Truth and Falsehood for Non-Representationalists: Gorgias on the Normativity of Language

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Sophists and rhetoricians like Gorgias are often accused of disregarding truth and rationality: their speeches seem to aim only at effective persuasion, and be constrained by nothing but persuasiveness itself. In his extant texts Gorgias claims that language does not represent external objects or communicate internal states, but merely generates behavioural responses in people. It has been argued that this perspective erodes the possibility of rationally assessing speeches by making persuasiveness the only norm, and persuasive power the only virtue, of speech. Against this view, I show how Gorgias' texts support a robust normativity of language that goes well beyond persuasion while remaining non-representational. Gorgias' claims that a speech can be persuasive and false, or true and unpersuasive, reveal pragmatic, epistemic, and agonistic constraints on the validity of speech that are neither representational nor reducible to sheer persuasiveness.

The claim that truth is merely whatever our peers let us get away with saying has made Richard Rorty (1979, 175-176) well known. The underlying suggestion is that the only judges of the correctness of our claims are the members of our human community of justification, and that no non-human reality ('objects themselves' or 'the nature of things') could or should play a part in its assessment. There is nothing more to truth than justification, since the distinction between truth-as-correspondence and truth-as-justification is not relevant in practice. Thus we might as well drop the former and uphold the latter.[1]

There are noticeable similarities between modern deflationism *à la* Rorty and some views associated with ancient sophists and rhetoricians.[2] An obvious reference is Protagoras' doctrine that 'Man is the measure of all things', but more generally, the practices of Greek sophists and rhetoricians such as arguing on both sides of an issue, improvising speeches about

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[1] For critical discussion of Rorty's deflationary views, see e.g. Williams (2003), Misak (2013), and Forero Mora (2015). For general account of deflationary approaches to truth, see Stoljar & Damnjanovic (2010).

[2] There are several differences in the character of these two groups—particularly perhaps that sophists had more theoretical dispositions than rhetoricians (cf. Barney 2006, 77)—, but for this paper's purposes, and since their relevant practices are largely overlapping, they can be harmlessly ran together here.

any topic, and teaching those abilities to others, seem to suggest the view that language's function is not accurately representing the world, but simply persuading one's audience.

To many contemporary thinkers, Rortyan deflationism goes too far. Reducing truth to mere justifiability, and dismissing appeals to objective reality seem to get us into a conversation in which there is no fact of the matter by reference to which disputes can be settled, and all that really makes a difference for assigning speech correctness is the speaker's rhetorical power to convince, persuade, and ultimately manipulate any given audience. The upshot is the reduction of correctness to power. As Rorty himself admitted,

the only real question is one of power, the question of which community is going to inherit the earth, mine or my opponent's. […] Both sides may agree that […] there seems no prospect of reaching agreement on the particular issue at hand. So, both sides say as they reach for their guns, it looks as if we'll have to fight it out (2000a, 13).

Thus a non-represenationalist view of language and truth seems to do away with the possibility of rationally deciding between alternative speeches. In Habermas' terms, a conception of language as a mere instrument of persuasion does away with the distinction between its communicative function (aimed at reaching understanding between subjects) and its instrumental function (aimed at attaining the speaker's goals):

A […] refusal to differentiate between the strategic and non-strategic uses of language, between success-oriented and understanding-oriented action deprives Rorty of the conceptual tools to do justice to the intuitive distinctions between rationally convincing and persuading, between motivation through reasons and causal exertion of influence, between learning and indoctrination. (Habermas [quoted in Rorty 2000b, 58])

So in deflationary accounts there is no qualitative difference between sincerely offering arguments and strategically trying to trick the interlocutor. The view of language as another form of human competition, where whoever most successfully persuades their audience wins, confuses victory with truth.

This criticism resonates strongly with several remarks from Plato's dialogues, which represent Gorgias as claiming that his task is to produce not virtuous, but powerful (*deinous*) speakers (*Meno* 95c); that his is the most powerful craft, because it can enslave all other crafts voluntarily through persuasion (*Philebus* 58a–b); and that he is more successful in persuading a patient to undergo medical treatment than doctors who have medical knowledge (*Gorgias* 456b). Socrates reacts to this by claiming that Gorgias' craft, rhetoric, is a producer of persuasion based not on instruction but on belief (Ib. 453a–5a).

Interpreting Gorgias' extant texts is therefore relevant to the problems surrounding truth deflationism, since—as I will argue below—he seems to endorse a non-representational view of language, but his normativity of speech goes well beyond mere persuasive power. So a study of his views should provide insights into how a deflationary account of truth could respond to the accusation of reducing normativity to power.

This essay is divided in three parts: (1) an argument for the view that Gorgias' conception of language is non-representational and behavioural; (2) a discussion of some passages that reveal that Gorgias' normativity of speech extends beyond mere persuasiveness; and (3) a synthetic depiction of the emerging normativity of speech.

First, a methodological point: there are two interpretive difficulties particularly salient when it comes to Gorgias interpretation. The first is that his texts are patently playful (e.g. *Helen* 21), to a point that it is quite hard to decide which statements in Gorgias' extant texts should be considered sincere, and which should be dismissed for being merely sarcastic or lighthearted; how should we distinguish between what Gorgias meant sincerely and what he said merely playfully?

The second interpretive difficulty is that the extant texts are of different natures: *On Not-Being,* for instance, is often taken to be a dialectical gibe on Eleatic thinkers with not much serious philosophical substance to offer;[3] but the *Encomium of Helen* and the *Defense of Palamedes* seem to have been composed as demonstration pieces for students to memorize and study stylistic and argumentative tools, which also raises doubts on their philosophical worth (Aristotle, *Sophistici Elenchi* 183b34–184a7); but if this is the case, then which principles should we use in order to differentially handle texts of diverse natures? And how could we combine them to generate a unified interpretation of Gorgias' views?[4]

I will tackle these interpretive problems by assuming as a principle that the main thing to avoid is interpretive arbitrariness (i.e. the introduction on the part of the interpreter of arbitrary distinctions, divisions or hierarchies as tools to make the textual diversity manageable). In order to avoid committing such arbitrariness, I will attempt to develop a *holistic reading* (McComiskey 1997) of Gorgias' main extant texts (*On Not-Being*, the *Defense of Palamedes*,

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[3] Among those who consider *On Not Being* an ironic refutation of Eleatic views that does not portray worthy arguments, are Robinson (1973, 58); Dillon & Gergel (2003, 352n1); Valiavitcharska (2006, 152-153); see also Graham (2010, 725); McKirahan (2010, 393). For an interesting dissenting view see Wardy (1996).

