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Gorgias on Knowledge and the Powerlessness of *Logos*

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Abstract: In Gorgias's Encomium of Helen and Defense of Palamedes, the orator draws attention to two important limitations of speech's power that concern its different relationships to belief vs. knowledge. First, logos has the capacity to affect and change a person's beliefs, but it is powerless to change or undermine a person's knowledge. Second, speech has the power to produce a new belief, but it is powerless to produce knowledge itself where knowledge is lacking. My primary aim in this essay is to examine Gorgias's epistemology of persuasive logos with a view to illuminating these two limitations. I suggest that Gorgias's claims in the Helen and Palamedes make the most sense when considered in the forensic and deliberative contexts in which the art of rhetoric thrived in ancient Greece. In such contexts the prevailing epistemology that contemporary orators take for granted is a kind of folk empiricism that privileges sense-perception as a source of knowledge, and I argue that Gorgias's ideas about logos and its limitations are best understood in terms of that epistemological framework. Speech cannot make people "unknow" what they have seen with their own eyes, nor can it act as a surrogate or replacement for sense-perception itself.

Keywords: Gorgias; knowledge; speech; logos; rhetoric; epistemology; belief; doxa; Encomium of Helen; Defense of Palamedes

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1. Introduction

Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen* offers an account of *logos* that memorably advertises its extraordinary power. The ostensible goal of the speech is to exonerate Helen of Troy against those who wrongly blame her for sailing away with Paris, and it argues that she could only have done so for one of four possible reasons. Either the gods willed it, she was physically forced, she was persuaded by words, or she was in love. In none of these cases, however, is she truly culpable. It is in his defense of her innocence in the third scenario, that of persuasion, that Gorgias finds an opportunity to highlight the wide-ranging powers of speech. *Logos*, he argues, is a "mighty power" (*dunastēs megas*) that can be used to control the minds of listeners by manipulating their emotions, thoughts, and beliefs at will, along with the actions that follow from them (8–10).[1] The skilled speaker is able to persuade and deceive an audience and make them believe whatever he wishes, regardless of its truth or falsity, and consequently to do whatever he wishes. Indeed, the power of speech is so great that it is similar to physical violence with respect to the irresistibility of its effects on a listener's psychology and behavior. If Helen left with Paris because she was persuaded to do so, therefore, it is "just as if she had been carried away by force" (12), which is precisely what absolves her of culpability. "For speech that persuades", Gorgias explains, "compels the soul that is persuaded both to obey the things said and to consent to the things done" (12). Commentators on the *Helen* often emphasize this grandiose characterization of the power of *logos*, and many even take it to have been the orator's primary objective in the speech all along. Nearly a century ago, for example, Thomas Duncan wrote, "It is clear...that Gorgias makes his encomium of Helen really an occasion to glorify his own art, the art *tou logou*", and, more recently, Rachel Barney has suggested that "the agenda of the *Helen* [seems] to come clear in its extended praise of *logos*".[2]

Although it is certainly true that Gorgias wants to draw attention to what words can accomplish, what has received little attention, by contrast, is Gorgias's account of the *limits*

of speech's power.[3] For all his bluster about what *logos* is capable of, the orator is also careful to highlight the fact that its power is not absolute. Both in the *Helen* itself and in other extant fragments and testimonia, notably *Defense of Palamedes* and *On Not Being*, Gorgias explores the epistemic conditions under which speech operates and the ways those conditions constrain its power.[4] Simply put, the power of speech is effective only in the domain of belief or *doxa*, not in the domain of knowledge. For Gorgias this means two things. The first is a point about the *object* of speech's transformative powers. *Logos* has the capacity to affect and change a person's beliefs, but it is powerless to change or undermine a person's knowledge. The second is a related point about the *product* of speech. *Logos* has the power to produce a new belief, but it is powerless to produce knowledge itself where knowledge is lacking. On the Gorgianic account, belief is the malleable wax to knowledge's unbendable metal, and while persuasive speech can mold the former to its will, it can neither change the shape of the latter nor transform wax into iron.

My primary aim in this essay is to examine Gorgias's epistemology of persuasive *logos* with a view to illuminating the account just sketched. I shall focus especially on his two epideictic speeches, *Helen* and *Palamedes*, and key to my interpretation of them will be the idea that Gorgias's claims make the most sense when considered in the forensic and deliberative contexts in which the art of rhetoric thrived in ancient Greece. In such contexts the prevailing epistemology that contemporary orators take for granted is a kind of folk empiricism that privileges sense-perception as a source of knowledge. I will argue that Gorgias's ideas about *logos* and its limitations are best understood in terms of that epistemological framework. Speech cannot make people "unknow" what they have seen with their own eyes, nor can it act as a surrogate or replacement for sense-perception itself.

2. The Limits of Speech

Gorgias's works characterize *logos* as powerless in two key ways. The first receives its clearest formulation in the *Helen* itself. In the middle of his panegyric account of everything speech can accomplish, he offers an explanation of its power that also functions as a caveat:

> How many people have persuaded how many about how many things by molding false speech![5] For if everyone, concerning everything, had memory [*mnēmēn*] of the past, <awareness> [*ennoian*] of the present, and foresight [*pronoian*] of the future, speech would not similarly be like it is in actuality, now that it is not easy to remember [*mnēsthēnai*] the past, examine [*skepsasthai*] the present, or divine [*manteusasthai*] the future. So concerning most things most people take belief [*doxan*] as their soul's guide. But belief [*doxa*], being slippery [*sphalera*] and unstable [*abebaios*], involves those relying on it in slippery and unstable fortunes. (11; trans. modified)

In this passage Gorgias draws a distinction between two kinds of epistemic states. The first is *doxa*, belief or opinion, which he characterizes as inherently unreliable. The word for "slippery", *sphalera*, derives from wrestling vocabulary and means "likely to make one stumble or trip", while the term for "unstable", *abebaios*, denotes unsteadiness, uncertainty, fickleness, and unreliability. Hence he characterizes *doxa* as both fallible and mutable. Belief is the sort of thing that can lead one astray, and the sort of thing that is subject to change in ways that render it unpredictable and untrustworthy. These two qualities, moreover, explain belief's susceptibility to the power of speech. Because *doxa* is mutable, it can be transformed by persuasion, and because it has no fixed relationship to truth, it can be transformed by persuasion into *false* belief.[6] The internal aim of the *Helen* itself provides strategic reason for emphasizing this connection between belief's susceptibility to persuasion and its fallibility. Gorgias and his audience take it for granted that running away with Paris was a mistake. If Helen did it under the influence of convincing speech, therefore, then she was not simply persuaded but *deceived*. Accordingly, Gorgias introduces this section of his argument with, "And if speech persuaded and deceived her soul..". (8), thereby casually identifying persuasion with deception in this context. Likewise, he goes on to argue:

> That persuasion proceeding via speech impresses the soul however it wishes can be seen by studying: first, the speeches of the cosmologists who snatch away one belief and replace it with another [*doxan anti doxēs*], making untrustworthy [*apista*] and unclear [*adēla*] things appear to the eyes of belief [*doxēs*]; second, the compelling competitions of speeches in which one speech, written with skill though not spoken with truth, delights and persuades the crowd; and third, the speech contests of philosophers, in which quick thinking shows how easily changed [*eumetabolon*] is the trust in belief [*tēn tēs doxēs pistin*]. (13; trans. modified)

Note that Gorgias consistently uses the term *doxa* to describe the cognitive state affected by persuasion, and that he connects that point to the fact that opinions are "easily changed" irrespective of their truth and falsehood. Significantly, in his conclusion Gorgias states that the goal of his speech has been to put a stop to the "ignorance of opinion" (*doxēs amathian*) (21) by exculpating Helen. Once again, *doxa* is subject to error. His audience holds false or ignorant beliefs about Helen, and his speech aims to change those beliefs.

