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R.J. Barnes¹

Gorgias on Speech and the Soul

In his *Encomium of Helen* and *On Not Being*, Gorgias of Leontinoi discusses the nature and function of speech more extensively than any other surviving author before Plato. His discussions are not only surprising in the way they characterize the power of *logos* and its effects on a listener but also in how the two descriptions of speech seem to contradict one another. In the *Helen*, Gorgias claims that *logos* is a very powerful entity, capable of affecting a listener in whatever way it wants. In *On Not-Being*, he makes the very different (but no less exaggerated) claim that *logos* is a non-entity, incapable of referring to anything other than itself. In this essay I show how these apparently contradictory accounts might be brought into harmony with one another.² In the first part I address some of the interpretive difficulties with the text of Gorgias's *On Not Being* (henceforth *ONB*) and the role that irony plays in the work. In particular I argue (as others have before) that Gorgias's remarks about the impotency of speech are not meant to be taken seriously. Instead, they are aimed more squarely at raising questions about how exactly speech is thought to function and, more specifically, how linguistic reference works—i.e., how words somehow correspond to things, on one level, and to our ideas about things, on another.

In the second and third parts of this paper, I illustrate how Gorgias's concern with linguistic reference in *ONB* goes on to inform his notion of *logos* in the *Encomium of Helen*. I point specifically to evidence found in an important and often overlooked exit clause at

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² For other attempts to synthesize the two accounts, see Jacques Brunschwig, "Gorgias et l'incommunicabilité," in *La communication, Actes du XVe Congrès de l'Association des Sociétés de Philosophie de langue française*, v. 1 (Montreal: Éditions Montmorency, 1971), 79–84, and Alexander Mourelatos, "Gorgias on the Function of Language," *Philosophical Topics* 15, no. 2 (1987): 135–70.

the close of *ONB* regarding the difference between words and things. There, Gorgias insists that if words manifest meaning at all, they must appeal to their own sort of sense organ. In the *Helen*, he draws on the concepts of soul (*psychē*) and opinion (*doxa*) in order to construct this alternative, psychagogic account in which utterances are actually apprehended in ways akin to sense perception. Whether or not one is convinced by Gorgias's alternative account of how speech works, the description he gives of *logos* does notionally circumvent the problem of linguistic reference and, in doing so, pushes one to think beyond the potentially constrictive framework of *nomen et nominatum*. I argue that, when read in this way, these two early discussions of *logos* represent a unified progression of serious thought about how speech works.

Approaching *On Not-Being*

The text and tone of Gorgias's *ONB* pose several important interpretative difficulties that must be addressed at the outset. For one, the text we have survives in paraphrase from two sources—Sextus Empiricus's *Against the Logicians* and a pseudo-Aristotelian text titled *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* (henceforth *MXG*). The versions differ markedly from one another in several respects, and the tides of scholarly opinion over the past century have ebbed and flowed over which text is closer to the original. Since Sextus's version is in much better shape materially and easier to follow than *MXG*, it was once strongly preferred—so much so that Hermann Diels declined even to print the latter in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*.³ Over the last half-century, scholars have increasingly tended to prefer *MXG*, largely because it appears to cleave more closely to the verbiage of Gorgias's own day than Sextus's version, which incorporates a greater amount of later philosophical jargon.⁴

³ In addition to Diels, see Heinrich Gomperz, *Sophistik und Rhetorik* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1912), 18; Wilhelm Nestle, "Die Schrift des Gorgias 'über die Natur oder über das Nichtseiende,'" *Hermes* 57 (1922): 554-5.

⁴ Walter Bröcker, "Gorgias contra Parmenides," *Hermes* 86 (1958): 425-40; Jaap Mansfeld, "Aristotle, Plato, and the Preplatonic Doxography and Chronography," in *Studies in the Historiography of Greek Philosophy*

Although it is true that MXG is preferable in this respect, there are other aspects in which Sextus's version may better reflect Gorgias's original work—one being the overall structure of its arguments which more closely echoes other surviving Gorgianic works.⁵ In this paper I refrain from absolutely privileging one version over the other and instead take a more synthetic approach.⁶

What is fundamentally clear from both versions of the text is that Gorgias structured his work around a series of three interlocking claims:

1. Nothing is.
2. Even if something is, what is cannot be known.
3. Even if something is and can be known, the thing known cannot be communicated.

The concessive structure of this argument (not x , and even if x , not y , and even if y , not z) is, by all accounts, authentically Gorgian. It is closely paralleled in the *Defense of Palamedes* and never quite catches on with other authors as an argumentative form until the Pyrrhonist philosopher Aenesidemus includes it as one of his five tropes.⁷ It is

(1986; repr., Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1990), 22–83; Jaap Mansfeld, “*De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia: Pyrrhonizing Aristotelianism*,” *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 131 (1988): 239–76; Richard Bett, “Gorgias’ Περὶ Τοῦ Μὴ ὄντος and Its Relation to Skepticism,” *International Journal for the Study of Skepticism* 10 (2020): 187–208.

⁵ Evan Rodriguez, “Untying the Gorgianic ‘Not’: Argumentative Structure in Gorgias’s *On-Not-Being*,” *Classical Quarterly* 69 (2019): 87–106.