[4] I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this crucial issue.

and the *Encomium of Helen*).[5] Thus, I will explore whether a consistent theory of language and truth can emerge from all the relevant sentences from every text, taken seriously.

Such a holistic approach allows me to solve (or at least sidestep) both interpretive issues. About the first one: the common practice of denying the seriousness of certain passages makes a consistent interpretation more likely, but the criteria for selecting some assertions as sincere and others as not so much are hard (if not impossible) to properly justify, and often simply reveal the interpreter's own theoretical preferences, which she can then easily find reflected in the remaining claims. Moreover, the sincere/playful dichotomy is too narrow to represent the richness of intentions in Gorgias' texts: he could have been sincere, sarcastic, playful, displaying his technical ability, adversarial, merely ridiculing his audience or his interlocutor, all of these in the same text, and some of them even in the same sentence. Concerning the second problem, the fact that different texts may have had different practical functions in their historical context does not imply that the assertions contained in one of them are more or less philosophically valuable. Thus any attempt to come up with principled ways of attributing differential trustworthiness or significance values for each text will probably hit the same wall of interpretive arbitrariness that I am interested in avoiding.

Thus, a holistic approach seems to be the most promising interpretive route to avoiding arbitrariness in evidence selection. I will thus treat all of Gorgias' seemingly relevant claims as equally valid expressions of his views, and attempt a consistent global interpretation of them. This may of course yield a theory that Gorgias himself would not have personally espoused. However, biographical questions about Gorgias' personal views aside, it is independently interesting to see whether a coherent view can emerge from the complete body of extant evidence, what it would look like, and what it can say in response to our contemporary concerns.

1. *Gorgias' behavioural conception of language*

What is Gorgias' view of the function of language? In this section I briefly present the position, originally developed by Mourelatos (1987), that Gorgias rejects representational accounts of language, and assigns to it a behavioural function. For our purposes I will assume

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[5] In this I follow McComiskey's (1997) work on Gorgianic rhetoric. A holistic approach questions the traditional assumption that the extant Gorgias texts are «disparate or contradictory statements», and seeks to show that they are rather «intricately interrelated and internally consistent contributions to a complex theory». This does not assume that Gorgias *intended* for the texts to constitute a holistic theory, but rather examines whether such theory can be seen to *emerge* from the texts as they are.

this interpretation, and try to account for certain aspects of Gorgias' text that may seem not to fit well with (or to remain unaccounted for by) it.

The third part of *On Not Being* puts forward several arguments for the claim that one person cannot communicate her knowledge to another. One of them relies on category differences:[6] speeches (or *logoi*) and things belong to different ontological categories, and it is impossible for an element of one category to be known through an element of the other; so communication, i.e. making events and things transparent or available in *logos*, is impossible. Another argument relies on perceptual differences:[7] two subjects cannot have the same perceptual experience or mental image of a given object, and even the same subject cannot have the same experience through different senses or at different times; therefore communication is impossible, since such sameness is one of its conditions.[8]

Mourelatos convincingly argues that each of these arguments criticises a particular conception of linguistic meaning. The argument from category differences objects to the *referential* conception (the idea that the meaning of a word or expression is constituted by its correspondence, or reference, to an external object), and the arguments against perceptual sameness objects to the *mentalist* conception (the idea that the meaning of a word or expression consists in its reference to a mental representation or a mental object). So Gorgias claims that, since words or expressions do not map onto external things or onto mental states, the function of language can be neither referential nor representational.

In addition to these negative arguments, the texts also contain a positive defence of a behavioural conception of language: a word or expression is caused by a certain kind of external stimulus, and its meaning consists in its calling out the same behavioural responses that the corresponding stimulus originally called out. In this account, the sensory input of the object that caused a certain *logos* can be substituted by that *logos*, and the former can generate the same (emotional or behavioural) effects in the listener's behaviour. Evidence for this can be found in

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[6] Presocratic fragments are quoted following the numbering in Diels & Kranz (1906), hereafter *DK*. The passage is DK 82B1 & B3 ([Arist.] *Melissus, Xenophanes, Gorgias* [*MXG*] 980a19-b8 & Sextus Empiricus *Adversus Mathematicos* [*AM*] 7.83–84).

[7] [Arist.] *MXG* 980b8-17; *Sextus* AM 7.86.

[8] The two versions of this text have interestingly different arguments about the impossibility of communication. One difference worth noting is that Sextus Empiricus' version adds a causal argument: the causal link goes from the external objects to the logos (speech being an effect of external objects affecting our bodies), and not the other way around, and this implies that "logos does not make external objects manifest, but external objects inform logos" (AM 7.85). Language can neither refer to, nor represent, objects because it is brought about by objects, but cannot in turn bring them about.

Helen's claims about *logos*' power to accomplish the most divine deeds (82B11.8-14): in poetry, *logoi* are to the listener substitutes for actual experiences, and elicit the same behavioural effects that such experiences do (fear, tear-shedding, sorrow). Behavioural reactions are also caused by the spells of witchcraft, whose words bring about pleasure and take away pain. In other cases (astronomy, speech contests, and philosophy) *logoi* substitute for external inputs whose output is persuasion (in other words, these speeches are substitutes for empirical evidence).[9]

Given this behavioural, non-referential, non-representational view of language, what criteria can be used to evaluate a speech's validity? Clearly any appeal to correspondence with objective fact is out of the question. But are persuasiveness criteria all that is left? An examination of the extant texts—particularly the *Defense of Palamedes* and the *Encomium of Helen*—reveals that Gorgias is willing to go much farther than that.

