TEN NEGLECTED CLASSICS OF PHILOSOPHY

edited by Eric Schliesser
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Finally, this volume is dedicated to my two favorite, fellow explorers of books, Sarit and Avi.
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I borrow a so-called intuition pump—that is, a carefully constrained thought experiment—which induces, even shapes, readers to use their intuition to develop an answer to a problem—from Dan Dennett. Dennett’s “Faustian bargain” is articulated as follows:¹

For several years, I have been posing the following choice for my fellow philosophers: if Mephistopheles offered you the following two options, which would you choose?

(A) You solve the major philosophical problem of your choice so conclusively that there is nothing left to say (thanks to you, part of the field closes down forever, and you get a footnote in history).

(B) You write a book of such tantalizing perplexity and controversy that it stays on the required reading list for centuries to come.

Some philosophers reluctantly admit that they would have to go for option (B). If they had to choose, they would rather be read

¹. I thank an anonymous reviewer and Peter Ohlin for helpful remarks.
than right. Like composers, poets, novelists, and other creators in the arts, they tend to want their work to be experienced, over and over, by millions (billions, if possible!). But they are also tugged in the direction of the scientists’ quest. After all, philosophers are supposed to be trying to get at the truth.

When I have presented the same Faustian bargain to scientists they tend to opt for (A) without any hesitation—it’s a no-brainer for them. (Daniel C. Dennett [2013], “A Faustian Bargain,” in Intuition Pumps and Other Tools for Thinking, p. 411)

Dennett was one of my undergraduate teachers, and I heard him try out versions of the Faustian bargain on visiting scholars long before he published it (in his book he describes further variants.) At some point, I articulated and tried out a descendant of his bargain on some fellow professional philosophical historians of philosophy. It goes something like this:

(A*) You conclusively settle all interpretive-conceptual problems about a famous puzzle, such as Plato’s “third man” problem in the theory of forms, Descartes’s supposed “circle,” or the relationship between the infinite and finite in Spinoza’s metaphysics.

(B*) You generate interest in a previously overlooked text so that it (not you) gets on the required reading list for centuries to come.

2. I apologize for this ugly locution. I mean to be picking out professionally trained philosophers that, on the whole, work on the history of philosophy within philosophy departments; I do so to distinguish them from historians of philosophy who work in history or literature departments as well as from other professional philosophers with an interest in the history of the philosophy. For recent debate, see Lærke, M., Smith, J. E., and Schliesser, E. (eds.) (2013), Philosophy and Its History: Aims and Methods in the Study of Early Modern Philosophy, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
While (A*) and (B*) do not exhaust all possible options, I have found—based on unscientific sampling methods—that most scholars, after protesting that a conclusive solution to a genuine interpretive problem seems too demanding an aspiration, happily and promptly settle for (A*); that’s what we are trained to aim at, after all.

But a few respondents are, after some hesitation, tempted by (B*). For ever since some professional philosophical historians of philosophy started to study canonical works in context, it was likely they would stumble across texts that might seem candidates for (B*). And while getting the past right is a nontrivial task, doing justice to the past and thereby shaping a better future may be nobler yet. One might even say—as Chike Jeffers pointed out to me—that work in, say, Africana or feminist history of philosophy is notably distinct from standard historical work on the Western tradition because of a kind of revisionary commitment to something akin to (B*) rather than (A*).

Moreover, pursuing (B*) is also a near-selfless-act; in it one is the nearly anonymous handmaiden to another’s success. Even if one is motivated (one concludes after reading Nietzsche) by a strange kind of desire for revenge or (echoing Walter Benjamin) by a desire to speak for history’s losers, it remains the case that one uses one’s skill and judgment to make somebody else’s previously overlooked views, insights, or arguments available for discussion. Of course, plenty of scholars are motivated by the true and the good, and (B*) might be just one way among many to promote these.