⁶ On the need for a synthetic approach, see Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, tr. K. Freeman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), 97; G.B. Kerferd, “The Interpretation of Gorgias’ Treatise: Περὶ Τοῦ Μὴ ὄντος ἢ Περὶ Φύσεως,” *Deucalion* 9 (1981), 321; Kerferd, “Meaning and Reference: Gorgias and the Relation between Language and Reality,” in *The Sophistic Movement*, ed. K.J. Boudouris (Athens, 1984), 215; Rodriguez, “Untying the Gorgianic ‘Not’,” 103.

⁷ A.A. Long, “Methods of Argument in Gorgias’ *Palamedes*,” in *The Sophistic Movement*, ed. K.J. Boudouris (Athens, 1984), 235; David Sedley, “Sextus Empiricus and the Atomist Criteria of Truth,” *Elenchos* 13 (1992), 25–26n8.

more difficult to determine whether this thesis authentically reflects Gorgias's own opinion, however, or whether it is meant ironically.

The three claims Gorgias makes are not only outlandish but also self-refuting in their very enunciation. How is it not paradoxical, for instance, to use speech in order to communicate the idea that our speech cannot communicate our ideas? Problems like this one have naturally caused readers to wonder whether Gorgias's claims are meant to be taken at face value or with some degree of irony. If we imagine that Gorgias was genuinely committed to them, we would be condemning him to some truly tangled reasoning. A more charitable approach, and one which other interpreters have taken, would be to say that Gorgias (a showman by all accounts) makes this argument as a way of surprising his audience and showing off his cleverness.⁸

This practice of constructing elaborate arguments for unlikely premises was, to be sure, not uncommon for intellectuals in Gorgias's day. One is reminded of Plato's *Euthydemus* (where the titular character argues that Ctesippus's father is a dog),⁹ Aristophanes's Pheidippides (who argues that it is a just thing for a son to beat his father),¹⁰ or the various mock-encomia which were written in praise of salt, mice, pebbles, death, and the like.¹¹ The proper response to these sophistic displays was not, of course, to assent to the arguments themselves but rather to delight in the cleverness involved in their

⁸ Gisela Striker, "Methods of Sophistry," in *Essays on Hellenistic Epistemology and Ethics*, ed. Gisela Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 13-14; Kurt Lampe, "The Logos of Ethics in Gorgias' *Palamedes*, *On What Is Not*, and *Helen*," in *Early Greek Ethics*, ed. David Wolfsdorf (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 113.

⁹ Plato, *Euthydemus*, 298d-e.

¹⁰ Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 1405.

¹¹ On salt: Plato (*Symposium* 177b) and Isocrates (*Helen* 12); on mice offered by Gorgias's pupil Polycrates, see Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 2.24 1401b15; on pebbles offered by Polycrates, see *Rhetoric to Alexander*, 3.10-2; on death offered by Gorgias's pupil Alcidas, see Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.116 cf. Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters*, 592c. On these sorts of encomia more generally, see Arthur Pease, "Things without Honor," *Classical Philology* 21 (1926): 27-42.

invention and, perhaps also, to reflect on the deeper questions they may raise *sotto voce*.¹² In fact, Gorgias already lays out this principle quite clearly in his own playful encomium: “telling those who know the things that they already know is persuasive but it does not bring delight [τὸ γὰρ τοῖς εἰδόσιν ἂ ἴσασι λέγειν πίστιν μὲν ἔχει, τέρψιν δὲ οὐ φέρει].”¹³

According to early sources, Gorgias often wielded his wit with purpose. Aristotle, for instance, cites Gorgias’s famous observation that seriousness can be diffused by a dose of humor, just as humor is diffused by seriousness.¹⁴ He also notes how Gorgias was adept at using humor and irony (*eirōneia*) as a means of honing in on serious questions.¹⁵ In the *Politics*, for example, Aristotle recalls how Gorgias made the punning remark that the craftsmen (*dēmiourgoi*) of Larisa are not just pot-makers (*holmopoioi*) but also Larisa-Makers (*larisopoioi*) when they bestow citizenship on foreigners. The pun partly hinges on the term *dēmiourgos*, which means “craftsman” but looks like “people-maker.” As Aristotle recognizes, the humorous equivalence is not just a pun but also an invitation to ask serious questions about the issue of citizenship and how it is bestowed—e.g., is citizenship something that can be produced (like a pot) or is it something that must be inherited naturally at birth? Importantly, Gorgias’s joke only raises questions and never provides answers. This dodginess also seems to have been characteristically Gorgian.

¹² See also Jonathan Pratt, “On the Threshold of Rhetoric: Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*,” *Classical Antiquity* 34 (2015): 169-70, who warns against the tendency of dismissing these displays as τὸ ψευδολογεῖν when they “could more fruitfully be seen as intellectual experiments, protests against convention, or attempts to address the demands of unusual situations.”

¹³ Gorgias, *Helen*, 5.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 3.18 1419b3-5 = DK 82B12.