2. *Gorgias' normative claims*

If the function of language is to elicit behavioural responses, then the obvious way to evaluate a given speech would be assessing its efficacy in generating such responses. Thus, if a speech is intended to move an audience, its ability to elicit tears and laughter are key indicators of success; if it is intended to convince, then reported conviction would. Thus the behavioural normativity of speech seems naturally centred on persuasion. Gorgias, however, does not circumscribe the validity of speech to persuasiveness. This section argues that in his extant texts the notions of truth and falsehood are not aligned with the notion of persuasion. Rather, (2.1) persuasive speeches can often be false, which implies that falsehood criteria are independent from persuasiveness; and although speech cannot be true in the sense of directly referring to facts about the world, it can teach truth by employing several indirect strategies like argumentative strength and appeals to direct experience. This shows that (2.2) Gorgias' linguistic normativity goes beyond persuasiveness to include pragmatic, agonistic, and empirical considerations.

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[9] Expressing agreement with this view, Segal holds that the role of speech is "creating 'impressions' upon the psyche of [the speaker's] audience and thus somehow directing their actions" (1962, 111); and Consigny claims language is "an activity designed to effect results" in the behaviour of the listeners (2001, 76). Kerferd, on the other hand, offers a representationalist reading according to which logos appeals to the way things are in reality, but does so imperfectly, and is therefore always deceitful (1981, 81-82).

2.1. *Persuasive falsehood, indirect truth*

In the *Encomium of Helen* Gorgias mentions oratory contests "in which one speech, written with skill, not spoken with *truth*, delights and *persuades* a great crowd" (13); he stresses the distinction between skilful and true speeches claiming that the skills applied in the discourses of magic are powerful in generating some behavioural outcomes, but remain normatively problematic:

[10] Inspired incantations conveyed through words become bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain; for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power of the incantation beguiles it and persuades it and alters it by witchcraft. Of witchcraft and magic twin arts have been discovered, which are errors of the soul (ψυχῆς ἁμαρτήματα) and deceptions of opinion (δόξης ἀπατήματα). [11] How many people *have persuaded or persuade* how many others about how many things by forging a *false speech*? (ὅσοι δὲ ὅσους περὶ ὅσων καὶ ἔπεισαν καὶ πείθουσι δὲ ψευδῆ λόγον πλάσαντες.)[10]

So persuasive a speech can be effective in generating the desired effects in a person's soul, and yet lead that soul to err (ἁμαρτάνειν) by accepting opinions that entail deception (ἀπατήματα). Gorgias goes on to argue that in many cases people are persuaded of things about which they lack knowledge and have mere opinion (*Helen* B11.11); he states that if people had knowledge of things past, present and future, "*logos* would not be similarly similar", and that the defective kinds of *logos* works on the basis of unstable opinion.

These claims imply the existence of a norm that determines the falsehood of speeches independently of their persuasive success, a norm that seems to be closely related to a distinction between opinion and knowledge (more on this below). Passages like these, in which Gorgias expresses negative views on persuasive speech, have led quite a few scholars to the view that he rejected the possibility of a speech that had any virtue other than being persuasive or outright deceitful. This radically negative perspective portrays Gorgias as holding language to be nothing but a persuasion tool, and persuasion nothing but a means for deception.[11]

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[10] This sentence is often interpreted as meaning that all persuasion derives from a false speech (thus Graham (2010, 759) translates: "Everyone who has persuaded anyone about anything persuades him by fashioning false speech"). But this is not required by the Greek, which does not contain any universal nouns. A translation closer to the original would have interrogative form, as suggested above. This is probably intended as a rhetorical question, meaning something like "Many people have persuaded or persuade many others about many things by forging a false speech!" The crucial point is that the text does not explicitly hold all persuasive speeches to be false speeches. Thus, however distant the norms of persuasion and truth are, persuasion and truth are not necessarily incompatible.

[11] Thus, Gorgias' own craft of rhetorical argumentation "is deliberately opposed to 'truth' and produces a *logos* which is τέχνῃ γράφεις, οὐκ ἀληθείᾳ λεχθείς" (Segal 1962, 112). Dodds (1958) holds that Gorgias aimed at producing "dazzling insincerities". For Guthrie, Gorgias thinks we must settle with false, yet persuasive, opinion, given that true knowledge is unattainable (1971, 271-274). Segal

But this cannot be the whole story, since the very notion of falsehood remains to be explained. If persuasion is all there is to speech normativity, then what makes a persuasive speech false? Why does Gorgias employ this notion as a different kind of evaluation? Moreover, radically negative interpretations fail to account for evidence in the other direction, which I go on now to report, concerning the Gorgias' claims about truth. Indeed, some of these claims would be odd if the norms of speech could be reduced to persuasiveness.

Consider *Palamedes* 33–35, in which the speaker addresses his jury near the end of his defence speech. He promises that he will teach them the truth about his case, but then his tone shifts into a tragic recognition of the limitations of *logos*:

(33) […] Among you, the most distinguished of the Greeks, and deservedly so regarded, it is not proper to resort to persuasion by means of the intercession of friends, or entreaties or appeals to pity. Rather, it is right for me to escape this charge by relying on the most perspicuous justice, *teaching the truth* (διδάξαντα τἀληθές), not seeking to *deceive* (ἀπατήσαντα) you […]. (35) If, then, through speeches *the truth of deeds could become transparent and manifest* (τὴν ἀλήθειαν τῶν ἔργων καθαράν τε καὶ φανεράν γενέσθαι) to one's hearers, judgement would now be easy on the basis of what has been said. Since, however, that is not the case, take care of my body, take a longer time, and make your decision on the basis of the *truth.*

Here Palamedes holds that the right thing for him to do is defend himself from the accusation by "teaching the truth", without resorting to deception (the same word that in the Helen portrayed one of the arts of witchcraft: the "deception of opinion"). Since his audience is so distinguished, he prefers to teach them the truth *rather than* aim at persuasion. So this passage implies a distinction between the methods of truth and the methods of persuasion that lead to deception.