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4. In commenting on an earlier draft, the scholar Martin Lenz suggested that (A*) may be impossible as long as (B*) is a live option. Perhaps Lenz’s insight explains why variants of (B*) are often treated with hostility by scholars, who tend to condemn “anachronism” or “instrumentalization” of the past.
There is also something quixotic about (B*) because it is so unlikely to succeed. An informed reflection on canon formation suggests that enduring novelty is introduced into the curriculum and people’s reading habits not by the conjoined efforts of scholars but by the ideological and curricular needs of history’s proverbial winners, who write and rewrite the past to give their own commitments an air of inevitability, the so-called royal road to me (to adopt a fine phrase by Michael Kremer).\(^5\)

Even so, picking (B*) is one of the conceits behind this volume; that is, it aims to generate discussion on works that the contributors, all distinguished and eminent philosophers, are fiercely passionate about and that are (relatively) neglected at present. These passions reveal strong reservations about the philosophical-professional status quo. For instance, Alan Richardson’s chapter (7) is a polemic not just against the title of this volume but also against contemporary philosophical practices; he argues that “the overall lesson of the inevitable rise of the projects we associate with early analytic philosophy is false.” He revisits a work by Ernst Cassirer (1874–1945) to provide a “needed level of nuance to the default stories of the development of analytic philosophy in the twentieth century,” strongly implying that these stories oversimplify.

While challenging the status quo, several chapters of this volume also express reservations about the term “classic” and articulate, directly and indirectly, important insights about canon and tradition formation. For example, Michael Della Rocca returns to the proverbially obscure F. H. Bradley (1846–1924)—an author often thought to have been decisively placed in the dustbin of history by

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Russell at the origin of analytical philosophy—and he illuminates not just Bradley’s ongoing philosophical significance in ways that challenge received opinion but also the ways in which analytical philosophy relied on a perhaps necessary myth in its founding.

In addition, in her chapter, Sally Haslanger (6) reflects “on a piece of ephemera that exemplifies, in several ways, much that is neglected by our profession.” Her chapter also explicitly challenges the very idea of a “classic.” She does not merely push her readers to consider the overlooked and marginalized in the profession (and society!); she also raises questions about how we should conceive of philosophy as such.

Finally, the nature of philosophy is addressed head-on in Rachel Barney’s chapter on—thanks to Plato’s memorable and influential rhetoric—one of the arch-villains of philosophy; the Sophist-rhetorician Gorgias (a contemporary of Socrates), in a dazzling performance, defended one of the least admired characters in (literary) history, Helen of Troy. Barney’s chapter suggests that the nature and limits of philosophy, our canon, and our approved “styles” may well be intimately and uncomfortably connected from the (Greek) “start.”

It would be astonishing if the authors of this volume presented a unified perspective. But a surprising point of convergence can be

discerned, perhaps through the magic of associative reasoning; it occurred to me in reflecting on Kris McDaniels’s analysis on Edith Stein (1891–1942)—“empathetic acts are fulfilled by further empathetic acts”—the significance of love. In one sense this is not very surprising, because love is central to Plato and the Platonisms that have shaped canonical philosophy. We can hear echoes of such Platonism in the “secret” of Hermann Lotze’s Mikrokosmus diagnosed by Frederick Beiser, “that the ultimate reality, the ultimate value, and indeed the ultimate truth, is love”—see Beiser’s chapter (4) on Lotze (1817–1881)—as well as in the promise of François Fénelon (1651–1715) of the “divine ecstasy” that is subsequent to the “love” of “eternal reason” (see Hanley’s essay, chapter 2). But as Barney’s chapter on Gorgias (the author), who treats love as more akin to a compulsion, reminds us, there is also a Plato that continues sophistic philosophy by other means as an enduring challenge to his reader.

Now, as Haslanger explicitly notes in her chapter (6) on Jane Addams’s “Women and Public Housekeeping,” love is also a very problematic virtue in the history of political economy, especially when used to devalue women’s contributions, as well as the many ways in which traditional philosophy has become complicit in structural patterns of exclusion if not outright domination. There is no better chapter to confront such issues than Jeffers’s (9), which finds in W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) a productive “demand that black people treat openness and thoughtfulness about sex and its place in life as key cultural goals”—a demand that is worth generalizing to


8. Some of the ambivalence of love is also apparent in the “credo” of Bradley’s Appearance and Reality. This sentence is often quoted: “To love unsatisfied the world is mystery, a mystery which love satisfied seems to comprehend.” The following line often not: “The latter is wrong only because it cannot be content without thinking itself right.”
us all.\textsuperscript{9} It is no surprise that given his eugenicist aims, Du Bois is suspicious of (some versions of) love, too.\textsuperscript{10} Even so, despite the critical scrutiny of philosophy’s past and status quo, this volume also includes calls to renew not just the political order (see especially chapter 3, Anderson’s essay on Thomas Paine’s \textit{Agrarian Justice}) but also the love—and allowing “love” here to be understood as a compulsion, a longing, and a joining together—of wisdom, that is, philosophy, by becoming in Richardson’s words, “a much more many-splendoured thing.”

