

## CHAPTER I

*Gorgias of Leontini and Plato's Gorgias**Josh Wilburn*

Gorgias of Leontini, born in his Sicilian home town around 485 BCE, was a central figure on the intellectual landscape of the Greek world in the fifth and fourth centuries. He is reputed to have been a student of the eminent philosopher Empedocles, as well as of Tisias and Corax, two of the earliest teachers of legal oratory in Sicily. When he visited Athens in 427 as the leader of a political embassy on behalf of Leontini, he reportedly astonished the Athenians with his oratorical skill on that trip, and he spent subsequent decades making his living as an itinerant speaker throughout mainland Greece, becoming especially well known for his flamboyant style of rhetoric and his use of novel rhetorical techniques. His speeches and written works themselves covered a wide range of topics and occasions, from the political to the philosophical to the oratorical itself, and over the course of his exceptionally long life – perhaps as long as 109 years, according to ancient reports – he made a profound and, arguably, unrivaled contribution to the nascent art of speech in the fifth century.<sup>1</sup> One sign of his influence as a leading rhetorician of his time is the clear impression he made on Plato. He is a main character in Plato's *Gorgias* and is mentioned in six other Platonic dialogues as well – *Apology*, *Meno*, *Symposium*, *Phaedrus*, *Hippias Major*, and *Philebus* – and all of his appearances in the Platonic corpus draw attention to his occupation as an orator.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter considers the influence of the historical Gorgias of Leontini on Plato's *Gorgias* – a topic that has been largely neglected by

<sup>1</sup> An indication of his importance is the impressive list of students that (accurately or not) ancient doxographers assign to him, which includes many of the most prominent thinkers and politicians of his time, such as Pericles, Aspasia, Critias, Alcibiades, Aeschines the Socratic, Thucydides, Isocrates, Agathon, Polus, Alcidamas, Antisthenes, and Meno. For further biographical information about Gorgias' life and practices, see Wilburn (2018) and Consigny (2001: 6–8 and nn. 20–28), who also provides helpful references to ancient sources.

<sup>2</sup> See *Ap.* 19e; *H. Ma.* 282b; *M.* 71c–72a, 73c–d, 95b–c, and 96d; *Phdr.* 261b and 267a; *Phil.* 58a; and *Symp.* 198c.

commentators.<sup>3</sup> On the interpretation I will be defending, some of the central issues and ideas on which Plato's dialogue focuses – ones introduced by the character himself – are directly informed by views Gorgias presents in his own works. In particular, the *Gorgias* explores a number of philosophical issues that emerge out of, or are closely connected to, the historical Gorgias' ideas about the nature, effects, and use of speech or *logos*. On this view, then, the orator is no idle character in the dialogue, nor a mere placeholder for rhetoricians in general, but rather represents the source of some of the text's distinctive themes. My approach will be to examine fragments and *testimonia* of the historical person – drawing especially on Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* and his *Defense of Palamedes* – in conjunction with his character in the *Gorgias* and with references to him in other Platonic dialogues. I will focus specifically on three Gorgianic themes or lines of thought that are prominent in Plato's dialogue: (1) the conception of speech as a form of power, or *dunamis*; (2) the relation between power and wish, or *boulēsis*; and (3) the contrast between – and contrasting relationships speech itself has with – belief, on the one hand, and knowledge, on the other.<sup>4</sup> Note that I do not mean to argue that the historical Gorgias actually *held* the views Plato associates with him in his dialogue. Gorgias' works are notoriously playful and paradoxical, which makes it difficult to discern the extent to which they represent sincere expressions of personal belief, or simply the speculative, tongue-in-cheek, or even jesting remarks of an imaginative orator.<sup>5</sup> For that reason, my thesis is simply that Gorgias gave voice to certain ideas in his works – whether he was personally committed to them or not – and that *Plato* evidently took them seriously as an expression of Gorgianic theory and practice.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> De Romilly (1992: 67–71) provides a brief discussion, but she focuses only on the first of the three points of similarity I will discuss in this chapter. Valiavitcharska (2006: 27), by contrast, thinks Plato actually deliberately *misrepresents* Gorgianic views.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Dodds (1959: 7–9), who denies that the historical Gorgias was an original philosophical thinker and claims that Plato's interest in him was simply that he was *deinos legein*.