¹⁵ Aristotle praises Gorgias’s capacity to produce comic metaphors that are neither too ridiculous (γελοῖον) nor too solemn and tragic (σεμνὸν ἄγαν καὶ τραγικόν), nor even far-fetched (πύρρωθεν) or obscure (ἀσαφεῖς, Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 3.3 1406b4-19 = DK 82A23). He also compares the ironic bombast of Gorgias’s speeches to the display speeches in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 3.7 1408b17-20).

As Aristotle puts it, Gorgias makes the joke “partly out of *aporia* and partly with irony [τὰ μὲν ἴσως ἀπορῶν τὰ δ’ εἰρωνευόμενος].”¹⁶

It is not hard to imagine that a similar dynamic might be at play in *ONB*. Gorgias raises serious questions about ontology, epistemology, and human communication; however, he does so partly out of *aporia* and partly with irony. His claims that nothing exists, nothing can be known, and nothing can be communicated may not convince anyone—and may not be meant to. But once we confidently sweep them aside as ridiculous, we are faced with the question of what to put in their place. We must ask how to account for our own suppositions about speech, knowledge, being, and, importantly, whether or not other contemporary theories resembling Gorgias’s own extreme version have any more or any less credence.

As scholars have long recognized, one lightly veiled agenda of *ONB* is to take a potshot at the Eleatics who, in Gorgias day, were making influential claims about what can exist, what can be known, and what can be communicated through speech.¹⁷ The three central pillars of Eleatic philosophy are that not-being is (1) unreal, (2) unthinkable, and (3) unspeakable. Gorgias’s triple-tiered thesis in *ONB* undermines these claims all too neatly by trading not-being for being and constructing an argument for why the latter is (1) unreal, (2) unthinkable, and (3) unspeakable. By arguing flatly against the Eleatic position on these issues, Gorgias calls into question an influential strand of contemporary thought. Although he may not shake anyone’s instinctive confidence that things in the world are, can be known, and can be communicated, he raises doubts about popular ways of explaining these things and challenges his audience

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, 3.1 1275b26-30 = DK 82A19. For a broader discussion of this passage and other examples of Gorgianic irony, see Marie-Pierre Noël, “L’enfance de l’art: Plaisir et jeu chez Gorgias,” *Bulletin de l’Association Guillaume Budé* 1 (1994): 71–93.

¹⁷ George Grote, *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1867), 107-9; Bröcker, “Gorgias contra Parmenides.” For a more recent study of this anti-Eleatic aspect of *ONB*, see Patricia Curd, “Gorgias and the Eleatics,” in *La costruzione del discorso filosofico nell’eta dei presocratici*, ed. Maria Sassi (Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2006), 183–200.

to find better ways of accounting for their own suppositions about the nature of being, knowledge, and *logos*.¹⁸ With this in mind, let us turn now to what Gorgias has to say specifically about *logos* in *ONB*.

Speech and the Senses in *On Not Being*

Gorgias's initial argument regarding the impossibility of communication rests on the observation that words do not manifest meaning in the same way as things do.¹⁹ By "thing" (*pragma* in *MXG*) or "things that exist externally" (*ἄπερ ἐκτὸς ὑπόκειται* in Sextus), Gorgias has in mind phenomenal objects. Most objects present themselves quite naturally to our faculties of perception. That is, visible objects are apprehended by our eyes, audible objects by our ears, and so on. Words function differently. They do not present themselves to our eyes or ears like other visible or audible objects. Instead, they *re-present* other things. That is to say, speech somehow points beyond itself, beyond its own perceptible content, and toward something else without appealing to our eyes or ears in quite the same manner as other perceptible objects do. As Gorgias puts it, speech is not something one hears or sees any more than colors are heard or sounds are seen:

For if things that are—i.e., things that truly exist externally—are visible and audible and, broadly speaking, perceptible, and if visible things are apprehended by sight, audible things by hearing and not vice versa, how then is it possible to indicate these things by some other means.²⁰ For

¹⁸ I agree with Rachel Barney, "Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*," in *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy*, ed. Eric Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 24, who suggests that Gorgias's brand of philosophy (if we can call it that) is characterized by "provocation and challenge." It is comparable to Plato's aporetic dialogues.

¹⁹ For the best overall discussions of Gorgias's third thesis of *ONB*, see Kerferd, "Interpretation," and "Meaning." Mourelatos, "Gorgias on the Function" is also helpful on certain details.

²⁰ Here I take *ἐτέρω* as instrumental. Most read it as an indirect object: "to someone else." However, this overlooks the parallelism with *ὀράσει* and *ἀκοῇ* as well as the later explanation that speech is the "other means" by which we must somehow indicate things seen and heard.

speech is the means by which we indicate [things] and speech is not the things that are and exist [externally].