Philosophy has a complex relationship to its own past. There are recurring temptations—famously expressed by Descartes and Carnap amongst others—to start totally anew without any reference to what has gone before. Such temptations are reinforced in philosophical movements that self-consciously oppose a focus on the “mighty dead.” For example, self-styled “scientific philosophers” embrace the intellectual division of labor and hope that with techniques inherited from the sciences—and by focused problem solving—to make progress and avoid the overconfident mistakes of those who, to echo a familiar sentiment, put their faith in acts of creative genius;\textsuperscript{11} from the perspective of this enterprise, the study of “the greats,” even without reverence, flirts with the absurdly silly. Scientific textbooks and popular images of science, often influenced by Thomas Kuhn’s durable (1962) \textit{The Structure of Scientific

\textsuperscript{9} I thank Jeffers for discussion on this point.

\textsuperscript{10} I quote Jeffers: Looking back once more at “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address,” we find DuBois speaking there of the need to promote “the rehabilitation of the indispensable family group, by deliberate planning of marriages, with mates selected for heredity, physique, health and brains, with less insistence on color, comeliness or romantic sex lure, mis-called love” (1996b, 175).

Revolutions, reinforce the idea that progressive scientific enterprises rightly discard disciplinary pasts; after all, it is thought there is no need to be acquainted with, say, the contents of Newton’s Principia to do cutting-edge research in contemporary physics. It is no surprise, then, that some professional philosophers have little working knowledge of, or interest in, philosophy’s past.

Moreover, others raise concerns over the composition of the philosophical canon. It’s primarily white and primarily European; leaving aside a few church fathers, it has a bias toward those who inhabited Athens in the fifth and fourth century before Christ (Plato, Aristotle), those that visited Paris in the seventeenth and eighteenth century (Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz, Hume, etc.), and those that spoke German in the (long) nineteenth century (Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Frege, etc.). The current teaching canon, which draws on and nurtures the philosophical “classics,” within philosophy, systematically excludes whole cultures, is biased toward men, and lavishes attention on thinkers who—regardless of their intellectual merits—also espoused racist, sexist, eugenicist, and imperialist views. Those that worry about the present patterns of exclusion within philosophy


and larger society alternate between advocating extensive reform of the canon, focusing on greater inclusivity, and abolition altogether.

As the previous paragraph implies, classic texts continue to figure in undergraduate philosophy and humanities education. Some texts work extremely well to introduce and recruit young minds to philosophy (e.g., Plato’s dialogues); experienced teachers know that part of a student’s joy is to experience philosophy in the company of those that set the philosophical agenda. Students enjoy the achievement of grappling with seminal texts; it also familiarizes them with the idea that books with depth can speak to different audiences at once and sometimes repay repeated readings. Another part of an aspiring philosophical student’s pleasing cultivation is to learn to recognize echoes or the problematic of these significant texts in other works of philosophy and even in differing walks of life. In addition, the existence of an assumed shared textual background allows for relatively efficient, conceptual and argumentative shortcuts or vivid imagery—for example, “evil demons” or “philosopher kings”—in one’s teaching.

Other texts remain indispensable to the graduate curriculum: many professional philosophers encounter, say, Hume’s Treatise and Kant’s first Critique before obtaining a PhD. It is not always clear what—other than institutional inertia—keeps them in the curriculum and why the very best graduate departments keep hiring specialists to teach such works. Presumably, it is believed that even when such texts are thought surpassed, they articulate the framework of enduring philosophical options. Perhaps, too, it is believed useful in an age that encourages increasing professional specialization to teach comprehensive works that can convey the role of systematic trade-offs and constraints in philosophical reflection on fundamental questions.