<sup>5</sup> For commentators who note the playfulness of Gorgias' writings or who similarly focus on the ideas themselves rather than Gorgias' own personal commitments, see Barnes (1982: 173, 525); Barney (2006: 93, n. 30, 95; 2016: 3–4, 24); Schiappa (1995: 318); and Woodruff (1999: 300). Gagarin (2001: 279), for his part, directly questions whether the analysis of *logos* in Gorgias' *Encomium* is his own view.

<sup>6</sup> A number of commentators note that Plato treats the character Gorgias himself rather respectfully in his dialogue, and that, regardless of whatever worries he might have about the implications of views he puts into Gorgias' mouth, he clearly thinks they are worth reckoning with. See, for example, Grote (1971: 65); Guthrie (1969: 37); and Woodruff (1999: 291).

**I.I The Power of Speech***I.I.I Speech as a Dunamis in the Gorgias*

The first point of contact between Gorgias of Leontini's work and Plato's depiction of him is also the most obvious: the conception of speech as a form or source of *power*, which is introduced early in the dialogue. The main thread of discussion initially emerges out of Socrates' stated interest in finding out precisely what 'art' Gorgias practices and what kind of 'power' (*dunamis*) it has (447b–c). Gorgias' answer is that he practices and teaches rhetoric (449a), which is an expertise in speeches (449d–e) that deals with 'the greatest of human concerns' (450a–b). When Socrates presses him to state exactly what 'greatest good for human beings' it is that rhetoric produces, Gorgias responds:

The thing that is in actual fact the greatest good, Socrates. It is the source of freedom (*eleutheria*) for human beings and at the same time it is for each person the source of rule (*archein*) in one's own city . . . I'm referring to the ability to use speeches to persuade judges in a law court, councilors in a council meeting, and assemblymen in an assembly or in any other political gathering that might take place. Indeed, with this power (*dunamis*) you'll have the doctor for your slave (*doulos*), and the physical trainer, too. As for this financial expert of yours, he'll turn out to be making more money for somebody else instead of himself: for you, in fact, if you have got the power (*tōi dunamenōi*) to speak and to persuade the crowds. (452d–e)<sup>7</sup>

Gorgias goes on to elaborate: oratory 'encompasses and subordinates to itself just about every other power (*hapasas tas dunameis*) all at once'; its 'power' (*dunamis*) is so great that the rhetorician is able to speak more persuasively on any subject than anyone else, including even experts in their given fields (456b–c); this 'power' (*dunamis*) makes it possible, among other things, for them to rob doctors or craftsmen of their reputations; and it is a 'competitive skill' (*agōnia*) analogous to boxing, wrestling, or fighting in armor (456a–457c).

The central feature of Gorgias' account of oratory is *power*. Oratory is itself a *dunamis* or power; it is a source of seemingly unlimited social and political power over others; and it is similar to forms of power that involve the use of literal physical force or brute strength. The dialogue itself takes this conception even further, however. When Gorgias' student Polus takes over the conversation, he pushes the connection between rhetoric and

<sup>7</sup> Translations of Plato are from Cooper and Hutchinson (1997), with modifications.

power to its limits by likening the orator's ability to the absolute political authority of a tyrant (*tyrannos*) or potentate (*dunastēs*) (466b–c, 471a–d, 479a). Polus has in mind especially their power to administer capital punishment, seize property, and banish people from their cities at will, and he cites as an example the Macedonian king Archelaus, who ascended to power through unjust acts of murder. In making these comparisons, Polus follows the implications of Gorgias' agonistic conception of oratory to their sinister but natural conclusion: oratory provides the same potential for injustice as the unchecked power of violent political tyrants. This conception of oratory-as-power that is introduced by Gorgias himself and amplified by Polus turns out to be programmatic for the *Gorgias*, in that it gives rise to many of the central questions and concerns that Socrates and his interlocutors address over the course of the text (some of which will be discussed further in Sections 1.2 and 1.3).