Now, by end of the passage Palamedes claims that the truth of deeds or of facts cannot be revealed through *logoi*. But if one cannot employ *logos* to make truth manifest (τὴν ἀλήθειαν φανεράν γενέσθαι), how can one use it to teach the truth (τἀληθές διδάσκειν)? The former claim is nothing new: it merely restates the point in *On Not Being* that communication is impossible. But the latter does provide new information: speech can teach something about the truth even though it cannot make it evident.

(1962, 112) and Dillon & Gergel (2003, 80) take the phrase in *Helen* 11 quoted above to mean that all persuasion is based on false *logos*. From Gorgias' thesis that nothing can be communicated, Kerferd infers that "every *logos* involves a falsification of the thing to which it has reference" (1981, 81). Melero Bellido (1996, 205n141) interprets the distinction between good and bad *logos* as merely that between convincing and not-so-convincing speeches. For Spatharas, Gorgias handled the concept of truth as "nothing but a presupposition of effective deceit" (2001, 393). (Valiavitcharska (2006) is a remarkable exception to this trend.)

So how can *logos* teach the truth despite not being capable of directly revealing it? May there be indirect means through which *logos* can do so? Two things are worth noting here. First, Palamedes' speech —as well as the one in the *Helen*— is produced within an agonistic context of defence, in which the speaker's main task is countering the strength of an accuser's speech. In these contexts teaching the truth may be achieved indirectly not by revealing facts about the world, but by exposing the flaws of the accusation speech. Someone may argue that teaching the jury the truth in a defense speech cannot be achieved without representing reality correctly. But a defense speech can be spoken truly by simply stating inconsistencies or logical flaws in the accusation's argumentative structure. This is, in fact, what the *Helen* and *Palamedes* speeches do: they do not make claims about what Helen and Palamedes actually did, but rather show that they could not have done what the accusers claim they did. Thus, although Palamedes' claim that he will "teach the truth [διδάξαντα τ᾽ἀληθές]" seems to mean that he will "tell them exactly how it happened" (Coulter 1964, 281), this is noticeably not what Palamedes turns out to do: he does not describe what he actually did, but instead he focuses on showing, on merely counterfactual grounds, that Odysseus' accusation is false.[12]

So Palamedes does not use speech to refer to matters of fact about what really happened. The only matters of fact that Palamedes does appeal to—and this is the second thing worth pointing out—are those of which the members of the audience have themselves experienced directly: his own past life, which has been free of blame (29), and has rather produced benefits for all the Greeks and indeed all men (30). Thus, he uses *logos* not to refer to facts directly, but rather indirectly, by reminding his audience of the facts that they have witnessed: particularly, his way of life, which they have long been acquainted with. That is why, despite knowing that he cannot communicate the truth through speech, he nevertheless asks his jury to take their time and decide on the basis of a long time rather than a short one, and on experience (*peîra*) rather than slander (*Palamedes* 34). Thus, by appealing to to the jury's direct experience of his own character, Palamedes makes it clear that although speech cannot directly refer to facts, true speech can appeal to facts indirectly, by asking the audience to recall their own direct experience.

In conclusion, rather than interpreting διδάξαντα τ᾽ἀληθές referentially (as 'telling it exactly and directly how it happened'), it should be understood as stating that speech can

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[12] "I will show you that he does not speak truly in two ways: neither if I was willing was I able, nor if I was able did I want to take on such activities" (οὐκ ἀληθῆ λέγειν διὰ δισσῶν ὑμῖν ἐπιδείξω τρόπων· οὔτε γὰρ βουληθεὶς ἐδυνάμην ἂν οὔτε δυνάμενος ἐβουλήθην ἔργοις ἐπιχειρεῖν τοιούτοις. — Palamedes 5). For an analysis of Palamedes' counterfactual argumentative strategy, see §2.2.2 below.

'teach the truth' indirectly, i.e. by revealing the falsehood in the accuser's speech, and by reminding the audience of facts that they themselves have witnessed.

The outset of the *Helen* further explains how *logos* can indirectly teach the truth. There Gorgias holds his goal to be "to refute […] the detractors of Helen", and adds:

I would like [i] to put a stop to the accusations of her bad reputation by informing my speech (*logôi*) with *reasoning* (*logismon*), and [ii] to put a stop to the ignorance by showing that her detractors are *liars* and revealing the *truth* (*Helen* 1).

Here, [ii] supports the argument above by holding that the speaker will simultaneously reveal the truth *and* show the accusation speech's falsehood. Moreover, [i] adds that a way in which this can be done is by means of reasoning. As will become clear below, the specific reasoning that Gorgias has in mind is a kind of counterfactual technique, which indirectly teaches the truth by showing the logical impossibility of the accuser's position.

2.2. *Truth, falsehood, and persuasion in a behavioural account of language*

I have tried to gather evidence that in Gorgias' texts the notions of falsehood and truth diverge from the notion of persuasion in ways that reveal that truth and falsehood are persuasion-independent norms. This subsection further analyses those normative traits by providing (2.1.1) a non-representational account of falsehood that goes beyond mere lack of persuasion: a speech is false if, by being guided by it, we are likely to make practical mistakes; and (2.2.2) a non-representational notion of truth that goes beyond mere persuasiveness: a speech is true in the sense that it is shown to be more robust than its alternatives in a competitive, agonistic context.