In addition to formal, pedagogical functions, classic works also play other, nontrivial roles in the ongoing life, as it were, of
philosophy. I list four such roles that I think of as being especially important: first, such works sometimes renew philosophy, especially in periods after an antihistorical sweep. By this I mean that rather than reinvent wheels, people turn to them because they provide resources to recover lost insight; arguably during the last half century lots of classical texts have played such a role in moral philosophy (e.g., Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Sidgwick’s *Methods*) and metaphysics (e.g., Spinoza’s *Ethics*). Second, within professional philosophy, research on a canonical figure is still a legitimate way for an ambitious character to apprentice within the profession, even make a first mark. In doing so, they resemble those musicians that nourished, in J. M. Coetzee’s telling of the story, an appetite for Bach when he was out of fashion.¹⁵

Third, some professional philosophers understand themselves as members of a tradition (e.g., American pragmatists, critical theorists, Deleuzians) in which the aspiring contribution is both a response to a select number of familiar works, and a creative extension or reconfiguration of their problematic. Finally, some proven, enduring authors (Seneca, Montaigne, Kierkegaard, de Beauvoir, Thoreau, etc.) are read for wisdom and (provocative) enjoyment by a wider, literate public, including professional philosophers and others inside and outside the academy.

Thus, there are many ways to be a classic within philosophy and many classics are capable of serving multiple functions. Perhaps, it is distinctive of a classic within philosophy to have such multiplicity of functions. To claim this, to even talk of a “classic,” is not to deny the path dependency of classics on each other and institutional

¹⁵ Coetzee, J. M. (1993). What is a classic? *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 5(2), 7–24. Given that in his essay the novelist and critic Coetzee treats the situation of classical music as a healthy one (as opposed to the dire situation in literature), it is not impossible Coetzee is being ironic.
constraints, including the systematic patterns of exclusion mentioned above that have formed existing canons. That history’s judgment is significant is undeniable, but only an economist, perhaps, would suggest it is optimal, and therefore, the study of a disciplinary past is a dispensable luxury. 16 To say that some books and authors have proven to be enduring is not to offer a prediction. 17 It is not a law of nature that philosophy will always be taught by way of books; it is certainly conceivable that philosophers will stop writing books and find other forms of communication. In fact, one way to hasten such an outcome is to regard the past as a static, known quality that does not demand our engagement or critical judgment.

Thus far, I have noted four functional (sometimes conflicting) roles of classics and that the teaching canon draws on and nurtures some texts that we often speak of as “classics.” These may be thought insufficient to characterize a classic. While it would be foolish to expect a list of necessary and sufficient conditions of the classic, we can do more to offer a more precise characterization that can help the reader in her engagement with the chapters in this volume. 18

17. Hume seems more optimistic: “On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with. Envy and jealousy have too much place in a narrow circle; and even familiar acquaintance with his person may diminish the applause due to his performances: But when these obstructions are removed, the beauties, which are naturally fitted to excite agreeable sentiments, immediately display their energy; and while the world endures, they maintain their authority over the minds of men.” (“Of the Standard of Taste,” 11) Hume’s “Of the Standard of Taste” is relevant to the present volume; in it, Hume explicitly treats Fénelon as one of his key interlocutors. Few philosophers otherwise ever encounter Fénelon in their education or scholarship. See Ryan Hanley’s chapter (2).
18. To be clear the chapters themselves do not reflect the viewpoint of the introduction and were completed before the introduction was drafted.
In “What Is a Classic?” J. M. Coetzee (Nobel laureate in literature, 2003) insists, while flirting with the idea of the survival of the literary fittest, that classics sustain and survive ongoing scrutiny in the long run from a variety of perspectives, which may include—judging by Coetzee’s practice—their creative rewriting. Such ongoing scrutiny comes close to being a necessary condition on the being of a philosophical classic; one may suspect it is a kind of performative requirement for a classic. One may wonder why this condition is not necessary; the possibility, even existence of instant classics undercuts the necessity of the condition.