εἰ γὰρ τὰ ὄντα ὁρατά ἐστὶ καὶ ἀκουστά καὶ κοινῶς αἰσθητά, ἅπερ ἐκτὸς ὑπόκειται, τούτων τε τὰ μὲν ὁρατά ὁράσει καταληπτά ἐστὶ τὰ δὲ ἀκουστά ἀκοῆ καὶ οὐκ ἐναλλάξ, πῶς οὖν δύναται ταῦτα ἐτέρῳ μὴνύ-εσθαι; ᾧ γὰρ μὴνύομεν, ἔστι λόγος, λόγος δὲ οὐκ ἔστι τὰ ὑποκείμενα καὶ ὄντα.²¹

This passage points to the categorical difference in how we apprehend words and how we apprehend perceptible objects.²² It maps this distinction onto the categorical difference between how specific sense organs apprehend specific forms of sense data—a claim that may loosely riff on an Empedoclean model of perception in which specific sense organs function as pores that admit only specific effluences of sense data.²³ Either way, in making this argument, Gorgias raises an important linguistic question that he pointedly never answers: How can speech indicate something other than itself? He concludes (as he must for the sake of the argument of *ONB*) that speech cannot indicate anything other than itself and, for this reason, communication must be impossible.

After reaching this point, the two versions of *ONB* diverge. *MXG* launches into an additional argument against the possibility of

²¹ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, 7.83-4 cf. *MXG* 6 980b1-3. All translations are my own.

²² It does not tacitly concede that communication may be possible through “onomatopoeia” or “ideographic supplements” as is argued by Mourelatos, “Gorgias on the Function,” 137.

²³ See Plato, *Meno*, 76a8-e2 with Kerferd, “The Interpretation,” 323-4. It is quite clear (*pace* Mourelatos, “Gorgias on the Function,” 137-8, 148-9) that Gorgias’s writings draw on many contemporary strands of intellectual thought, be it Hippocratic, Eleatic, Empedoclean, or otherwise: Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism: Literary Culture and Poetic Theory in Classical Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 172-87; Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 211-6.

communication, focusing this time on the categorical difference between words and thoughts.²⁴ Sextus's version, however, continues with the argument we just summarized and adds two striking qualifications. The first has been read by Alexander Mourelatos as representing an alternative theory of communication that Gorgias explores further in the *Helen*.²⁵ However, as I will argue, it is actually the second and final qualification that acts as the exit clause from Gorgias's *elenchos* and provides the groundwork for thinking about speech in an alternative way.

The first qualification makes a concession regarding the correspondence between words and things. It states that even if speech corresponds to things in the world, it must be the case that *speech* is expressed by *things* and not vice versa.

To be sure, speech, [Gorgias] says, is for us composed of things that strike us from the outside—i.e., perceptibles. For instance, from contact with flavor, there arises within us speech expressed by that quality, and, from the encounter with color, the [speech expressed] by that color. But, if this is the case, speech is not an indicator of the external, rather the external is revelatory of speech.

ὁ γε μὴν λόγος, φησὶν, ἀπὸ τῶν ἔξωθεν προσ-πιπτόντων ἡμῖν πραγμάτων συνίσταται, τουτέστι τῶν αἰσθητῶν· ἐκ γὰρ τῆς τοῦ χυλοῦ ἐγκυρήσεως ἐγγίνεται ἡμῖν ὁ κατὰ ταύτης τῆς ποιότητος ἐκφερόμενος λόγος, καὶ ἐκ τῆς τοῦ χρώματος ὑποπτώσεως ὁ κατὰ τοῦ χρώματος. εἰ δὲ τοῦτο, οὐχ ὁ λόγος τοῦ ἐκτὸς παραστατικός ἐστίν, ἀλλὰ τὸ ἐκτὸς τοῦ λόγου μηνυτικὸν γίνεται.²⁶

²⁴ It is argued that a word cannot represent the same idea to all persons or even to a single person at different times (MXG 6 980b8-b21).

²⁵ Mourelatos, "Gorgias on the Function," followed by Juan Pablo Bermúdez, "Truth and Falsehood for Non-Representationalists: Gorgias on the Normativity of Language," *Journal of Ancient Philosophy* 11 (2017): 1–21. Mourelatos's thesis is critiqued by Erminia Di Iulio, "Gorgias' Account of Truth: Mourelatos and Bermúdez between Behaviorism and Coherence," *Fogli Di Filosofia* 11 (2019): 73–91.

²⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, 7.85.

Although interpretations of this passage may vary in detail, the basic message is clear enough: even if there exists a particular avenue of correspondence between words and things, we can be sure that things—not words—are still responsible for manifesting meaning.²⁷ The primary reasoning for this seems to be that even if speech arises through the interaction with objects, the speech that arises from this interaction still has no way of referring back to the object that generated it. Speech is categorically distinct from that to which it refers, and Gorgias has not yet resolved his aporia about how it might indicate something other than itself without appealing to sense perceptions. So, on the face of it, what we end up with is another strike against the possibility of communication.

Alexander Mourelatos has influentially argued that this passage hints at an alternative theory of communication. For him, this alternative theory is equivalent to the behavioral conception of language popular in the mid-twentieth century, in which words are regarded as substitutes for experiences and thereby act as surrogate stimuli for those experiences. Although Mourelatos is not far from the mark in his conclusion about what Gorgias's alternative theory of communication might look like and how well that alternative theory squares with Gorgias's notion of *logos* in the *Helen*, this passage alone cannot sufficiently support his conclusion since it nowhere indicates that *logos* acts as a stimulus in its own right or somehow generates experiences in a way comparable to how perceptible objects generate experiences.²⁸ Like Mourelatos, I think that Gorgias's *ONB* does open the door to an alternative model of communication and that, according to this alternative model, speech would function as a sort of stimulus, capable of conveying meaning in ways similar to perceptible objects. However, this observation that sensible objects trigger utterances only becomes interesting once Gorgias concedes the possibility that speech might be thought of as its own type of object corresponding to its own faculty of perception.