Gorgias contrasts *doxa* with a second, superior kind of epistemic achievement that he identifies using a family of terms like *mnēmē* ("memory") and *pronoia* ("foresight"). I will use the term "knowledge" as a placeholder for this epistemic class, in line with Gorgias's own tendency to contrast *doxa* in other passages with forms of the Greek term *oida*, "to know". In the present passage, the distinguishing feature of knowledge is its apparent imperviousness to the influence of persuasion. If people *knew* the past, present, and future, Gorgias claims, then speech would not have the same power it holds over those with mere belief. The clear implication is that knowledge differs from *doxa* in the two respects that make the latter a target of persuasion. That is to say, knowledge is both stable and consistently true: unlike belief, it cannot easily be altered, nor is it subject to falsehood. Speech, therefore, in particular deceptive speech, is powerless to affect it. Whereas speech is fickle and often false, leading people into "insecure fortunes", those who know what is right and true will be inerrant in their decisions and enjoy "secure" fates.

The contrast between belief and knowledge also appears in the *Defense of Palamedes*, in which the speech's namesake defends himself against Odysseus's charge of treason. When Palamedes turns to address his accuser, he asks:

> Do you accuse me as someone who has precise knowledge or merely an opinion [*eidos akribōs ē doxazōn*]?... That you do not have knowledge [*ouk oistha*] of what you are accusing me of is apparent. Accordingly, since you do <not> know [<*ouk*> *eidota*], you merely believe [*doxazein*]. Further, you most audacious of men, do you have the audacity to prosecute a man on a capital charge by trusting in opinion [*doxēi pisteusas*], a most untrustworthy [*apistotatōi*] thing, without knowing the truth [*tēn alētheian ouk eidōs*]? What do you actually know [*sunoistha*] of the accused having done such a deed? And again: everyone has an opinion about everything [*to ge doxasasi . . . hapasi peri pantōn*]; they have that in common, and you are no wiser [*sophōteros*] than anyone else in that respect. But we must not trust [*pisteuein*] those who merely believe [*tois doxazousi*], but those who know [*tois eidosin*], nor think that belief [*tēn doxan*] is more trustworthy than truth [*tēn doxan tēs alētheias pistoteran nomizein*], but on the contrary that truth [*tēn alētheian*] is more trustworthy than opinion [*tēs doxēs*]. (22–24; trans. modified)

Palamedes's argument here turns on a distinction between belief and knowledge that parallels the *Helen* on key points. Once again he uses the term *doxa*, and with striking repetition, to characterize the inferior epistemic state. The defining feature of belief, moreover, is fallibility, while knowledge has a special relationship to truth that is reflected in Gorgias's terminology. He initially contrasts *doxa* with "knowing", then with "knowing the truth", and finally simply with "truth" itself. The connection between knowledge and truth is so tight, then, that they can even be loosely identified with another, at least for rhetorical purposes. As in the *Helen*, the different relationships belief and knowledge bear to truth

also make the former unreliable and untrustworthy and the latter deserving of trust, where these qualities are normatively linked to their suitability for guiding actions. It would be a mistake for his accuser to make mere belief the basis for prosecution, especially when the defendant's life is at stake. Likewise, as Palamedes emphasizes in his conclusion, it would be a mistake for his jurors to put their trust in belief and make the irreversible decision of finding him guilty (34).

Additionally, although the passage above does not explicitly contrast belief and knowledge on the basis of their mutability and susceptibility to persuasion, the rhetorical context of Palamedes's *apologia* implies this distinction. Palamedes himself is responding to charges that he characterizes as "abuse" (29) and "slander" (34) by a "liar" (26) who "does not speak truly" (5), in contrast to his own speech, which proceeds by "declaring the truth, not by deceiving" (33). Gorgias' audience, moreover, knows that Palamedes is telling the truth, that he was innocent of the crime but ultimately convicted anyway because of Odysseus's misleading but persuasive words. Palamedes's jurors had only their beliefs to guide them, and under the influence of deceptive rhetoric, they ended up with false ones. Their ignorance is entailed, moreover, by Palamedes's assertion early in the speech, in Eleatic spirit, that it is impossible for someone "to know what never happened" (5). The logical implication for Gorgias's Greek audience, who are aware of the facts of the case, is that in ultimately convicting Palamedes, his jurors believed something that they literally *could not have known*. The crime never happened, never was, and hence was never knowable. Compare the jurors with Palamedes himself, on the other hand. He is immune to Odysseus's rhetoric because he "knows clearly" that he never committed the alleged crime (5); speech, therefore, has no power to convince him otherwise.

Both in the *Helen* and *Palamedes*, then, a constraint is placed on the epistemic *object* of speech's power: persuasive *logos* operates on *doxa* but is powerless to alter knowledge.[7] In the *Defense of Palamedes*, Gorgias also highlights a second kind of powerlessness that concerns the epistemic *product* of persuasive speech. In a short but revealing passage from his concluding remarks to the jury, Palamedes comments: "Now, if it were possible through speeches [*dia tōv logōn*] for the truth of deeds [*tēn alētheian tōn ergōn*] to come to light, clear [*katharan*] and apparent [*phaneran*], to the listeners, then it would be easy [*euporos*] to arrive at a verdict on the basis of what I have said. But since that is not the case, take care for my person, take more time, and make your judgment in accordance with the truth". Here Palamedes laments the impossibility of making the truth "clear" and "apparent" to the jurors through his words alone. That is, he cannot make his audience know what really happened simply by telling them.[8] That speech can affect what they believe Palamedes takes for granted, of course. He has already warned them against trusting the deceptive words of his accuser, which would result in their holding false beliefs, and he himself hopes to persuade them to take their time, deliberate carefully, and ultimately arrive at true beliefs instead. Indeed, his call for cautious deliberation presupposes that his jurors fall squarely in the uncertain realm of *doxa*. As Aristotle notes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we do not deliberate about things that are necessary or certain, but only about what is "unclear" (*adēlois*) to us (1112b9–10). Likewise, Palamedes highlights the fact that *if* he could impart knowledge directly to his jurors through his defense, there would be no need for deliberation; it would be "easy" (*euporos*) for them to make a decision directly on the basis of his words. Note, too, that the counterfactual easiness of their decision once again entails the first limitation of speech's power. If they *knew* he was innocent, his accuser's words would have no influence on them. Their knowledge would make them impervious to persuasion, and they would arrive at the right verdict immediately and effortlessly. Alas, however, Palamedes can merely speak the truth and, in the best-case scenario, make them believe it, but nothing he can say can make them know it.[9]