In his essay, Coetzee identifies four features that enable a work to become a classic: (1) the work needs to be studied and discussed in small circles, relatively untouched by the general public’s fashion; (2) one can become an advanced student in a discipline based on some kind of competent engagement with such works; (3) there needs to be ongoing learned commentary or criticism; (4) the existence of a form of advanced emulation through creative imitation or reworking. These four features all track different kinds of elitist features of classics that arouse suspicion in those with concerns about patterns of exclusion.\(^{19}\) In addition, Coetzee implies (5) that a work counts as a classic only if it can eventually catch the interest of a wider audience beyond the most advanced professionals.

Though Coetzee does not speak of philosophical classics (he focuses on music and literature) in context, his features can be applied in the present context to a considerable degree (and in general, philosophy is often tacitly on Coetzee’s agenda). While not denying the inherent tensions between (1) and (5), I have already mentioned instances of (2), (3), and (5); few would deny the existence of (1)—indeed, it is often a source of lament to philosophers that wish to

\(^{19}\) In his essay, Coetzee does not overlook the elitist elements, but he is more interested in the cosmopolitan dimension of a classic.
prove the relevance or, if they are working in an European grant environment, “impact” of these texts.

One may, however, doubt that (4) occurs in philosophy. It is probably not a good strategy to try to get a monograph published following Kant’s architectonic in the first *Critique*. Having granted that, this volume includes a very good example of (4): Fénélon’s (1699) *The Adventures of Telemachus: The Son of Ulysses* is itself a creative extension of the original classic (and even bears the subtitle of “continuation of the fourth book of the *Odyssey*”). Moreover, (4) is not just of historical interest; here’s an example from within professional philosophy: an important essay in the recent revival of analytical metaphysics is O’Leary-Hawthorne and Cortens (1995), “Towards ontological nihilism.”20 Given its provenance in Syracuse’s philosophy department, it is no surprise that it generously mentions Jonathan Bennett, the dominant figure of that department in the last third of the twentieth century. But as it turns out, the rhetorical and argumentative methodology is deeply indebted to Bennett’s *Rationality*—this will be described by Dennett in his chapter (10), so I will not repeat it here—a work familiar to Hawthorne and Cortens. This fact could go unnoticed because Bennett’s *Rationality* is not mentioned in their piece.21 Obviously, judged by criteria (1) through (5), the works discussed in this volume are not all at present a classic. For them to become a classic or return to that state, philosophy needs to change; this volume hopes to open up entertaining and instructive, new pathways

20. *Philosophical Studies* 79(2), 143–165. One further notable feature of this paper is the positive engagement with Bradley—then relatively unusual in analytical philosophy. See Della Rocca’s chapter (5) and my Introduction for more on this.

and narratives for student and advanced philosopher alike through the passionate engagement with ten recently neglected works.

I conclude with a final comment on the shaping of this volume. After a number of posts on the philosophical canon that I published at the New APPS blog, I was approached by Oxford University Press with an idea for a volume like the present one. After I accepted the press’s generous invitation, I approached a number of professional philosophers whom I admire and invited them to contribute to this enterprise. In so doing, I tried to strike a balance between professional philosophical historians of philosophy and “nonhistorians.” (A few chapter authors are also known as first-rate contributors to both historical and systematic projects.) I asked them each to write a chapter on a work that they thought unjustly neglected. In addition, the work so chosen could not be by a person “still active as a philosopher.”

Undoubtedly, these ten chapters also exhibit some of the patterns of exclusion that I mentioned above. So, for example, the present volume does not include any chapters on works in medieval philosophy nor works in any of the major non-Western philosophical traditions. I hope that some such omissions can be rectified in potential future volumes.

22. Along the way the word “classic” replaced “masterpiece” in the title of this volume; some chapters still show traces of the original title.
23. The one living subject of these chapters, Jonathan Bennett, focuses primarily on collating and translating early modern texts (see http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/). Several chapters reveal more of the details of my initial invitation.
Ever since their own day, the ancient Greek sophists have provoked outrage. Thanks to early enemies like Aristophanes and Plato, they stand perennially accused of “making the weaker argument the stronger,” defending the indefensible by unfair means. The term “sophist” [sophistês] had negative connotations almost from the start, and over time has just come to mean “person who argues unfairly.” But in a more neutral sense, “sophist” is simply the name we use to pick out an exciting and by no means indefensible intellectual movement—a loose group of fifth-century BCE Greek thinkers, writers, and teachers who included Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus, Gorgias, and perhaps Socrates himself. It is a controversial question who should count as one of the sophists and on what grounds, just as it is with “Enlightenment” thinkers or “postmodernists.” In the case of the sophists, not only is there no one thing that all of them had in common, in most cases only tantalizing scraps of their works have survived. We can catch only a glimpse of what all the fuss was about.  