²⁷ Similarly, Kerferd, "Meaning and Reference," 218.

²⁸ To call this a behavioral conception of language is also, in my mind, unnecessarily anachronistic (cf. Bett, "Μῆ Ὀντος," 194n22, 204n35).

This latter concession is made only with a second qualification which effectively serves as an exit clause to the foregoing elenchus. It states that even if speech can be thought of as something that exists, it must (1) exist differently from other things that exist and (2) be apprehended differently from other things that exist:

For even if speech exists, [Gorgias] says, it at the very least differs from the rest of things that exist, and visible bodies would differ most of all from things spoken. For the visible is apprehensible through one organ and speech through another.

εἰ γὰρ καὶ ὑπόκειται, φησὶν, ὁ λόγος, ἀλλὰ διαφέρει τῶν λοιπῶν ὑποκειμένων, καὶ πλείστῳ διενήνοχε τὰ ὄρατὰ σώματα τῶν λόγων· δι' ἑτέρου γὰρ ὄργάνου ληπτὸν ἐστί τὸ ὄρατὸν καὶ δι' ἄλλου ὁ λόγος.²⁹

In this passage, Gorgias entertains the possibility that speech might exist as its own sort of entity under two related conditions: *logos* must differ from all other things and must be apprehended differently from other things (especially sight). Mourelatos dismisses this passage, assuming that the contrast drawn between speech perception and sight perception entails an implicit (non-Gorgian) concession that the meaning of speech can be communicated to the faculty of hearing alone (as opposed to sight).³⁰ However, this need not be the case. The assumption that speech conveys its meaning to the faculty of hearing alone was already explicitly denied earlier on in both versions of the *ONB*.³¹ Moreover, one should ask what purpose Gorgias would have for granting the possibility that speech may be apprehensible through hearing while denying the possibility that speech may be apprehensible through sight (i.e., writing). It would be more consistent and more charitable to assume that when Gorgias says that speech, as a thing that exists, must differ from the

²⁹ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, 7.86.

³⁰ Mourelatos, "Gorgias on the Function," 137 cf. Kerferd, "Meaning and Reference," 219.

³¹ *MXG* 6 980b1-3; Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians*, 7.83-4 quoted and discussed above.

rest of the things that exist, he means simply that it must differ from all perceptible objects that exist, including audible things. In other words, he abstracts *logos* from all of its perceptible manifestations that may be available to sight, hearing, or the like and treats it as its own entity—an entity that, if it has any effect on a listener at all, must be apprehended by something like a sixth sense.

What makes this final exit clause remarkable is that it grants a starting point for an alternative framework for communication. If speech is understood as a thing that exists, it may, like other things that exist, manifest meaning to the one apprehending it. The only conditions to this are that speech must (1) be radically different from all other objects of perception and (2) must be apprehended differently from them as well. Once these conditions are met, a form of communication may take place in which speech functions analogously to (but still differently enough from) perceptible objects. In the next section, we shall see how this alternative theory is developed in Gorgias's *Encomium of Helen*.

Speech and the Soul in the *Encomium of Helen*

In sections 8-14 of the *Encomium of Helen*, we find a very different, though no less surprising, picture of *logos* than we had in *ONB*. It must be said at the outset that this account is probably not meant to be taken as Gorgias's final word on how words work. By Gorgias's own admission, the *Helen* was written as a plaything (*paignion*) and thus not as something to be taken all too seriously.³² I suggest simply that sections 8-14 of the *Helen* may be regarded as a playful and provisional sketch of an alternative theory of communication, one that specifically sidesteps the problems of linguistic reference that Gorgias underscores in *ONB*. In particular I show how the *Helen* picks up where the final exit clause of *ONB* leaves off and fulfills its conditions by presenting *logos* as (1) something different from all things (especially visible things) and (2) something that is apprehended differently from (but analogously to) perceptible things.

³² "I wanted to write this speech as an encomium of Helen and as plaything for myself [ἐβουλήθη γράψαι τὸν λόγον Ἑλένης μὲν ἐγκώμιον, ἐμὸν δὲ παίγνιον]" (*Helen*, 21).

Gorgias fulfills the first condition by carving out a new conceptual space in which speech may exist. As he put it, speech is a mighty dynast (*dunastēs megas*) that performs divine deeds with the smallest and most imperceptible (*aphanestatos*) body.³³ By locating speech beyond human perception, he marks *logos* out as categorically distinct from other perceptible objects. The word *aphanestatos* is, of course, derived from *phainō*, which denotes all types of disclosure and revelation but, at its core, bears a strong visual sense. To call speech physically minute and *aphanestatos*, Gorgias is especially stressing the difference between speech objects and visible objects while at the same time categorically distinguishing speech from all other perceptible things. This move harmonizes well with what is said in *ONB* about the necessary difference between words and all other perceptible things in the world (especially visible things).³⁴ Thus, already from the outset of Gorgias's description of speech in the *Helen*, we find that *logos* is not only an object that exists in the world but also one that exists in the world differently from other things we might see or hear.