### 1.1.2 *Gorgias on the Power of Logos*

What I would now like to show is that the conception of oratory that Plato's character Gorgias introduces in the dialogue is informed by the historical figure's own work. In particular, Gorgias famously articulates a rather radical version of the view that oratory is a form or source of power in his *Encomium of Helen*, a speech in which his ostensible aim is to exculpate Helen of Troy for sailing away with Alexander. She can only have done so, he argues, for one of four reasons – the will of the gods, physical force (*bia*), having been persuaded by speech (*logos*), or under the influence of love – and in none of these four scenarios is she truly to blame for her action. In his defense of Helen's innocence in the third case – that of persuasion – Gorgias' strategy is to liken speech to physical violence. Although it is only a tiny and invisible 'body', he says, speech is a 'mighty potentate' (*dunastēs*, 8) that has the 'power' (*dunamis*, 10) to transform the minds of an audience. It can excite their emotions, change their beliefs through persuasion, and ultimately make them *act* in whatever ways the speaker desires. All of these effects, moreover, are compulsive and irresistible for the listeners themselves. Gorgias comments:

What reason prevents us from <thinking> that Helen came led by speech no more willingly (*ouk ekousan*) than if she was ravished by force (*bia*)? It is possible <to see how> the faculty of persuasion <rules>, which does not have the look of compulsion (*anankē*), but does have its power (*dunamis*). For speech, by persuading the soul that it persuades, compels (*anankase*) it both to accept what it says and to agree to its deeds . . . The power of speech

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(*tou logou dunamis*) has the same relationship to the order of the soul as does the order of drugs to the nature of bodies. For just as different drugs draw different humors from body, and some put an end to sickness, some to life, so some speeches induce grief, some joy, some fear, some instill courage in the audience, and some drug and bewitch the soul with a kind of pernicious persuasion. (12–14)<sup>8</sup>

The similarities between Plato's dialogue and Gorgias' work are striking. Both elide the traditional Greek contrast between force (*bia*) and persuasion (*peithō*) by assimilating convincing speech to a form of brute force.<sup>9</sup> For Gorgias, it may *literally* be a physical force, since it is evidently corporeal in nature, and it acts on the listener as a form of compulsion just as violence does, and with the same inevitability as the mechanistic effects of pharmaceuticals on the body itself.<sup>10</sup> His emphasis on the 'power' of speech and his characterization of it as a mighty 'potentate', moreover, directly anticipates the language Plato's character Gorgias uses, as well as his student Polus' likening of the orator to a literal potentate.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, we have evidence from elsewhere in the Platonic corpus that Plato associated Gorgias with the conception of *logos* as a form or source of power that operates like brute violence. Most obviously, in the *Philebus*, Protarchus claims, 'I have often heard . . . Gorgias saying that the art of persuasion is greatly superior to all others, for all things are made its slaves willingly (*doula di' hekontōn*), rather than by force (*dia bias*)' (58a–b). The fact that he has 'often' heard this claim makes Plato's attribution of the view to the historical person especially emphatic. Also significant is the *Meno*, where Gorgias' student, who claims to share his teacher's views, successively proposes that virtue is (for a man) 'being successful in political affairs' (71e), or (for everyone) 'the ability to rule (*archein*) over human beings' (73d) or 'to desire admirable things and have the power (*dunatos*) to acquire them' (77b). His characterization is of virtue, not oratory, but the virtues he enumerates closely resemble the goods that the character in

<sup>8</sup> Translations of Gorgias' works are from Graham (2010: vol. 2), with modifications.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Barney (2016: 22) and Calogero (1957: 13) on this point.

<sup>10</sup> Barney provides illuminating discussions of Gorgias' power-focused and seemingly physicalist conception of speech (2016: 8–12), as well as of Plato's presentation of it (2010).