1. A general overview of the sophists’ ideas and activities, defending some of the more sweeping claims here, can be found in Barney 2006.
Among the few complete sophistic texts that have come down to us, two stand out for their brilliance, complexity, and sheer nerve. These are a pair of *epideixeis* by Gorgias: the *On Not-Being* and the *Encomium of Helen*. An *epideixis* was a set-piece speech, a public demonstration of persuasive skill aimed at prospective students. And Gorgias was the greatest and most celebrated rhetorician (i.e., teacher of public speaking) of his day—indeed, the term “art of rhetoric” [*rhetorikê*] was probably coined by Plato in order to classify him. In both the *On Not-Being* and the *Helen*, he gives a rigorous demonstration of a completely outrageous thesis. The *On Not-Being* proves that nothing exists; that if it did exist, we could not know it; and that if we did know it, we could not communicate it to each other. The upshot of this deadpan exercise in triple nihilism is left for the reader to decide. Gorgias’s *Encomium of Helen* is less ambitious but equally subversive. It is a logically valid proof that Helen of Troy—infamous adulteress, legendary provoker of a disastrous world war—should not be blamed for running off with Paris. And the upshot seems to be much broader—perhaps that, quite generally, nobody can ever be to blame for any action. But as with the *On Not-Being*, what Gorgias really intends is anybody’s guess.

2. See Schiappa 1990. This raises the question of whether Gorgias really counts as a sophist at all, since part of Plato’s point is that *sophistês* and *rhêtorikos* should be considered different professions (cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 463b–463c, 520a–520b). Be that as it may, Gorgias clearly fits the general profile of the fifth-century sophist. Like Protagoras, Hippias, Prodicus, and the rest of the gang, he was an itinerant intellectual performer and teacher of wisdom; a specialist in techniques of argument and persuasion; and the author of texts which both advertise those skills and engage with contemporary philosophical debates, often with a subversive twist. Plato’s dialogues conflict as to whether Gorgias presented himself as a teacher of *virtue*, as Protagoras and most of the other sophists did: *Meno* 95c seems to correct *Gorgias* 460a on this point. But as a definition this is too narrow anyway: it would also exclude other important figures (Antiphon, Critias) who clearly belonged to the movement in a general way.
In fact, one of Gorgias’s principal intentions is probably to baffle us about his intentions. This can be seen most clearly in the frame of the Helen, which is a neat exercise in undermining the reader’s expectations. Gorgias opens with a pious declaration:

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

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

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

That last phrase comes as a bit of a jolt. Where does it leave his earlier talk of truth and fairness? Which is the aim here, reason or entertainment? Does Gorgias believe what he has argued? Does he want \(us\) to believe it? If persuading us of Helen’s innocence is not

\(^3\) Translations from the Helen (and the Defense of Palamedes) are from Gagarin and Woodruff 1995, sometimes with minor modifications: this very useful volume also includes Gorgias’s other significant surviving texts. The standard Greek text (and source of the section numbers in parentheses) is Diels and Kranz 1960–61, vol. 2; cf. also MacDowell 1982.
the point, then what is the point? A central theme of Gorgias’s discourse, as we will see, is the persuasive power of *logos*, speech; but why exactly should we be impressed by that, if we are not in fact persuaded?

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

I. THE ARGUMENT

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

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

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

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

1. Helen went to Troy either because of fate and the gods (I here simplify “the will of fortune and the plan of the gods and the decree of necessity”) or because of force or because of persuasion by speech [*logos*] or because of *erôs*.
2. If she went to Troy because of fate and the gods, Helen is not to blame.
3. If she went to Troy because she was forced, Helen is not to blame.
4. If she went to Troy because she was persuaded by *logos*, Helen is not to blame.
5. If she went to Troy because of *erôs*, Helen is not to blame.
6. Therefore, Helen is not to blame for going to Troy (from $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5$).