The fulfillment of the second condition left open in *ONB* is slightly more complex. In order to show that speech is apprehended differently from other things, Gorgias creatively coordinates the concepts of opinion (*doxa*) and soul (*psychē*) in order to construct something that resembles a faculty of speech perception. He models this new idea of speech perception directly on the idea of sense perception—in particular, the faculty of sight (*opsis*), which he describes in sections 15-20. As I shall illustrate in what follows, Gorgias offers a two-tier model of both speech and sight perception in which just as visible things impact the soul (*psychē*) through the intermediary of sight (*opsis*), thingified speech impacts the soul (*psychē*) through the intermediary of human opinion (*doxa*). The two faculties of speech perception and sight perception are categorically

³³ Gorgias, *Helen*, 8.

³⁴ "The contrast between the diminutive substance of *logos* and the magnitude of its effects reaffirms the categorial gulf between words and things—an echo of the third part of *Not Being*" (Mourelatos, "Gorgias on the Function," 156).

distinct (as they must be) yet parallel in how they function. To grasp this, it helps to take a closer look at what Gorgias has to say specifically about the workings of speech and sight and, importantly, the role that *psychē* plays in both.

Gorgias makes it quite clear that both speech and vision work by shaping the soul in one way or another. He writes, for instance, that “persuasion joining with speech shapes the soul too in the ways it wants [ἡ πειθῶ προσιοῦσα τῷ λόγῳ καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐτυπώσατο ὅπως ἐβούλετο]”³⁵ and that “the soul is shaped in its very character through sight [διὰ δὲ τῆς ὄψεως ἡ ψυχὴ κὰν τοῖς τρόποις τυποῦται].”³⁶ Moreover, both vision and speech affect the soul in similar ways. The faculty of vision works by transmitting mental states directly to the soul. For instance, Gorgias notes how, at the sight of an enemy army, *opsis* “becomes perturbed and perturbs the soul [ἐταράχθη καὶ ἐτάραξε τὴν ψυχὴν].”³⁷ Later, he describes how the eye of Helen, when it caught sight of Paris, “transmitted to the soul a desire and eagerness for eros [προθυμίαν καὶ ἄμιλλαν ἔρωτος τῇ ψυχῇ παρέδωκε].”³⁸ Speech functions somewhat similarly. As Gorgias puts it, speech affects the soul just as drugs (*pharmaka*) affect the body (*sōma*).³⁹ When drug-like speech comes into contact with the soul, it causes it to experience a wide variety of emotions/illusions:

For just as different drugs extract different fluids from the body, some stop sickness, others life, so too some utterances create pain, others delight, others fear, others instill auditors with courage, and still others intoxicate and bewitch the soul with evil persuasion.

³⁵ Gorgias, *Helen*, 13.

³⁶ Gorgias, *Helen*, 15.

³⁷ Gorgias, *Helen*, 16.

³⁸ Gorgias, *Helen*, 19.

³⁹ Gorgias, *Helen*, 14: “The power of speech has the same relation to the composition of the soul as the composition of drugs has to the nature of bodies [τὸν αὐτὸν δὲ λόγον ἔχει ἢ τε τοῦ λόγου δύναμις πρὸς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς τάξιν ἢ τε τῶν φαρμάκων τάξις πρὸς τὴν τῶν σωμάτων φύσιν].”

ὥσπερ γὰρ τῶν φαρμάκων ἄλλους ἄλλα χυμούς ἐκ τοῦ σώματος ἐξάγει, καὶ τὰ μὲν νόσου τὰ δὲ βίου παύει, οὕτω καὶ τῶν λόγων οἱ μὲν ἐλύπησαν, οἱ δὲ ἔτερψαν, οἱ δὲ ἐφόβησαν, οἱ δὲ εἰς θάρσος κατέστησαν τοὺς ἀκούοντας, οἱ δὲ πειθοῖ τιμι κακῆ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐφαρμάκευσαν καὶ ἐξεγοήτευσαν.⁴⁰

Like visible objects, things spoken instill a wide variety of mental states within the soul. In this capacity, speech, in Gorgias's words, coerces the soul (*ēnagkase*) to do and believe whatever it wants.⁴¹

The chief similarity between vision and speech is that they both ultimately affect *psychē*—that is to say, they are at bottom psychological or, perhaps better, *psychagogic* experiences. This fact becomes especially important when we realize that Gorgias is one of the first extant authors to speak about *psychē* in a psychological sense and that, throughout his extant writings, the term for soul only appears in the *Encomium of Helen*. In Gorgias's lifetime, the meaning of *psychē* was evolving (somewhat messily) from a smoky substance that drifts apart from the body at death to the unifying seat of sensation, thought, and emotion.⁴² In the *Helen*, Gorgias capitalizes

⁴⁰ Gorgias, *Helen*, 14. See also *Helen*, 9: "To those who hear it [i.e., poetic speech] comes fearful shuddering, tearful pity, grief-loving desire, and, based on the fortunes and misfortunes of the actions and bodies of others, the soul experiences, through speeches, a certain experience of its own [ἦς τοὺς ἀκούοντας εἰσηλθε καὶ φοβικὴ περιφοβὸς καὶ ἔλεος πολὺδακρυς καὶ πόθος φιλοπενθήσ, ἐπ' ἀλλοτρίων τε πραγμάτων καὶ σωμάτων εὐτυχίαις καὶ δυσπραγίαις ἰδίον τι πάθημα διὰ τῶν λόγων ἔπαθεν ἢ ψυχῆ]."