3. The Epistemology of Rhetoric

What conception of knowledge underlies Gorgias's account of the power and powerlessness of speech? In this section and the next I argue that the *Helen* and *Palamedes* take

for granted a folk empiricist epistemology. It is empiricist in the sense that it privileges sense-perception, and in particular visual perception, as the primary mode of attaining knowledge. It is a "folk" empiricism in the sense that it appeals to pre-theoretical ideas about evidence, belief, and knowledge that would have had currency among Greek audiences, and hence that an orator like Gorgias could assume and invoke without controversy in rhetorical contexts.[10] This reading runs counter to prominent lines of interpretation that take Gorgias to advocate a radical epistemology that denies the possibility of attaining knowledge entirely—either because there is no objective truth to be known or because human beings simply cannot know it—and that views the *Helen* and *Palamedes* through the lens of, and as reflecting, that perspective.[11] While a radical position may follow from Gorgias's metaphysical work, *On Not Being*, however (a text to which I will return in Section 4), it is foreign to and incompatible with the speeches under consideration.[12] The arguments of the *Helen* and *Palamedes* are firmly situated in the world of politics and ordinary Greek life, and they unambiguously take for granted both the existence of objective truths and the human possibility of knowing some of them. More specifically, as I argue in what follows, both speeches assume that we can and do have knowledge of many things—events, actions, and states of affairs—that we see or otherwise perceive directly. According to this interpretation, to say that speech is powerless to undermine knowledge is to point out that people generally cannot be convinced to disbelieve the reality of what they themselves experience or witness with their own eyes. Likewise, to say that speech is powerless to produce knowledge is to recognize that speech cannot duplicate direct perceptual experience itself. Hearing about an event, however vivid the description, is not the same as seeing it for oneself.

On this reading, Gorgias's conception of *logos* is informed by and gets its traction from the forensic, political, and deliberative contexts in which orators thrive, and it makes the most sense when viewed in that light. Indeed, one of the main virtues of the folk empiricist reading I advance here is that it situates Gorgias's views within the rhetorical tradition over which he loomed so large. On my interpretation his account of speech presents key ideas that are explored again and again in the work of his contemporaries and successors in the oratorical and philosophical traditions. In particular, we frequently find in rhetorical writing the idea that speech is powerless either to deceive those with knowledge or to produce knowledge in the ignorant, where the contrast between knowledge and mere belief or ignorance is framed in empiricist terms. In the rest of this section I survey some representative examples from that tradition to show how commonplace and ubiquitous the ideas in question are among Gorgias's contemporaries, and how natural they are to invoke in a variety of contexts that appeal to folk sensibilities.[13]

As a starting point, let us begin with the relatively mundane observation that rhetoric takes for its subject matter actions and circumstances that have occurred, are occurring, or will occur in the past, present, and future. Aristotle in fact offers a threefold division of oratory in terms of speakers' different relationships to time. The deliberative orator is concerned with the future: his speech concerns things to be done hereafter that he advises about, for or against. The forensic orator is concerned with the past: one man accuses the other, and the other defends himself, with reference to things already done. The epideictic orator is, properly speaking, concerned with the present, since all men praise or blame in view of the state of things existing at the time (*Rhetoric* 1358b12–17). For the Greeks rhetoric is associated above all with political venues, especially the lawcourts and deliberative bodies like the assembly, where what is at stake has to do with actions and events that play out in time in the world of human affairs. Palamedes and his accuser argue about whether he did or did not commit acts of treason in the past, for example, while speakers in Thucydides contend about what will or will not happen in the future if Athens invades Sicily.

Greek authors connect the temporal orientation of rhetoric with an epistemological claim, moreover, which is that most events in the past, present, and future are unclear and unknown to human beings. Contemporary writers are especially emphatic in expressing

their anxieties about the uncertainty of the future. Alcidamas, for instance, writes, "It is difficult, perhaps even impossible, for human foresight [*pronoian*] to reach into the future and attain exact knowledge [*proidein akribōs*]" (*On Those Who Write Speeches* 22; trans. Gagarin and Woodruff), and Isocrates concurs that "foreknowledge [*progignōskein*] of the future does not belong to our nature" (*Against the Sophists* 2; trans. Norlin). For many rhetoricians, consequently, the role of speech and oratorical debate is to provide a basis for informed *belief* in the absence of certainty and knowledge. As Isocrates explains, "People with intelligence...when dealing with matters about which they must deliberate [*bouleuōntai*], ought not to think that they know [*eidenai*] what the result will be, but to be minded toward such matters as men who indeed use their judgment [*doxēi*], but are ignorant [*agnoountas*] of what the future might hold in store....And how can people wisely exercise discretion [*krinai*] about the past or deliberate about the future unless they examine and compare the arguments [*logous*] of opposing speakers?" (*On the Peace* 8–9; trans. Norlin).[14] Thucydides's Diodotus likewise argues that "anyone who argues seriously that speeches [*tous logous*] should not guide our actions [*tōn pragmatōn*] is...stupid, if he thinks there is any other way to explore the uncertain future" (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 3.42.1–2; trans. Mynott). According to this perspective, speech is beneficial because audiences (and often speakers themselves) lack knowledge, and speech can influence their beliefs for the better. At the same time, however, an audience's ignorance also makes them susceptible to deception, a point that often becomes grounds for apprehension or criticism. Consider, for example, Thucydides's description of the general Nicias's reluctance to support a withdrawal from Sicily despite a dire military situation: "He knew well that the Athenians would never approve of any such decision unless they themselves had voted for withdrawal. And those voting about it would not be making their judgments on the same basis as they did—seeing [*horōntas*] the situation first-hand rather than hearing [*akousantas*] about it from the criticism of others; on the contrary, they would be persuaded [*peisesthai*] by whatever misrepresentations a clever speaker [*ex hōn an tis eu legōn diaballoi*] might come up with (7.48.3; trans. Mynott). Here Thucydides contrasts the epistemic situations of Nicias and his soldiers on the battlefield with that of their fellow citizens back home, and he distinguishes between the two in unmistakably empiricist terms. The limits of the Athenians' knowledge of current events are the limits of sense-perception: Nicias *sees* the horrors of war and impending defeat with his own eyes, whereas they do not. Precisely because they cannot perceive for themselves how things are in Sicily, moreover, they are susceptible to oratory that deceives them about the military conditions there.[15] Although Thucydides does not say so explicitly, he also clearly implies the converse, which is that Nicias himself would not be taken in by a skilled rhetorician, since he has firsthand knowledge of how things really are in the field.