2.2.1. *Pragmatic falsehood*

Perhaps the most striking negative normative statement in Gorgias' extant texts is the claim in *Helen* 11 that persuasion is many times achieved on the basis of a false speech (ὅσοι δὲ ὅσους περὶ ὅσων καὶ ἔπεισαν καὶ πείθουσι δὲ ψευδῆ λόγον πλάσαντες). In support of this he argues (12) that if people had knowledge of things past, present and future [μνήμη, ἔννοια, πρόνοια], "speech would not be similarly the same". But since people are ignorant of most things, they must rely on opinion [δόξα].[13] This distinction between opinion and μνήμη, ἔννοια, and πρόνοια will prove useful in clarifying Gorgias' notion of false speech.

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[13] It may be asked whether μνήμη, ἔννοια, and πρόνοια collectively amount to knowledge. To that I reply for now that I use the term 'knowledge' to to refer to that which people lack if they only have opinion, and people have if they possess memory, *ennoia,* and foresight. Gorgias clearly wants to

In the *Palamedes*, when the accused asks Odysseus (11a.22) whether his accusation is based on having opinion [δοξάζων] or on having knowledge [εἰδώς] of the deeds he accuses him of, he then claims that if Odysseus had knowledge, then one of three things would have to hold: either he saw the deed himself, he participated in it, or he can point at someone who saw it or participated in it. In any case, Odysseus should be able to mention the specific circumstances of the deed, or at least present a direct witness who could. However, since he cannot do any such thing, we must conclude that his accusation is based on opinion, not on knowledge (24).[14] 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.

This conception of knowledge as first-hand experience is present elsewhere in Gorgias' extant writings, although none of them offers a full description of it. In the passage just discussed, *Palamedes* mentions seeing as providing knowledge. In *On Not Being* Gorgias also holds perceptual experiences (seeing and hearing) as a case of *ennoia*:

Indeed, that which a man is not aware of (*ennoei*), how […] will such a man come to grasp it (*ennoesei*) from someone else by means of discourse, or by means of a sign, something other than the thing itself—except by virtue of having seen it, if [it is] a color, or having heard [it, if it is] a sound? ([Arist.] *MXG* 980b3-8, tr. Mourelatos)

Thus direct perceptual experience constitutes an exemplary case of *ennoia*, and its epistemic grasp (however partial) cannot be replaced by that of speech, even if speech can substitute direct perception, as seen above. The problem, however, is that, as Gorgias states in *Helen*,

it is not easy to remember what has passed, or to examine the present, or presage what will be; so most people take opinion as advisor on most things. But opinion, being slippery and unreliable, surrounds those who use it in slippery and unreliable fortunes. (11)

Thus, since knowledge of past, present, and future is so hard to attain, people turn out to be most of the time susceptible to the perils of persuasive speech: they lack the direct

make an epistemic distinction between the two states, even if the latter does not amount to full knowledge (of the kind *On Not Being* denies we can have). More on the epistemic status of *ennoia* below.

[14] This should not be interpreted as implying that the ability to provide a witness is a sufficient condition for knowledge. It rather seems to work as a defeasibility criterion: if you claim you have knowledge of an event, but did not directly experience it and cannot even provide a witness, then your claim to knowledge should be rejected. So the absence of both direct experience and a witness is a sufficient condition for denying knowledge, but this needn't imply that either is a sufficient condition for knowledge.

knowledge that would shield them from error, so they must follow the unstable opinion that is derived not from an experience but from a speech.

This distinction between knowledge and opinion illuminates Gorgias' claim about false speech: whenever a person acts under the guidance of speeches while lacking the relevant direct experience (i.e. whenever her behavioural input is not *ennoia*, but *doxa*) she is in danger, because opinion is "slippery and insecure" when it comes to guiding action (*Helen 12*). Palamedes' trial is a paradigmatic case of the dangers of opinion: by taking it rather than experience as a guide, the Greeks condemn an innocent man to death.

Now, can speech be legitimately traced back to direct experience? Well, according to the behavioural account (which is supported by the third part of *On Not Being*), it cannot (see §1 above). Words were generated from interactions with objects, but they cannot *re-fer* (bear back, carry back) to their factual origin, given that they are such different entities. The behavioural arrow goes only one way (from things to words).[15] Thus, any claim that attempts to take the arrow backwards (from words to things) is unjustifiable, for "how […] would someone say in speech what he knows? Or how could it become clear to a hearer who did not see? For […] the speaker speaks, but not colours or things".[16]

That said, what speech *can* do is generate the behavioural reactions that the direct experience of objects would generate. Speech can do this given the learned association between the word and the experience of the object. In his description of the power of logos in the *Helen* (11.8), Gorgias claims that speech achieves its effects through the smallest, most invisible bodies (σμικροτάτωι σώματι καὶ ἀφανεστάτωι), and that this makes it a great master (δυνάστης μέγας) of the human soul, which it can effectively lead into error. This is what may have happened in the case of Helen herself: if it turned out that she went to Troy because she was convinced by a speech, then her soul was fooled (τὴν ψυχὴν ἀπατήσας) by it, and we should not blame her for it: she was simply a victim of persuasion.

This materialistic account of speech is remarkable: *logos* works through material particles that are imperceptible given their smallness, but achieve great effects in the listener

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[15] "Speech […] is composed out of external, i.e. perceptual, objects impinging on us; for from the contact with flavor is generated in us the speech that expresses this quality, and from the contact with color, the one that expresses color [ὅ γε μὴν λόγος […] 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.]" (*On Not Being* from Sextus Empiricus, *AM* 7.85).

[16] ὃ γὰρ εἶδε, πῶς ἄν τις, φησί, τοῦτο εἴποι λόγῳ; ἢ πῶς ἂν ἐκείνῳ δῆλον ἀκούσαντι γίγνοιτο, μὴ ἰδόντι; ὥσπερ γὰρ οὐδὲ ἡ ὄψις τοὺς φθόγγους γιγνώσκει, οὕτως οὐδὲ ἡ ἀκοὴ τὰ χρώματα ἀκούει, ἀλλὰ φθόγγους· καὶ λέγει ὁ λέγων, ἀλλ' οὐ χρῶμα οὐδὲ πρᾶγμα. ([Arist.] *MXG* 980a20-b3).

due to their subtle nature. This suggests a non-representationalist view insofar as words and speeches turn out to be nothing more than material phenomena, having none of the symbolic properties that would be required for them to fulfil a representational role. The power of speech, rather, is producing the behavioural effects of objects themselves. Seeing a person immersed in a tragic situation would move us to tears; the words of a tragic poem would make us feel and act the same way, since the small, subtle particles of *logos* have the same impact on our souls as the particles involved in the actual process of perception.