⁴¹ "For speech, after persuading the soul, coerces what it persuaded to obey what is said and approve what is done [λόγος γὰρ ὁ τὴν ψυχὴν πείσας, ἦν ἔπεισεν, ἠνάγκασε καὶ πείθεσθαι τοῖς λεγομένοις καὶ συναινέσαι τοῖς ποιουμένοις]" (*Helen*, 12).

⁴² See David Claus, *Towards the Soul: An Inquiry into the Meaning of Ψυχή before Plato* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), esp. 148-50; André Laks, "Soul, Sensation, and Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 250-70.

on this new sense of the word, using it fourteen times, mostly in reference to the function of speech and sight.⁴³

What must have appealed to Gorgias about the psychological sense of the word *psychē* is that it provides a neat way of marrying the physical domain of sense perception with the cognitive domain of speech perception. As we saw earlier in *ONB*, Gorgias's main problem with speech is that it does not seem to convey meaning to the senses in the same way that other things do. And, if it does not do this, it is difficult to articulate how speech conveys meaning at all. With the addition of the new concept of *psychē*, the situation changes. Sense perceptions are no longer the ultimate receptors of external content and, instead, become intermediaries that ultimately inscribe what they perceive directly onto the soul.⁴⁴ With sense perception serving this subsidiary role, it becomes less problematic that speech cannot manifest meaning to the senses directly since it becomes theoretically possible to imagine a scenario in which speech might somehow bypass the senses entirely and communicate with the soul by some other avenue. As we saw already, this is essentially how Gorgias conceives of speech as working in the *Helen*.

So far, we have noticed that in Gorgias's *Helen* things seen and things spoken function in similar ways; they are imagined as external stimuli that ultimately affect the same terminus—namely, the soul. They differ, however, in the faculties through which they are apprehended and conveyed to the soul. Gorgias is quite clear that visible objects pass through the intermediary of sight (*opsis*) or the eye (*omma*) before affecting the soul. He is also clear that speech is not apprehended by sight or hearing or any of the five senses.

⁴³ The only time it is not specifically used in reference to vision or speech is in the opening sentence (κόσμος [...] ψυχῆ δὲ σοφία; *Helen*, 1) which can be translated in various ways depending on how one reads the predication: “*sophia* is *kosmos* for the soul” or “*kosmos* is *sophia* for the soul.” Either way, Gorgias is using *psychē* with its psychological meaning.

⁴⁴ Gorgias uses the concept of *psychē* similarly to how medical writers speak of *sōma* where it functions as “a kind of interval” fitted conceptually between the “external catalyst and a (visible) outcome” (Holmes, *The Symptom*, 214).

Instead, it appeals to what Gorgias calls the eyes of opinion (τοῖς τῆς δόξης ὄμμασιν).⁴⁵ In this role, opinion (*doxa*) functions analogously to sight as an intermediary between the external stimulus (i.e., *logos*) and the internal terminus of human experience (i.e., *psychē*). In the tables below, I map out the conceptual difference between *ONB*, which omits any idea of *psychē* and *doxa*, and the *Helen*, which includes them as a way of mapping speech perception onto sense perception while still allowing each to remain categorically distinct:

On Not-Being (without psychē/doxa)

	Stimulus	Terminus
Sense perception	visible objects	sight (<i>opsis</i>)

Encomium of Helen (with psychē/doxa)

	Stimulus →	Intermediary →	Terminus
Sense perception	visible objects	sight (<i>opsis</i>)	soul (<i>psychē</i>)
Speech perception	speech (<i>logos</i>)	opinion (<i>doxa</i>)	soul (<i>psychē</i>)

This mediating role of *doxa* is crucial for understanding Gorgias’s discussion of magic in §10:

For the power of the incantation, joining with the opinion of the soul, enchants and persuades and alters it with magic. And the arts of enchantment and magic are found to be twofold—namely, the errors of the soul and the deceptions of opinion.

συγγινομένη γὰρ τῇ δόξῃ τῆς ψυχῆς ἢ δύναμις τῆς ἐπωδῆς ἔθελε καὶ ἔπεισε καὶ μετέστησεν αὐτὴν γοητεία. γοητείας δὲ καὶ μαγείας δισσαὶ τέχναι εὗρονται, αἱ εἰσι ψυχῆς ἀμαρτήματα καὶ δόξης ἀπατήματα.

⁴⁵ Gorgias, *Helen*, 13. As far as I can tell, the phrase is unparalleled in archaic and classical Greek.