The contrast between speech's impotence against those with knowledge and its effectiveness against those who lack it is especially clear in the opening passage of Antisthenes's *Ajax*, in which the eponymous hero argues to a jury of fellow warriors that he, not his rival Odysseus, should receive the arms of the fallen Achilles. He begins his speech by saying, "I wish I had the same people judging me as were present during the actual events [*en tois pragmasi parēsan*]. For in that case I know I would need only to remain silent [*siōpan*] and there would be nothing more for this man to say [*legonti*]. But the fact is that those who were present during the deeds [*tois ergois*] are absent now, and you who know [*ouden eidotes*] nothing of them are here judging me" (*Ajax* 1.1–5; trans. Gagarin and Woodruff). Ajax equates the jury's ignorance of past events with the fact that they were not there to witness them with their own eyes. If they had been there, Odysseus's clever rhetoric would have had no effect on them. Indeed, speech's powerlessness to change their minds in that scenario would be so absolute that Ajax himself would not even have to say a word on his own behalf. Rather, the audience's own firsthand experience of the events would mean that they already *knew* what really took place, and that alone would suffice to produce an unshakeable judgment in Ajax's favor. Because they were not there and did not see it, however, they are vulnerable to Odysseus's deception. As Antisthenes's own audience

would know, moreover, the jurors ultimately succumbed to the power of *logos* and awarded the arms to Odysseus—unjustly, if Greek tradition is to be believed.[16] Like Palamedes contending against the same adversary, Ajax must try to convince an audience who did not witness the deeds of the past and who therefore lack the epistemic amulet that would protect against the deceptive magic of speech.

Like Gorgias, rhetorical writers also—in keeping with their casual identification of knowledge with direct perceptual experience—characterize speech as incapable of providing knowledge all by itself in most instances. This characterization is reflected above all in the dichotomy of word and deed, *logos* and *ergon*, which is ubiquitous in contemporary literature generally but especially in oratorical contexts. If Antisthenes's Ajax, for example, encourages the jury not to issue their verdict on the basis of arguments, but rather on what he and Odysseus have actually done in the past, for "speech [*logos*] has no force [*ischun*] in comparison with action [*ergon*]" (*Ajax* 7.1–8; trans. Gagarin and Woodruff). The idea is that for the purposes of arriving at correct judgments about matters that are unknown, past deeds that are already known constitute a more trustworthy and reliable guide than words, which cannot literally show the audience what really happened—they cannot, as Palamedes puts it, make deeds "clear and apparent" (35). Hence Ajax reiterates that his jurors are "ignorant" and despairs that they are not qualified to be called *kritai* or "judges" at all in the matter. Rather, in hearing only the speeches before them, they are merely *doxastai*, "guessers" or "people with opinions" (8.8).

The inferiority of words to deeds is also one of the persistent themes of Thucydides's *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, finding its most dramatic expression in a speech by the populist leader Cleon, who reproaches his fellow citizens for reconsidering their earlier decision to punish the rebellious Mytileneans with slaughter: "You have gotten used to being spectators of words and listening to deeds [*theatai men tōn logōn* . . . *akroatai de tōn ergon*]. You judge the feasibility of future deeds [*erga*] from the performances of good speakers [*tōn eu eipontōn*], and the facts of past events from the speech [*logōi*] of clever critics, preferring to put your trust in what you hear [*to akousthen*] rather than in the deeds you can actually see [*opsei labontes*]. You are champions at being deceived [*apasthai*] by the novelty of speech [*logou*]" (3.38.4). Here Cleon insists on a hierarchical distinction between action and speech. Whereas the former deserves our trust and provides a legitimate basis for making judgments about the uncertain past and future, the latter is unreliable and deceptive. Cleon's criticism takes aim at an Athenian culture that inverts the epistemic value of the two. In becoming "spectators" of speeches, they grant to words the kind of credibility that should be reserved for what they witness with their own eyes, and they discredit the deeds they actually see in favor of ones they merely hear about.

Isocrates' *Antidosis* provides another illuminating example, as the writer explains the unique position in which he finds himself as a defendant:

> If I were being tried for some criminal acts [*praxeis*] I should not have been able to produce the acts themselves for you to see [*idein*]. Rather, you would have had to guess [*eikazontas*] what happened [*tōn pepragmenōn*] on the basis of what I said [*tōn eirēmenōn*] and pass judgment to the best of your ability. But since I am charged with offending by my words [*tous logous*], I think that I shall be in a better position to make the truth manifest [*emphaniein tēn alētheian*] for you; for I shall present in evidence the actual words which I have spoken and written, so that you will vote on them not from mere belief [*ou doxasantes*], but clearly knowing [*saphōs eidotes*] their nature. (*Antidosis* 53–54)

What distinguishes the author's situation is that he is accused of committing wrongdoing through his *words*, whereas most criminal defendants are accused of unlawful *deeds*. Regarding the latter, Isocrates echoes Palamedes's assessment of the limitations of speech, and he couches it in folk empiricist terms. A forensic speech can only provide a basis for guesswork and belief, not knowledge, and the reason for that is that it cannot make the audience see what really happened. Because visual perception is the sensory mode considered necessary for perceiving most alleged crimes, *logos* is powerless to impart knowl-

edge about them to the ignorant. By contrast, hearing is the mode required for obtaining knowledge of what someone says, and speech is suited to reproduce the experience of hearing words. In the case of offensive speech, therefore, a speaker *can* recreate the relevant sensory experience and thereby "make the truth manifest" to their listeners. In Isocrates's anomalous situation, then, speech does have the power to provide knowledge after all, but it is the exception that proves the rule.

4. *Logos* and Knowledge in Gorgias

This survey of contemporaneous sources reveals a characterization of *logos* and its relationship to knowledge that echoes Gorgias on several important points: knowledge is distinct from mere belief or conjecture; most people rely on belief about most things, which leaves them open to the influence of persuasion and deception; and while persuasive speech is powerless change the minds of those who actually know something, it is also—regrettably for those who would like to communicate the truth—powerless to produce a state of knowledge in those who did not already have it. On all of these points, moreover, writers in the oratorical tradition take for granted a folk empiricist account of these claims, in line with the intuitions of their popular audiences. This in itself already provides strong reason for suspecting that Gorgias assumes a similar epistemology of rhetoric in his own account of *logos*, for that was the framework that would have given such claims verisimilitude in precisely the sorts of epideictic and forensic contexts that pertain to the *Helen* and *Palamedes*.

