confronts us with our fundamental freedom as readers and forces on us the fact that most kinds of philosophical writing strive to hide: that it is up to us to decide exactly what his arguments show, to solve the problems they raise, and to formulate alternatives if we reject them.

I said earlier that the *Helen* is, with the exception of the *On Not-Being*, like no other text on earth. But that is not really true. Many of Plato's works fit the profile of "philosophy as challenge"—think of aporetic dialogues like the *Euthyphro* and *Hippias Minor* and puzzlements like the *Cratylus, Cleitophon*, and *Menexenus*. Plato too writes texts which are funny and rigorously argued at the same time, distanced from any authoritative authorial voice and frequently ↳ self-undermining, with nested and many-leveled arguments jostling for the spotlight— arguments which often enough proceed, like those of the *Helen*, from startlingly modern premises to permanently outrageous conclusions. These resemblances are unlikely to be pure coincidence. But to explore them further we would have to face up to a possibility at least as alarming to many scholars as the abolition of moral responsibility or a proof that nothing exists: that Plato's works are, among other things, a continuation of sophistic philosophy by other means.

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Notes

1. A general overview of the sophists' ideas and activities, defending some of the more sweeping claims here, can be found in Barney 2006.
2. See Schiappa 1990. This raises the question of whether Gorgias really counts as a sophist at all, since part of Plato's point is that *sophistês* and *rhêtorikos* should be considered different professions (cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 463b–463c, 520a–520b). Be that as it may, Gorgias clearly fits the general profile of the fifth-century sophist. Like Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus, and the rest of the gang, he was an itinerant intellectual performer and teacher of wisdom; a specialist in techniques of

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argument and persuasion; and the author of texts which both advertise those skills and engage with contemporary philosophical debates, often with a subversive twist. Plato's dialogues conflict as to whether Gorgias presented himself as a teacher of *virtue*, as Protagoras and most of the other sophists did: *Meno* 95c seems to correct *Gorgias* 460a on this point. But as a definition this is too narrow anyway: it would also exclude other important figures (Antiphon, Critias) who clearly belonged to the movement in a general way.

3. Translations from the *Helen* (and the *Defense of Palamedes*) are from Gagarin and Woodruff 1995, sometimes with minor modifications: this very useful volume also includes Gorgias's other significant surviving texts. The standard Greek text (and source of the section numbers in parentheses) is Diels and Kranz 1960–61, vol. 2; cf. also MacDowell 1982.

4. We might object that Gorgias cannot intend such a sweeping result; for he says that *Paris* is to blame if he forced Helen or persuaded her (7, 12). But that claim is problematic in any case, since Paris's actions were surely caused by *erôs*, and perhaps by fate as well; so he is bound to turn out to be blameless by the same argument as Helen. If we want the argument to be internally coherent, I think we have to take Gorgias's assignment of blame to Paris as merely provisional, pending investigation of the causes of *his* actions (a question explicitly set aside at the start (5)). So the possibility remains that neither he nor anyone else would turn out blameworthy given sufficient examination—our attributions of moral responsibility would topple in a sort of infinite regress.

5. E.g., Jonathan Barnes: "if the argument works, it works for all agents and all actions, and no one is ever responsible for anything" (1982, 525).

6. Cf. Calogero 1957, who also discusses the connection with Socratic ideas.

7. "Madness" here is supplied to fill a lacuna, following Sauppe (cf. Diels-Kranz *ad loc.*), as do Gagarin and Woodruff. As Christopher Roser has brought to my attention, *Palamedes* (25) seems to make a similar point, and the term *mania* does occur there.

8. Actually, so does the first narrow reading, if taken together with Palamedes's principle. For Socrates's most basic thesis is that all desire is for what the desiring agent perceives as good, where "good" seems to mean "beneficial to its possessor" (cf. *Protagoras* 358a–358d and *Meno* 77b–78b). The moralized thesis I discuss in this paragraph, that no one does wrong voluntarily, depends on Socrates's further claim that virtue and right action *are* what is good for human beings, so that wrongdoing always involves ignorance, error, and a failure to attain what one is aiming for (namely the good). I see no sign of this moralized view in Gorgias, unless we simply assume the second narrow reading.

9. Gorgias then vacillates as to the subject matter of this persuasion. Sometimes he presents rhetoric as universal or subject-neutral, emphasizing that the trained speaker can be more persuasive than *any* expert on that expert's own subject (456a–457c, 458e–459b); but he also wants to insist that the rhetorician is particularly expert in political matters, i.e., on questions of justice, a claim which quickly leads to his refutation (454b, 460a).

10. I am indebted throughout to Mourelatos's broader argument in this fascinating paper.

11. Gagarin 2001 argues that sophistic texts, the *Helen* included, do not really aim at persuasion at all: the principal goal is "displaying ingenuity and contributing new and interesting ideas" (290).

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