Here, *dissai technai* does not refer to two types of verbal magic,⁴⁶ nor does it refer to two separate arts of speaking—be they poetry and incantation,⁴⁷ oratory and incantation,⁴⁸ or poetry and prose.⁴⁹ Rather, what Gorgias is saying is that the magic inherent to all of the arts of speech involves a “twofold” process (*dissai*): speech deceives opinion, and opinion, in turn, misleads the soul.⁵⁰

This difference in how things spoken and things seen are apprehended leads to differences in how each phenomenon is experienced. Unlike the intermediary of *opsis*, *doxa* can be especially deceptive. Gorgias stresses that *doxa*, in its role as the “counselor to the soul” (σύμβουλον τῆ ψυχῆ), is especially slippery and unstable (σφαλερὰ καὶ ἀβέβαιος) and capable of casting people into slippery and unstable fortunes.⁵¹ The reason for this heightened instability has to do with the imperceptible quality of speech. Gorgias notes how “the things we see do not have the nature we wish, but the one each happened to have” (ἃ γὰρ ὁρῶμεν, ἔχει φύσιν οὐχ ἣν ἡμεῖς θέλομεν, ἀλλ’ ἣν ἕκαστον ἔτυχε).⁵² *Logos*, on the other hand, is apparently unmoored from any sensible manifestation and could putatively communicate a much wider range of things to the faculty of *doxa* than the visible domain can to the faculty of sight. For this reason, skilled speakers can, as Gorgias puts it, “cause things both unbelievable and unclear to appear to the eyes of opinion [τὰ ἄπιστα

⁴⁶ D.M. Macdowell, *Gorgias: Encomium of Helen*, 2nd ed. (1982; repr., London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993), 33, thinks that *δισσαὶ τέχναι* suggests a distinction between the synonyms *μαγεία* and *γοητεία*.

⁴⁷ Jacqueline de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 3–22.

⁴⁸ W.J. Verdenius, “Gorgias’ Doctrine of Deception,” in *The Sophists and Their Legacy*, ed. George B. Kerferd (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1981), 122n37.

⁴⁹ Thomas Duncan, “Gorgias’ Theories of Art,” *The Classical Journal* 33 (1938): 406; Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, 116.

⁵⁰ See also Charles Segal, “Gorgias and the Psychology of the *Logos*,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 66 (1962), 112; Mikhail Pozdnev and Viktor Streicher, “‘Die doppelten Künste der Magie’? Zu Gorgias von Leontinoi, Helena c. 10,” *Wiener Studien* 123 (2010): 11–18.

⁵¹ Gorgias, *Helen*, 11.

⁵² Gorgias, *Helen*, 15.

καὶ ἄδηλα φαίνεσθαι τοῖς τῆς δόξης ὄμμασιν] simply by dispelling and instilling one opinion instead of another [δόξαν ἀντὶ δόξης τὴν μὲν ἀφελόμενοι τὴν δ' ἐνεργασάμενοι]."⁵³

With this twofold process in mind, we can see how the description of speech in Gorgias's *Helen* carries forward strands of thought left undeveloped in *ONB*. In the latter work, we saw how Gorgias calls into question whether speech is capable of referring to anything other than itself without appealing to sense perceptions. In an important passage at the close of Sextus's version of *ONB*, a concession is made that if speech could potentially exist as a thing in the world, it would differ from all perceptible things and, therefore, would be apprehended differently from perceptible things as well. This concession is not explored further in *ONB*. Instead, Gorgias concludes absurdly (and, I take it, ironically) that a thought cannot be indicated to others (οὐ δηλωτὸν ἄλλοις).⁵⁴ I have argued that, in the *Helen*, Gorgias picks up where the final concession left off in *ONB*. Gorgias conceives of speech as something that differs from all perceptible things and is apprehended in a way unlike (but analogous to) perceptible things. In particular, just as visible objects affect the soul by appearing to the eyes, speech affects the soul by appealing imperceptibly to the "eyes of opinion" (τοῖς τῆς δόξης ὄμμασιν) and, in doing so, it even communicates things that are unbelievable and unapparent (τὰ ἄπιστα καὶ ἄδηλα).⁵⁵

There, of course, remain many pockets of obscurity in the way Gorgias presents this alternative theory of communication. It is difficult to know, for instance, how exactly opinion communicates with the soul or how exactly speech communicates with opinion. It is correspondingly unclear what kind of thing speech is exactly or, for that matter, what kind of things the soul and opinion are. Speculating further about these and other details of Gorgias's description of *logos* in the *Helen* can be a ticklish endeavor even in the best of circumstances: our evidence is slim, and there is the ever-

⁵³ Gorgias, *Helen*, 13.

⁵⁴ MXG 5 979a13, cf. πῶς ἂν τις...δηλώσειεν ἄλλῳ, MXG 980a20; οὐδεὶς... ἑτέρῳ δηλώσειεν, MXG 980b17-8.

⁵⁵ Gorgias, *Helen*, 13.

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present danger of treating Gorgias's game (*paignion*) as something more serious than it was meant to be. At the very least, I have tried to explain the basic elements of Gorgias's intriguing, non-referential picture of *logos* in the *Helen* and how these basic elements can be seen to complement (rather than contradict) Gorgias's picture of *logos* in *ONB*. On a broader view, I hope to have shown how Gorgias's musings about speech contain serious reflections on the nature of human communication, even if these reflections are not always presented in a serious way.