And indeed, if we return to the two speeches themselves, we can see that the folk empiricist reading makes the best sense of them and receives support from several pieces of textual and contextual evidence. First, consider the key passage from the *Helen* in which Gorgias distinguishes belief from more reliable forms of knowledge. The terminology the orator uses there suggests that sense-perception is the basis of the knowledge he has in mind. To begin with, the language of human "fortunes" and of past, present, and future places him squarely in the oratorical tradition, which, as we saw in the last section, is concerned with knowledge of actions and events that take place in the temporal, perceptible world. The specific Greek terms he uses reinforces this point. His talk of "memory" (*mnēmēn*, *mnēsthēnai*) is suggestive of past sensory experiences, a point that is reflected in contemporary philosophical accounts of memory. Consider, for example, Socrates's characterization of memory in the *Philebus* as "the preservation of perception [*aesthesis*]" (34a), or Aristotle's claim that memories are "something like a picture [*zōgraphēma*]" or the "having of an image" conditioned by a lapse of time, and that it belongs to the "primary perceptual faculty [*tou aisthētikou*]—that is, the one by which we perceive time" (*On Memory* 450a30, 451a16–18). Gorgias's term for awareness of the present, meanwhile, is *skepsasthai*, the primary meaning of which denotes vision: to look, look carefully, view, watch. Similarly, the language of divination (*manteusasthai*) of the future calls to mind oracular contexts, which characteristically involve attempts to figure out what is going to happen in the future and how one's actions can affect the outcome. His reference to *pronoia*, "foresight" or "forethought", similarly anticipates the common oratorical usage of the term (as in Alcidamas above) to refer to humans' regrettable difficulty in anticipating future events.

Furthermore, although some scholars read the passage as advocating a skeptical epistemology,[17] it not only fails to support that interpretation but in fact points to a mundanely *un*-skeptical position. To begin with, Gorgias never actually denies the possibility of knowledge in general, but only that everyone has knowledge of everything (cf. Consigny 2001, p. 50). That is hardly a radical idea, however, and his corollary claim that most people have only beliefs about most things (*hoi pleistoi... peri tōn pleistōn*) is similarly measured. Note that Gorgias's remarks even seem to *presuppose* the human possibility of knowledge. The claim that knowledge is not achieved easily suggests that it can be achieved with difficulty, and the claim that most people do not know most things implies that at least some people know some things. And in fact, in the *Helen* Gorgias actually positively attributes some knowledge to people. Gorgias's audience already knows the story of Helen,

which they would have heard many times, and as a general rule, "to tell knowers what they know produces trust, but does not bring delight" (5). Knowledge is, unequivocally, a real possibility for human beings in the speech.[18] On the folk empiricist interpretation, then, Gorgias is simply appealing to commonsense observations that are especially relevant in rhetorical contexts. People do not see or perceive everything that happens, so their views about most things are grounded in something other than their own direct experiences of them (cf. Bermúdez 2017, p. 11). They do perceive *some* things, however, and those are the things they know.[19]

These intuitive folk ideas in turn provide the background for Gorgias's assertion that when people do (or if they did) possess knowledge of events, speech is (or would be) powerless to change their minds about them. Persuasion cannot make someone unsee what they have seen or unknow what they have witnessed directly in the past. Likewise, if people knew the future consequences of their actions ahead of time—if they could actually see what would happen—speech would have no power to persuade them into making catastrophic decisions. If the Athenians, for instance, could have foreseen with certainty the devastating results of their Sicilian expedition, Alcibiades's jingoistic rhetoric would have been impotent to shape their deliberations. Similarly, to focus on the case at hand, if Helen had known ahead of time the misery that would result from her actions, she could never have been convinced to run away with Paris in the first place. Here the historical or mythological background is relevant. As Gorgias's Greek audience would have known, Helen ultimately came to regret her fate in the bitterest terms. In the *Iliad*, when Priam tries to assure her that she is not to blame for the war and all its horrors, she replies: "I wish that evil death had been pleasing to me when I followed your son here, and left my bridal chamber and my kinspeople and my beloved daughter, and the lovely companions of my girlhood. But that was not to be, so now I pine away with weeping" (3.173–76). Here and on two other occasions she states that she would rather have died than leave Greece with Paris. What Gorgias's account of speech asserts, then, is the striking but eminently plausible idea that if Helen had known the future outcome of her decision with the same kind of certainty and clarity on which she now looks back on it remorsefully, Paris's beguiling persuasion (supposing that was the reason she left) would have been powerless to charm her away.

The folk empiricist reading is also the most attractive way of reading the *Palamedes*. The defendant's observation that *logos* cannot make the truth of deeds "clear and apparent" to listeners becomes, on this reading, the prosaic claim that speech cannot duplicate the direct experience of perceiving something for oneself. It cannot, as Isocrates puts it, "produce the acts themselves for [the jury] to see" (*Antidosis* 53; trans. Norlin). Palamedes's speech also shows additional evidence of a folk empiricist epistemology. Like the *Helen*, it unambiguously affirms that some people have knowledge, and it gives every indication that those who know things know them as the result of perception and personal experience.[20] As noted above, this includes Palamedes himself, who "knows clearly" that he is innocent, given that he has firsthand knowledge of all his own actions. Another example occurs when he rhetorically asks his accuser if he has mere belief about the alleged crime or actual knowledge of it; if it is the latter, he demands to know whether Odysseus knows what happened "because he saw it as a witness or because he was an accomplice" (22).[21] The alternative to mere opinion here is having seen it for himself.[22] The same epistemological viewpoint is implied, finally, by the sorts of arguments Palamedes makes to his jury. He could not have let the enemy into the Greek camp by digging a hole through the wall, because then everyone would have seen it and known what he did (12). He repeatedly "reminds" his jurors, moreover, of the "noble deeds" he has performed in the past that they have seen for themselves (28–32, 34). "That I am speaking the truth", he pleads, "I offer as a trustworthy witness my past life. You yourselves bear witness to my witness; for you are there with me, and hence you know these things" (15).[23]

Gorgias's works also suggest an understanding of the psychology, physiology, and epistemology of sense-perception that can serve as useful theoretical resources to support and explain the pre-theoretical folk empiricist perspective. In particular, his writings point

to a physicalist account of sense-perception that explains sight and hearing as material processes that put the mind in cognitive contact with external objects. The physicalist leanings of the *Helen* itself are evident in the orator's characterization of the mechanics of speech and vision. He describes *logos* as a mighty power, "which by means of the tiniest and most invisible body [*sōmati*] achieves the most godlike results" (8), and he explains its effects by highlighting a medical parallel.[24] "The power of speech", he claims, "has the same relationship to the order of the soul as does the order of drugs to the nature of bodies" (14). In the same way that pharmaceuticals purge, poison, or heal the body through physical processes, speech "drugs" the minds of those listening (*tous akousontas*) and thereby alters their beliefs and emotions in a mechanistic manner (14). On this view, speech is literally a bodily or corporeal thing that acts on the soul by "mingling" (*sunginomenē*) with it and "molding" or "stamping" (*etupōsato*) it (10, 13).[25] Although Gorgias is focused on hearing words rather than on the sensory process of hearing generally, his remarks strongly suggest a physicalist understanding of auditory experience.[26]