Except, of course, that *logos* is not as reliable as sense-perception. As a substitute for direct experience, speech makes the soul susceptible to pragmatic errors that direct experience would not. Seeing a person betraying the Greeks calls for certain reactions, but such reactions may not be appropriate after merely hearing an accusation speech about such betrayal. Thus, whenever a speech plays the role of direct experience in a person's actions, it takes on a role that it cannot be sufficiently justified to play, thus leading the agent who guides her actions according to it into many risks of practical error.

In conclusion, insofar as the notion of 'false speech' is linked to that of opinion (i.e. of a speech that substitutes direct experience as a guide for action), we can interpret falsehood as related to the pragmatic risks that such speech may lead us into given our lack of solid epistemic grounding. So in Gorgias' texts a speech that exposes the agent to practical errors—in other words, an opinion—counts as a false speech. We can therefore conceive of the relation between false speeches and objects in a pragmatic way, so that the function of speech is non-referential, but its normativity goes beyond persuasiveness and into the (in)ability of *logos* to serve as a guide for action.

2.2.2. *Agonistic truth*

Now, if speech cannot relate referentially to objects, facts or deeds, in which sense can it teach the truth? As mentioned above, in Gorgias' extant texts, producing a true speech is often linked to defending someone from an accusation, and, more specifically, to *refuting* the accusations. It may therefore be that a defence speech 'teaches the truth' by uncovering the accusation's lack of truth, taking truth here as akin to internal logical coherence. Thus, Helen's defender states that he will demonstrate the falsehood of accusations against her and reveal the truth (*Helen* 2), while Palamedes claims at the outset that his arguments will "show you [i.e. the jury] that he [i.e. the accuser] is not speaking the truth" (5). As also mentioned above, this truth-

by-uncovering-falsehood is performed in both texts by means of an argument (a *logismos*) that refutes the accuser's statements. Now, how does this *logismos* work?

Scholars have claimed that the argumentative strategy used by Gorgias in *Helen* and *Palamedes* is the so-called 'argument from probability,' i.e. an argument that incrementally undermines the likelihood of the opponent's claim instead of decisively arguing for a thesis or against its rival.[17] This interpretation can be traced back to Socrates' claim in Plato's *Phaedrus* (267a) that Gorgias "saw that probabilities are more to be esteemed than truths". Yet such characterisation does not accurately describe Gorgias' procedure in these two texts. His strategy is more correctly depicted as a progressive *reductio ad absurdum* of a claim, which is considerably different from a probability argument, mainly because of its deductive character. If Gorgias does employ *reductio* strategies in showing the opponent's untruth, then we can take 'truth' to be akin to logical coherence, and 'falsehood' as akin to logical inconsistency—the kind of thing that could be demonstrated by a *reductio* objection.

Gorgias defends Helen from her accusations by claiming that the accusation implies at least one of several claims, and then argues that each one of the implied claims leads to an absurdity. Thus, if the accusation implies at least one of them, and each *reductio* is successful, Gorgias would have shown deductively (and therefore necessarily) that the accusation itself is false, since, however it is interpreted, it implies a logical contradiction. In order to prove that Helen is not responsible for the consequences of her trip to Troy, Gorgias makes a fourfold division of the trip's possible causes: either [1] the Gods compelled her, [2] someone forced her, [3] she was seduced by words, or [4] she was possessed by love. This is a purportedly exhaustive enumeration of possible causes. By showing that in each case Helen would not be to blame, Gorgias builds the deductive argument that she is necessarily not to blame, not by arguing for that thesis directly, but by showing that its negation, however interpreted, implies a statement that is absurd or untenable.

The *Palamedes* (6-12) employs a similar, yet interestingly different, progressive *reductio* strategy. To prove that even if he had wanted he would not have been able to betray the Greeks, Palamedes draws several implications of having been able to do it: in order to be able to carry out the betrayal, he would have had to [1] meet the foreigners, [2] make a contract, [3] effectuate the treason, *and* [4] bring the enemy into the camp. Each act independently is a necessary condition for the treason to have taken place, so all four of them must have happened

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[17] E.g. Coulter (1964, 275–ff.); Guthrie (1971, 192); Melero Bellido (1996, 204–5); Dillon & Gergel (2003, 84).

for the accusation to be true. Thus, if any of these conditions was impossible, Palamedes' betrayal of the Greeks would also be impossible. The argument then proceeds to show that each of the conditions is impossible, so that we have effectively four sub-arguments supporting the impossibility of the main claim: [1] is impossible; therefore, Palamedes could not have betrayed the Greeks. Moreover, [2] is impossible; therefore, Palamedes could not have betrayed the Greeks. Moreover, …and so on. If only one of these four arguments succeeds, then Palamedes would succeed in showing the logical inconsistency of a speech claiming that he betrayed the Greeks: it would imply a contradiction.