<sup>11</sup> Of course, the context of the *Encomium* is different from that of the *Gorgias* itself, and the ultimate aims of the two authors no doubt differ significantly as well. Not surprisingly, then, the texts differ in some of the ways they use and develop the concept of speech-as-power. In particular, because the internal aim of Gorgias' own speech is apologetic in nature, the orator's emphasis on speech's power serves the dialectical function of exculpating the persuaded person, whereas this connection is not central in the *Gorgias* itself. Plato, then, is engaging with characteristically Gorgianic themes and ideas in ways that matter to him given his own distinct philosophical objectives. Similar remarks apply to differences in the contexts and aims of the *Palamedes* in relation to Plato's dialogue.

Plato's *Gorgias* promises oratory can provide for human beings. The connection between Meno and Gorgias, then, combined with Meno's pride in his own ability to deliver 'very good speeches' (80b), suggests that Meno's attempts to define virtue are informed by the Gorgianic conception of speech and its value to human beings.<sup>12</sup> The idea common to both dialogues is that, from Plato's perspective, the main demographic for Gorgias' brand of rhetoric is those who seek political power and influence. The long list of ambitious politicians whom Gorgias is supposed to have influenced or taught may corroborate this point. Xenophon, for his part, explicitly reports that Proxenus became Gorgias' student in order to become 'capable of doing great things' or 'capable of ruling (*archein*)', and out of a desire to achieve 'great power (*dunamis*)' (*Anab.* II.6.16–18).

Gorgias' emphasis on the power of speech in Plato's dialogue, therefore, is not mere Platonic invention. Rather, it reflects Plato's perception of both the historical figure's works and practices themselves and how they were received by eager students and aspiring political leaders.

## 1.2 Power and Wish

### 1.2.1 Dunamis and Boulēsis in the Gorgias

Plato's dialogue also engages with the historical Gorgias' work and with his account of oratory-as-power, I argue, in its exploration of the relationship between power and wish, or *dunamis* and *boulēsis*. Socrates and his interlocutors, beginning with Gorgias himself, advocate and explore the idea that power is what allows people to obtain or achieve the things they wish for, and that that is what makes it valuable to human beings. To put the point in language that neither Plato nor Gorgias themselves quite use, wish determines the end a person seeks, and power provides them with the means of achieving it.

This idea recurs throughout the text, but I will highlight three extended passages in which it is especially prominent. First, Gorgias' character introduces the idea in his description of the power oratory provides: the orator has the 'power' to be persuasive about 'whatever he wishes' (*boulētai*), even if what he 'wished' (*bouloito*) were to undermine the legitimate authority of doctors or experts unjustly. In response, Socrates takes issue with the suggestion that the orator will ever commit injustice.

<sup>12</sup> According to Xenophon, Meno prided himself on his 'power to deceive and fabricate lies', which also echoes Gorgias' account of *logos* in the *Encomium* (*Anab.* II.6.26).

The just person necessarily ‘wishes’ (*boulesthai*) to do just things, he argues, and those who learn what justice is become *just* themselves. If, therefore, the orator has knowledge of justice – as Gorgias, perhaps only under pressure from Socrates, promises – then the orator must be just and hence ‘will never wish (*boulēsetai*) to do what’s unjust’ (460c).<sup>13</sup>

Second, the relation between power and wish becomes central in one of the most memorable arguments of the whole dialogue, which takes place between Socrates and Polus. At issue is Polus’ conviction that orators ‘have the greatest power (*megiston dunantai*) in their cities’, because like tyrants and potentates, they can (as we saw in Section 1.2) put to death, banish, or confiscate the property of anyone they ‘wish’ (*boulōntai*) (466b–c). Socrates, however, claims that orators and tyrants are actually the *least* powerful people in their cities, on the basis of a distinction between doing what one believes best, on the one hand, and doing what one *wishes*, on the other. The general idea is that what people ultimately wish for, and seek to achieve in their actions, is what is good or best for them, but people often hold false beliefs about what is good and consequently act in ways that are actually *bad* for them. In such cases, they do what they believe is best but not what they actually wish for. This line of reasoning provides the resources to refute Polus:

- s. Therefore, we do not simply wish (*boulometha*) to slaughter people, or exile them from their cities and confiscate their property as such: we wish (*boulometha*) to do these things if they are beneficial, but if they are harmful we do not (*boulometha*). For we wish (*boulometha*) for the things that are good, as you agree, and we do not wish (*boulometha*) for those that are neither good nor bad, nor those that are bad . . . Then if a person who’s a tyrant or an orator puts somebody to death or exiles him or confiscates his property because he supposes that doing so is better for himself when actually it’s worse, this person, I take it, is doing what he sees fit, is not he?
- p. Yes.
- s. And is he also doing what he wishes (*bouletai*), if these things are actually bad? Why do not you answer?
- p. All right, I do not think he’s doing what he wishes (*bouletai*).

<sup>13</sup> The manuscript contains three additional lines in this section that include an additional repetition of *boulēsetai*, but are bracketed by most editors on grounds of redundancy. See Dodds (1959: 219–220) and Croiset and Bodin (2008); but cf. Burnet (1903).

- s. Can such a man possibly have great power (*mega dunatai*) in that city, if in fact having great power (*to mega dunasthai*) is, as you agree, something good?
- p. He cannot.

(468c–e)

Contrary to the Gorgianic account of rhetoric, then, orators are not necessarily powerful after all: power refers exclusively to the ability to obtain the good things one ultimately wishes for, but orators and potentates often fail to achieve what is truly good for them.

Finally, the concepts of *dunamis* and *boulēsis* are prominent in a later exchange between Socrates and Callicles. The context is that Socrates has earlier argued that although both doing injustice and being the victim of it are evils, the former is an even worse evil – the *greatest* of all evils for human beings, in fact – than the latter. Socrates and Callicles agree, moreover, that failure to protect oneself, one's friends, and relatives against evils is shameful, and it is more shameful the greater the evil is. What, then, Socrates wonders, must a person acquire in order to protect themselves and others against the evils of doing and suffering injustice? He asks:

Is it power (*dunamis*) or wish (*boulēsis*)? What I mean is this: Is it when a person does not wish (*boulētai*) to suffer what's unjust that he will avoid suffering it, or when he procures a power (*dunamin*) to avoid suffering it? . . . And what about doing what's unjust? Is it when he does not wish (*boulētai*) to do it, is that sufficient – for he will not do it – or should he procure a power (*dunamin*) and a craft for this, too, so that unless he learns and practices it, he will commit injustice? . . . Do you think Polus and I were or were not correct in being compelled to agree in our previous discussion when we agreed that no one does what's unjust because he wishes (*boulomenon*) to, but that all who do so do it involuntarily? (509d–e)

Socrates' line of questioning, then, establishes that wish is ineffectual in the absence of power. It is not enough to *wish* not to suffer injustice; one must also have a power that precludes suffering it. More importantly, and perhaps more surprisingly, even wishing not to *commit* injustice oneself is insufficient to guarantee that one will act well; one must also acquire 'some power' that enables one to act virtuously and avoid vice (510a).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The precise nature of this 'power' is never explicitly identified or described in the *Gorgias*, but it is not difficult to guess (especially in light of the myth at the end of the dialogue) that it is or involves the practice of philosophy.

Once again, then, *dunamis* in the *Gorgias* is what allows us to achieve the objects determined by *boulēsis*.