His characterization of vision in the final section of the *Helen* points in the same direction. "The things we see", Gorgias explains, "have a nature [*phusin*] that does not depend on our will, but on how each happens to be; and through the sense of sight the soul is stamped [*tupoutai*] in its very dispositions".[27] When a battle line of enemy soldiers appears, for example, "if sight looks upon them, it is shaken up [*etarachthē*], and it shakes up [*etaraxe*] the soul", which gives rise to the emotion of fear. The same process occurs when a beautiful body strikes the sense of sight, which in turn affects the soul and gives rise to pleasure and erotic love. He concludes that "sight engraves [*enegrapsen*] on the mind images of objects seen". For present purposes this account has three notable features. First, it is important to Gorgias's argument that perception and its psychological effects happen mechanistically and involuntarily: by way of sight, external objects *cause* certain kinds of responses in the mind (cf. Barnes (1982, p. 527) and Calogero (1957, p. 13)). That is why the emotion of love, if it is what led Helen away, can be considered a compulsive and therefore exculpating force. Second, the emphatic repetition of language that indicates contact of one body with another—stamping, shaking, engraving—suggests that the mechanistic, causal process by which visual perception operates is corporeal in nature (cf. Barney 2016, p. 14). This idea also fits well with the Empedoclean account of vision that Gorgias is said to endorse in Plato's *Meno*, according to which objects emit various effluences that are suited, depending on their size, to pass through specific sensory channels, and color in particular is "an effluence from shapes that fits the sense of sight and is perceived" (76d).[28] Third and most importantly, Gorgias conceives visual perception as an intermediary between external objects and the mind that puts the latter into cognitive contact with them. To say that vision "stamps" or "engraves" images of external objects on the soul suggests that the mental content of visual experiences is directly determined by—and somehow represents, resembles, or matches up with—the nature of the visible things perceived, just as a wax seal bears the shape of the stamp that impresses it.[29] The significance of this physicalist account of perception is that it provides an attractive basis for the folk empiricist identification of knowledge with perception. If our sensory impressions reflect and reveal something about the *phusis* of external objects as the result of a veridical process, then it makes sense to attribute to sense-perception the authority and reliability that define knowledge. The physicalist account also explains why human beings do not know most things: it is because we can perceive only what has sufficient spatial and temporal proximity to us to affect us materially. Just as we cannot reach out and touch objects that are geographically distant or in the past or future, similarly they cannot "touch" or "strike" our minds through the physical process of sense-perception.

Finally, Gorgias's *On Not Being* corroborates the folk empiricist interpretation. In the text the orator argues, first, that nothing exists; second, that even if anything did exist, it would be unknowable to human beings; and third, that even if human beings *did* have knowledge, they would be incapable of communicating this knowledge to others.[30] It is this third section, which discards the metaphysical and epistemological nihilism of the first

two sections for the sake of argument, in which we find an account of *logos* that parallels and complements the *Helen* and *Palamedes*.[31] Indeed, although interpretation of this treatise as a whole, as well as the orator's own attitudes toward its paradoxical claims, are matters of significant controversy, its third section is clear in articulating precisely one of the limitations of speech we have already encountered.[32] The summary of Gorgias's treatise in the (pseudo)Aristotelian *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* reports the following argument:

> And even if things are knowable [*gnōsta*], he asks, how would anyone communicate them to another? How could anyone, he says, put what he saw [*eide*] into words? Or how could something be made manifest [*dēlon*] to a hearer who did not see [*akousanti...mē idonti*]? For just as sight does not know sounds, so hearing does not hear colors, but sounds. And a speaker speaks, but not a color or an object. Thus how does one person get into his mind [*ennoei*] what he did not have in his mind from another by a speech or some other sign of the object, except by seeing [*idōn*] it if it is a color <or hearing it if it is a sound>?...Even if it is possible to know [*gignōskein*] and to speak what one knows [*gignōskēi*], how can the hearer [*ho akouōn*] get the same thing in his mind?...The same person clearly does not even perceive [*asithanomenos*] the same things at the same time, but different things by hearing and by sight, and different things at different times. So one person would hardly perceive [*aisthoito*] the same thing as someone else. (980a20–b18; trans. modified)[33]

Just as in his speeches, Gorgias denies that *logos* has the power to produce knowledge, but crucially, here he shifts back and forth indiscriminately between the language of knowledge and the language of sense-perception: to know something is to see, hear, or perceive it.[34] The reason *logos* cannot communicate knowledge, accordingly, is because it cannot replicate firsthand sensory experience (cf. Bermúdez 2017, p. 11). According to his argument, sight and hearing each have their own proper objects—colors and sounds, respectively—that they are uniquely suited to perceive and hence provide the perceiver with knowledge of.[35] The only way to know something visible, therefore, is to see its colors through the sensory mode of vision. Oratorical speech is thus incapable of providing knowledge of the visible world because it involves listening to words, rather than seeing colors. He is making perfectly explicit, then, exactly the point about speech's powerlessness that I have suggested in my interpretation of the *Palamedes*: a verbal description of an object or event, no matter how detailed and vivid, cannot make us literally *see* it. Gorgias's comments on the case of hearing may initially seem more complicated, to the extent that we are inclined to think of speech itself as a sound, and hence as properly suited to provide firsthand sensory experience of the audible—as in the case of Isocrates's *Antidosis*—in a way it cannot with the visible. Importantly, however, the terms Gorgias uses to refer to sounds, *phthongos* and *psophon*, are both used in Greek to denote mere sounds in contrast to meaningful speech or human voice. Both, for example, are commonly used to refer to sounds of musical instruments. Gorgias is not denying that we can hear or learn words through the medium of speech. He is simply making the prosaic point that listening to a speaker describe, say, a song is not the same as hearing the music for oneself.[36] In this treatise, then, Gorgias makes the same basic point as Palamedes concerning the powerlessness of *logos*—it cannot make listeners *know* something—but it grounds that idea in a more philosophical and expressly empiricist position.

5. Conclusions

Despite Gorgias's reputation as a bombastic marketer for speech's formidable power,[37] his *Helen* and *Palamedes*, as well as *On Not Being*, also draw attention to the *powerlessness* of speech to displace or produce knowledge. According to my interpretation, his account is informed by a folk empiricist epistemology that identifies knowledge with firsthand perceptual experience, and Gorgias is appealing to the commonsense Greek ideas that speech can neither deceive us about the things we have seen and heard for ourselves,

nor replicate sensory experiences by making us literally see and hear the objects and events that a speaker's words describe. On this reading, Gorgias's speeches give voice to anxieties about the limits of human knowledge and the relationship of *logos* to belief that animate much of the literature of his time, from the poetic and popular to the historical and philosophical.