Take the case of [1], for instance: if he had met the foreigners, then they would have had to speak. But they do not share a common language, so there must have been an interpreter, and thus a witness would have been produced. But there is no witness, so an interpreter could not have been there, and so the two parts could not have spoken. Therefore, a meeting between Palamedes' men and the Trojans could not have taken place (6-7). All of which ultimately shows that [1] is impossible, and therefore (given that [1] was necessary for the betrayal) that Palamedes could not have betrayed the Greeks. After providing *reductio* arguments like this for each of the steps, Palamedes concludes: since acts [1–4] were necessary for him to betray the Greeks, and all of [1–4] are impossible, the general charge against him is, by implication, impossible. Not improbable: impossible.[18]

So, although the two argumentative strategies are different, they are both *reductio* arguments, and this implies they share two key characteristics: first, they work deductively and, therefore, if they are successful they show the logical inconsistency of the accuser's thesis. Second, and even more importantly for our present concern, they are *counterfactual* arguments. They are not composed of factual claims about what really happened, but of claims about *what would be the case* if the accuser were right in his accusation. These argumentative tools (the

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[18] It has been pointed out to me that a logical reconstruction of the arguments would work as follows. In the *Helen* we have: (Helen is blameworthy) $\rightarrow$ (A v B v C v D). But $\neg$ A & $\neg$B & $\neg$C & $\neg$D. Hence $\neg$(Helen is blameworthy). By contrast, in the *Palamedes* we have: (Palamedes is guilty) $\rightarrow$ (1 & 2 & 3 & 4). But 1 $\rightarrow$ P, and $\neg$P, hence $\neg$1. Moreover, P $\rightarrow$ Q; but $\neg$Q, hence $\neg$P. Further, Q $\rightarrow$ R; but $\neg$R, hence… And so on. Use Z for the last such claim. We end up with: but $\neg$Z, hence $\neg$Y, … , hence $\neg$1, and hence $\neg$(Palamedes is guilty). Repeat this procedure for each of 1, 2, 3, and 4, and that imples that ($\neg$1 & $\neg$2 & $\neg$3 & $\neg$4). Each of the members of the conjunction would be sufficient for a *modus tollens* leading to the conclusion $\neg$(Palamedes is guilty). Thus, Gorgias' argument in the *Palamedes* actually contains four independently sufficient *reductio* arguments. Spatharas interestingly calls the strategy in *Helen* an "apagogic argument" and the one in *Palamedes* "'russian doll' schema" (2001, 405-407). The main difference is that, whereas in the former the theses that are rejected are independent from one another, in the latter each thesis presupposes the previous one. This is an accurate and interesting difference. A commonality between the two arguments, however, is that each is a *reductio ad absurdum* of a thesis by progressive *reductiones* of the thesis' implications.

reductio strategies characteristic of Gorgias) allow the speaker to teach some truths indirectly, without stating any facts, by solely analysing the logical implications of her opponent's speech.

In sum, Gorgias' truth-revealing speeches are built in an adversarial and agonistic context, in which the speaker employs argumentative strategies (*logismoi*) not to prove a positive point about a factual matter, but rather to prove that the opponent's claim would entail a logical inconsistency, which would render his whole speech incoherent. Truth is therefore negotiated here within the linguistic realm, by comparing the logical robustness of competing positions, without reference to facts as decisive evidence. Thus when Gorgias talks about the comparative truth of two speeches immersed in an agonistic context, he seems to be taking 'truth' to be either equal to, or implying, logical consistency, and 'lack of truth' to be necessitated by logical inconsistency. This can work to the extent that the speeches compete against one another within the social context of an agonistic institution in which the norms of logic count as inter-subjectively valid and important norms to judge a speech's relative success. Thus, the skilful use of reasoning (*logismos*) is a constraint that *logoi* have to abide by in order for the jury to grant the title 'true' to their speech. This is how truth escapes the realm of sheer persuasiveness, but remains within the boundary of the agonistic institution.[19]

2.2.3. *True speech and direct experience*

What other strategies besides logical reduction are available for the speaker to teach the truth? After constructing his reductive argument against the accuser, Palamedes turns to the audience and appeals to their direct experience: "To the truth of this claim—he says—I offer my past life as witness, and to this you yourselves can be witnesses. You have been my companions, so you know where the truth lies" (15). As mentioned above, although Palamedes cannot convey his innocence through words, he can ask the Greeks to recall their own direct experience of his character and deeds, as evidence that he is not such as to betray them.

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[19] Valiavitcharska holds that no speech is true by virtue of *logismos*. She offers two supporting arguments. (I) surely *logismos* is also used in the philosophical speeches that Gorgias considers deceitful, so it would not always lead to the truth. (II) *Logismos* was not strongly linked to truth in many other 5th century BC Greek texts (2006, 152–153). About (II), even if no other contemporary writer considered *logismos* to produce truth, this does not prove that Gorgias did not, and in fact in his only extant passage in which the term appears (*Helen* 2) both notions are in fact linked. With respect to (I), the claim that some uses of *logismos* produce truth is entirely compatible with the claim that some others produce false persuasion: valid *reductio* arguments are *logismoi* just as much as fallacies. The point is not simply about using *logismos*, but rather about making a better use of *logismos* than your opponent.

Crucially, neither of the two strategies of truth used by Palamedes (reminding the listeners of their direct experience, and objecting to the accusation through *logismos*) is in real conflict with the non-representational account of language, or with Gorgias' claim that speech cannot transmit the truth of facts. If at all, true speech makes truth visible indirectly, by refuting other alternatives, or by asking the audience to remember their own direct knowledge of facts.

3. *A behavioural normativity of language*

This essay began with a challenge to the non-representational, behavioural view of language. Such a view seems to imply the reduction of linguistic normativity to persuasiveness since, in any conversation, truth would be on the side of the more convincing speaker, simply because of her rhetorical power. This implies that there is no room for the rational exchange of arguments, but only for the strategic exertion of influence.

Gorgias' claims about truth and falsehood show that a behavioural account of language can provide a normativity that is much more robust than that. I want to distinguish four sources of rational constraint to speech present in Gorgias' behavioural account of linguistic normativity (see Table 1 below).

The first constraint comes from the world's objects, not taken as objects of reference, but as objects of practical interaction: Gorgias claims that some speeches are false, even if persuasive and spoken with great skill, since they are likely to lead us into practical errors, and thereby fail to provide a firm guide for our interactions with the world in practical life (§2.2.1). Accordingly, a speech that allows us to manipulate objects more precisely and safely can be considered more valid than another which does not. Call this a *pragmatic constraint* on speech validity.