### 1.2.2 *Gorgias on Boulēsis and Dunamis*

Plato's characterization of power and wish in his dialogue has its antecedent in the historical Gorgias' own works. This connection has been underappreciated by interpreters, but the evidence for it is striking. For Gorgias frequently couples the concepts of *boulēsis* and *dunamis* together in his speeches in an innovative way that draws attention to their conjoined roles in human action. Most notably, Gorgias' pairing of power and wish becomes the centerpiece of his argument in the *Defense of Palamedes*, an apologetic speech written from the perspective of the accused, who is attempting to exonerate himself from the spurious charge of treason brought against him by Odysseus. In his introductory remarks, the defendant promises, 'I shall prove to you that [my accuser] does not speak truly, in two ways: for neither if I wished to did I have the power (*boulēstheis edunamēn*), nor if I had the power did I wish (*dunamenos eboulēthēn*) to undertake these deeds' (5). This opening statement provides the framework for the rest of the speech, as Palamedes organizes his argument by defending each of the two conjuncts in its turn, and he repeats the terms *dunamis* and *boulēsis* and continues to pair them throughout.<sup>15</sup> Importantly, this two-part line of defense assumes that power and wish are each distinct necessary conditions of human action: in order to prove that someone did not do something, it suffices to show *either* that they did not wish to do it *or* that they did not have the power to do it.<sup>16</sup> The arguments succeed only if action requires both. In the *Palamedes*, therefore, power and wish are closely related to one another in human behavior, just as they are in Plato's dialogue.

<sup>15</sup> He immediately continues, 'I turn first to the former argument, that I lacked the power (*adunatos*) to do the deed' (6), and when he moves on to the next point, he states, 'For what reason would I have wished (*boulēthēnai*) to do these things, if I really did have the power (*edunamēn*) to do them?' (13). He ultimately concludes, 'That I could not even wish <if I were able, nor be able if I wished> (*eboulomēn < dunamenos . . . boulomenos edunamēn >*) to betray Greece has been proved by what I just said' (21). Palamedes also pairs and contrasts *dunamis* and *boulēsis* when he argues that he would have been foolish to try to subdue their barbarian enemies: 'By what power (*dunamei*) would I, a Greek, take over the barbarians, one against many? By persuasion or by force? Neither would they wish to be obey (*peisthēnai bouloinē*), nor would I have the power to force them (*biasasthai dunaimēn*)' (14).

<sup>16</sup> Compare one of Palamedes' opening comments to his jurors: 'For if you wish you will be able (*dunēsethe boulomenoi*) to put me to death easily' (2).

Two further considerations amplify this connection. The first is that Palamedes' defense speech develops a view of human motivation that anticipates some of the details of Plato's treatment of wish in the *Gorgias*. In particular, we have seen that Socrates defends the following cluster of ideas in the dialogue: everyone ultimately desires the good, and no one wants what is in fact harmful to them; people harm themselves only out of ignorance; no one voluntarily does wrong (since injustice is harmful, and no one willingly harms themselves); and people want to protect themselves, their families, and their friends from harm. Palamedes, likewise, articulates versions of these same ideas throughout his speech:

No one wishes (*bouletai*) to run the greatest risks for nothing, nor to be a wrongdoer in the greatest of wrongs (13).

There is not a single person who commits a crime out of a desire to be harmed (18).

All people do all things for the sake of one of these two motives: either to pursue some profit or to avoid a loss (19).

It is madness to undertake deeds that are impossible, unprofitable, disgraceful, by which one will harm one's friends and benefit one's enemies . . . It is not the business of the prudent to commit the greatest wrongs and to choose evils in preference to the goods at hand. If then I am wise, I did no wrong; if I did wrong, I am not wise (26).<sup>17</sup>

The parallel between the two texts on these points provides further evidence that Plato's treatment of wish and human action in the *Gorgias* is informed by the work of the dialogue's namesake.<sup>18</sup>

Second, we have good reason for thinking Plato was familiar with Gorgias' *Defense of Palamedes*. As previous commentators have noted, the defense speech Plato puts into the mouth of Socrates in his own *Apology* bears a number of notable similarities, in both structure and argumentative content, to Palamedes' speech. To give just a single example of special note for present purposes, one of Socrates' arguments for his innocence relies on the claim that no one 'wishes (*bouletai*) to be harmed rather than benefited by his associates', or, more generally, that no one 'wishes (*bouletai*) to be harmed' at all (25d–26a). The parallels between the two works are, on the

<sup>17</sup> See also *DP* 14, which denies that anyone would ever 'voluntarily' choose 'slavery over lawful rule, the worst state instead of the best'.

<sup>18</sup> For the view that Gorgias' work provides a precedent for the Socratic principle that 'no one does wrong willingly', see Calogero (1957) and Segal (1962: 118).