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Notes

1. All translations of Gorgias are by Daniel W. Graham, with my own modifications.
2. Duncan (1938, p. 405) and Barney (2006, p. 93; cf. 2016, p. 20). Cf. Poulakos (1983, pp. 4–5) and Segal (1962, p. 102). By contrast, Schiappa (1995) denies that the *Helen* is a veiled defense of the art of rhetoric.
3. An important recent exception is Mann (2021), who provides an illuminating discussion of the apparent weakness of *logos* in the *Palamedes*. His account differs from mine, however, both in its focus and in the fact that he takes the *Helen* to *contrast* with the *Palamedes* by affirming the power of speech unequivocally, whereas my account takes both texts to acknowledge aspects of its powerlessness. Relatedly, Mann focuses only on the second of the two kinds of weakness that I address.
4. The arguments of this paper require no assumptions about whether, or to what extent, Gorgias actually endorses the view of *logos* presented in the *Helen* and in his other works. My main claims stand as an interpretation of the conceptions of speech and knowledge delineated by his works, whatever his own attitude toward them might have been. On the question of the seriousness of the *Helen* and of Gorgias's works in general, see Barnes (1982, p. 173), Barney (2006, p. 93, n. 30), and Caston (2002, p. 207). For doubts about Gorgias's endorsement of the *Helen*'s analysis of *logos*, see Gagarin (2001, pp. 279–80) and Pratt (2015).
5. On this translation of the sentence, see Bermúdez (2017, p. 7, n. 10) and Mann (2021, p. 58, n. 14). Most interpreters, however, read the sentence declaratively, taking the repetition of ὅσοι...ὅσους...ὅσων (in its sense of "as many" rather than "how many!") to indicate that *all* persuasion results from false speech. For various versions of this reading of the text, see Jarratt (1991, pp. 23, 56), Kerferd (1981, pp. 80–82), Rosenmeyer (1955, p. 232), Segal (1962, p. 112), and Shaffer (1998, pp. 254–55). For a reply to Segal, see Valiavitcharska (2006).
6. Cf. discussion of the passage in Segal (1962, pp. 111–12).
7. Note, however, that this turns out to be a relatively minimal constraint for practical purposes, for in both speeches Gorgias characterizes knowledge as much rarer and more difficult to achieve than belief. While the power of speech is conditional on the listener's possession of belief rather than knowledge, therefore, it is a condition that is met in most cases. Speech is indeed powerless against those who *know*, but on Gorgias's view, few people actually do.
8. For discussion of this passage and its implication that speech can be true but yet fail to provide listeners with knowledge of the truth, see Bermúdez (2017, pp. 8–9), Biesecker-Mast (1994, p. 157), and Mann (2021, pp. 62–64). Cf. Untersteiner (1954, pp. 136–37).
9. I take it, then, that from the perspective of Gorgias' theory, Palamedes' aim is to instill true belief in his innocence in the jurors. Likewise, we could characterize the internal aim of the *Helen* as that of providing true belief about Helen's blameworthiness to the listeners.
10. The term "folk" is not intended to suggest anything dismissive, only that the empiricist ideas at play are ones that many or most ancient Greeks took for granted without necessarily thinking about the underlying philosophical details of them.
11. Consigny (2001, chp. 1–2) defends an anti-foundationalist interpretation according to which there is no *true* account of the world; rather, truths are evaluated in reference to intersubjective community practices and criteria (pp. 72–73). Many commentators interpret Gorgias through the lens of a Protagorean-relativist reading of *On Not Being*. Barney (2006, p. 94), for example, writes: "Gorgias and Protagoras can plausibly be seen as forming a united front of deflationary anti-realism...There is no reality beyond appearance, and no hope for any knowledge which would be different in kind from our fallible opinions". Guthrie (1969, pp. 51, 196, 211, 272–73) similarly perceives alignment between Gorgias and Protagorean relativism, commenting that for Gorgias, "There can be belief, but never knowledge". De Romilly (1992, pp. 66–77, 97) takes the *Helen* to express *reservations* about the possibility of knowledge, which *On Not Being* takes to their Protagorean extreme. By contrast, Mourelatos (1987, p. 164, n. 2) denies that Protagorean relativism plays any role in Gorgias's conception of speech and communication, and Caston (2002, pp. 217–18) even interprets *On Not Being* as a direct *contradiction* to Protagorean relativism. Cf. Untersteiner (1954, p. 162) and Woodruff (1999, pp. 305–6).

[12] Bermúdez (2017) similarly rejects radically negative or skeptical interpretations of the *Helen*.

[13] Notably, all four authors discussed below—Thucydides, Alcidamas, Isocrates, and Antisthenes—were reputed to have been taught or influenced by Gorgias. On Gorgias's alleged relationship to these and other prominent fifth and fourth century figures, including Meno and Hippocrates, see Bett (2002, p. 258), Consigny (2001, p. 7), Gagarin (2001, p. 283), Grote (1971, p. 41), Guthrie (1969, pp. 308–12), De Romilly (1992, pp. 61–65), Schiappa (1990, p. 465), Tompkins (2015), and Too (1995).

[14] Cf. *Antidosis* 271.

[15] For another example of the belief/knowledge distinction expressed in the empiricist language of personal experience, see Antiphon, *On the Murder of Herodes* 74–5.

[16] See Pindar, *Nemean Odes* 8.23–34; cf. 7.20–27.

[17] Guthrie (1969, p. 272), for example, takes the passage as evidence of relativism in the *Helen*. Cf. Note 11 above.

[18] Cf. remarks in Kerferd (1981, p. 79) and Crockett (1994, p. 84).

[19] This also makes sense of the ease with which cosmologists use *logoi* to change beliefs. As Mourelatos (1987, p. 157) notes, "Since theoretical entities are not accessible to observation, the language we employ in introducing and describing such entities cannot be based directly either on the things of the familiar and manifest world or on our repertoire of experiences".

[20] *Contra* Guthrie (1969, p. 271, n. 1), who claims that in the *Palamedes* "there is no such thing as knowledge".

[21] Note that Palamedes acknowledges a third possibility that seems to tell against my interpretation: "or by learning from an accomplice (*ē tou <metechontos> puthomenos*)?" (22). The apparent implication is that he might have acquired secondhand *knowledge* (not mere belief) on the basis of verbal communication from someone with firsthand knowledge. Despite that *prima facie* implication, however, at least three considerations tell against taking it as indicative of any deeper commitment on Gorgias' part. First and most importantly, in the collective interpretive data from the *Helen* and *Palamedes*, it clearly represents the noise and not the signal. By far the preponderance of evidence, especially the unequivocal remarks at Section 35 of *Palamedes*, tells in favor of the distinction between knowledge and belief that I have defended concerning their transmissibility by *logos*. Second, because forensic rhetoric does not demand the same kind of verbal precision as a philosophical treatise, the fact that in this one-off instance Gorgias applies the term "knowledge" more loosely than he allows elsewhere in the speech does not undermine my overall interpretation. It is also significant that the possibility of learning from an accomplice is the third item in a series—the first two of which are being an eyewitness or being an accomplice oneself—and that the verb "to know" appears only once at the beginning of that series. In other words, use of the term might be governed more by its proximity to the first two terms than by any deliberate intention by Gorgias to contradict his later claim about verbal communication (i.e., at 35). Finally, the remarks that immediately follow backtrack on the implication in question. If Odysseus learned from an accomplice, Palamedes says, then the accomplice should reveal himself and testify to the jurors himself, since such testimony would make the accusations more trustworthy (*pistoteron*) (22). This constitutes a retreat from the idea that an eyewitness can convey knowledge through speech, since the accomplice's testimony would not provide the jurors with certainty, but only with a higher degree of believability.