The second constraint—the one usually associated with rhetoric and sophistry, and taken by the critics to be the only one available to the non-representationalist—is related to a first-person perspective: In all fields of linguistic practice, persuasive speech-making implies mastering the techniques and skills of a craft. Scientists, humanists and public orators alike have to learn to use the tools of their specific trade, and attempt at creating speeches that conform to the rules of their craft and are suited to the particular occasion. This *performative constraint*

constitutes a rational constraint in the sense that speech performance, like every craft, implies the mastering of tools and skills in order to create performances that approach an ideal.[20]

A further constraint on speech comes from the second-person perspective of the audience. Palamedes asks the jury to remember their direct knowledge, thus appealing to the epistemic guidance of their own experience. This is an invitation to assess the value of words on the basis of the audience's direct awareness of facts and deeds. Palamedes seems to be asking his audience: 'If you were to act on the basis of your experience, would you behave in the same way as if you acted on the basis of this speech? If experience and speech do not lead you to the same path of action, then you should trust experience, because speech cannot make facts transparent in the way that experience can.' The audience's direct experience provides a further constraint on speech validity, which we can call *epistemic*.

The last constraint Gorgias introduces can be related to the third-person perspective of an institution whose procedures establish norms and standard by which to evaluate the relative merits of two (or more) competing speeches. Courts of law and peer-reviewed academic practices are cases of such institutions. By claiming that the lack of truth of a speech can be revealed through *logismos*, Gorgias is appealing to a set of normative standards, established by the tradition of which he partook; a tradition of speech competitions that allows one speech to confront another and criticise its validity, appealing to norms that the tradition has established as relevant for judging the merit of speeches. In this case, these are the norms of logical consistency. Given the emerging sensitivity to logical validity and invalidity among the Greek sophistic, rhetorical, and philosophical community, the norms of argumentation became intersubjective standards against which the validity of competing speeches could be measured. Gorgias appeals to these standards in both *Palamedes* and *Helen*, by creating *reductio* arguments that reveal the inconsistencies of the opponents' positions. In doing so, Gorgias is taking logical consistency to be a necessary condition for truth (so that the demonstration of a logical inconsistency would imply the demonstration of a speech's falsehood). Since this is possible only within the social context of an agonistic institution that accepts logical consistency as a valid component of the normativity of speech, the agonistic context allows for truth to go beyond sheer persuasiveness, including accountability norms that constrain persuasiveness itself, and that therefore amount to a more robust speech normativity.

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[20] Consigny (2001, 167-202) offers a detailed exposition of performative elements that Gorgias himself mastered in his own craft: literary styles and figures; argumentative strategies; histrionic tools like body expression and vocal flexion; control of the location where the speech will be performed; timing; etc.

In relation to this, when Rorty claims that truth is whatever our peers let us get away with saying, the notion of 'peers' should be taken seriously: peers of an organized speech institution are (or at least can be) enforcers of a set of shared standards, which they enforce in their evaluation of meaningful discourse. Within this institution, the validity of each particular speech does not depend solely on the skill with which the speaker presents it—although that surely plays an undeniable role—; it also depends on the speech's ability to withstand critical scrutiny of peers, and the relative ability of competing speeches to do the same. The decision on the validity of a speech does not, therefore, solely reside in the first-personal persuasive skill, but also in the agonistic community's critical evaluation of the merits of competing speeches, by reference to persuasion-independent norms and standards. These norms and standards are included in the notion of 'truth' that emerges from Gorgias' texts, and that constitutes a measure of speech validity largely independent from persuasiveness. I call this final element of the behavioural normativity of speech an *agonistic constraint* on speech validity.

Now, the agonistic constraint is constituted by the discursive norms and standards of the community of peers; but where do these norms and standards come from, and what establishes their validity? In this respect the agonistic standard seems to be dependent on the others: a community's evaluative norms and standards probably are the cumulative product of the community's past experience of judging the pragmatic, performative, and epistemic value of speeches, sedimented and passed on through generations. This, however, does not mean that the agonistic constraint can be reduced to the others, because the former can provide a collective validation that the others cannot, and also these norms, the distillation of the experience of a whole community, are not present in the other constraints.

To conclude, a study of Gorgias' normative claims reveals three sources of normative constraints on speech that set critical limits to a speaker's persuasive skill and power without attributing a representational role to language. From this perspective persuasiveness is not enough for a speech to be called 'true' or 'valid', since there are other non-representational constraints on speech validity that an audience can appeal to when judging a speech's validity. Thus, in a non-representational view, the truth or falsehood of a speech does not depend solely on the speaker's skill, but also on the speech's ability to guide our practical interactions with the world, to harmonise with the audience's direct experience, and to withstand the competitive evaluations that a network of peers subject it to. [21]

Origin of the constraint	RATIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON PERSUASION			
	WORLD/OBJECTS	1ST PERSON	2ND PERSON	3RD PERSON
Kind of constraint	PRAGMATIC	PERFORMATIVE	EPISTEMIC	AGONISTIC
Gorgias' normative claim	Opinion is persuasive but dangerous; it exposes those who follow it to practical error.	Correct speeches are not those that follow the rules, but those attentive to each context.	Knowledge is direct experience [*ennoia*], and speeches can appeal to it as a witness of truth.	One speech can reveal that another speech is not true through reasoning strategies [*logismoi*].
Rationale	A speech's correctness is relative to its ability to safely and stably guide our interactions with the world.	Persuasion is a craft, which requires sensitivity and appropriate reaction to each context's particularities, and is regulated by a normative ideal.	Direct experience is a source of evidence; so a speech that harmonises with it is more correct than one that does not.	Speech correctness is established according to standards instituted by a community of peers which submits competing speeches to critical evaluation, and makes them accountable to persuasion-independent standards.

Table 1: Gorgias' rational constraints on speech

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