[22] Cf. Bermúdez (2017, p. 11): "Hence knowledge seems to imply direct experience, whereas opinion turns out to be a speech that plays the role of knowledge when direct experience is not available".

[23] Bermúdez (2017, p. 9) explores another method by which speech can reveal truth despite its inability to reproduce direct experience: it can show logical inconsistency in an opposing speech.

[24] Drake (2021, pp. 250–51) and Jouanna (2012) discuss the parallel between Gorgias's conception of *logos* and the Hippocratic account of breath. Di Piazza and Piazza (2016) address points of kinship between medicine and rhetoric generally, and in particular the epistemic conditions of uncertainty under which both operate. For present purposes, it is noteworthy that Hippocratic texts often identify sense-perception as the source of knowledge while acknowledging the rarity of precise knowledge (e.g., *Ancient Medicine* 9).

[25] Drake (2021, pp. 254–55) also takes the language of "molding" literally.

[26] For further discussion of the materialism or naturalistic bent of Gorgias's account of *logos*, see Barney (2016, p. 12), Bermúdez (2017, p. 12), Crick (2014, pp. 83–87), and Segal (1962, pp. 104–6).

[27] Note that the fact that things have a nature independent of minds refutes the idea that for Gorgias there is no objective truth. Cf. Woodruff (1999, p. 304), who argues against interpreting Gorgias as any kind of extreme relativist.

[28] Barney (2016, p. 12) similarly notes that the *Meno* provides further evidence of a materialist theory of sense-perception of the sort hinted at in the *Helen*, but rightly notes that the argument of the latter does not hang on the particular scientific theory suggested by Plato. Drake (2021, pp. 253–54) also connects the physicalist theory of the *Helen* to effluence theory.

[29] Segal (1962, pp. 113–14) and Consigny (2001, p. 58) present a potential challenge for my interpretation, arguing that for Gorgias sense-perception is a subjective experience in which our own psychology, especially our emotions, affect what and how we perceive. Perception, on this view, is on the same epistemological footing as communicative *logos* when it comes to providing cognitive access to objects: "In neither case do men transcend the medium and reach 'pure' Being, but their knowledge of the world inevitably involves an admixture of their own...psychological patterns" (Segal 113). This has a basis, moreover, in the physiology of sense-perception: our emotional states can affect our pores themselves, which in turn affect what we perceive by way of the effluvia (Consigny 58). There are a few responses to this line of argument. First, it misrepresents the relationship

between our emotions and our perceptions that Gorgias is keen to emphasize. For him the direction of influence runs exactly the other way: our perceptions cause us to have certain kinds of emotions, not the other way around. We see the invading army, and *then* we feel fear because we see it. Second, sense-perception can be partly subjective *and* a reliable source of knowledge nonetheless, so long as its subjective component does not interfere with *all* of the sensory experience's content. And that condition is plausibly met. Our emotions might affect certain aspects of how we perceive an enemy army, but they cannot affect our perception *that* the army is there in front of us, for instance. This is related to a third point, which is that we need not assume sense-perception gives us complete cognitive access to the "pure being" of external objects and events, only that it reliably and accurately reveals at least *some* true things about them—like the fact that something is present in front of us or that an event is taking place. In a legal context, for example, having witnessed a murder up close provides the viewer with the knowledge *that* the murder occurred and/or a reliable memory to that effect.

30 On the surface, this is perhaps an unlikely place to find support for a folk empiricist epistemology. After all, one of its main theses is precisely the denial that human beings can know *anything*, whereas the folk view takes for granted that people know the things they perceive. However, even if Gorgias endorses the conclusions of the first two sections of *On Not Being* (I take no stand on whether he does for present purposes), the counterfactual conditions that the treatise's third section imagines are precisely the commonsense ones that the *Helen* and *Palamedes* take for granted—namely, that some things exist and are knowable. The third section of the treatise is informative, therefore, because it shows us what kind of epistemology is on the table *if* we assume—as Gorgias does in the *Helen* and *Palamedes*—that knowledge is possible.

31 Barney (2006, p. 94) concurs with Mourelatos (1987) that the arguments of the *Helen* and the third section of *On Not Being* are complementary: the latter shows what language *cannot* do; the former shows what it can do. My friendly amendment to their view is that the *Helen*, too, weighs in on some of what speech cannot do.

32 For interpretation of the aims and substantive content of *On Not Being* see Barney (2006, pp. 92–93), Caston (2002, p. 207), Grote (1971, p. 43), Guthrie (1969, p. 193), Kerferd (1981, p. 93), Poster (2017), Preus (2017, p. 201), and Woodruff (1999, pp. 305–6).

33 The version in Sextus Empiricus also supports my argument, although I concur with previous scholars that the *MXG* likely has greater fidelity to Gorgias's original. Cf. Kerferd (1981, p. 95) and Mourelatos (1987, p. 136), who calls the *MXG* "unquestionably" the better source.

34 Mourelatos (1987, p. 146): "That *noein* and *aisthanesthai* should be allowed to shift back and forth between "mentally picture" and "have a sensory impression of" reveals an assumption which is common to Gorgias and (as he sets things up) to those he addresses in his elenchus. It is the assumption familiar to us from classical empiricism, that ideas or thoughts have their origin and basis in sensory impressions".

35 This fits well with the Empedoclean pore-theory of perception attributed to Gorgias by Plato. Cf. Guthrie (1969, p. 198). Mourelatos (1987, pp. 137, 148), however, denies that the argument of *On Not Being* draws on any such theory, on the grounds that Gorgias's arguments need to rest on "ordinary intuitions or commonly held beliefs" rather than speculative theory in order to have force. I think we can concede this point, however, and at the same see how pore-theory provides a useful foundation for the folk position.

36 Likewise, the fact that *written* speech is something seen with the eyes does not entail that a written description of something brings us any closer to actually seeing it than if we *heard* the same speech.

37 Although I do not emphasize Gorgias's conception of speech's power in this essay, my understanding of it is in line with previous commentators who view it in terms of its psychological and behavioral effects. Although *logos* cannot duplicate sensory experience, it can cause us to *imagine* objects and events in the world in vivid ways, which can in turn cause the same sorts of psychological effects (desires, emotions) as perception itself, which can, finally, cause us to *act* in certain ways. Cf. discussion in Bermúdez (2017, pp. 4–5), Poulakos (1983, p. 13), and Woodruff (1999, p. 308).

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