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Form and Content in Gorgias' Helen and Palamedes: Rhetoric, Philosophy, Inconsistency and Invalid Argument in some Greek Thinkers

Gorgias' Helen (B 11) and Palamedes (B 11a) are among the longest pieces of continuous prose included in Diels-Kranz, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker. We have here a rare opportunity of considering how a writer who merits inclusion in Diels-Kranz develops an argument over a number of pages. Gorgias, it is true, is a rhetorician; and though he has some claim to be regarded as a sophist or Presocratic philosopher also (see especially Ε3), rhetoric has evidently much to contribute to the Helen and Palamedes. The extent of the contribution is indeed the primary subject of the first part of my paper. I shall inquire whether Gorgias in the Helen indulges in rhetorical flourishes in which form takes precedence over content; whether on the other hand Gorgias' general philosophical position supplies the content of this work and furnishes premises from which conclusions are drawn for Helen's benefit, the rhetoric furnishing no more than a pleasing mode of presentation; or whether a case is being argued, and language manipulated, ad hoc, the rhetoric substituting for logic and valid argument. Gorgias himself terms the Helen a paignion (21): I shall briefly consider the meaning of the word in the light of my discussion. I shall discuss the Palamedes in less detail, and consider whether the presuppositions of the Helen and Palamedes are inconsistent with one another. Subsequently, I shall raise the question whether inconsistency is per se a mark of a rhetorician at this period, or whether similar inconsistencies may be found in other writers who are philosophically more respectable. I shall also consider to what extent Gorgias' presuppositions, and inconsistencies, are shared with non-philosophical Greeks in early Greece; and very briefly indicate some long-standing worries of my own about the study of Presocratic philosophers.

There is much of interest in the introduction to the Helen; but I have no space to discuss it here, and shall begin at (6), where Gorgias sets out four possible reasons or causes for Helen's going to Troy with Paris: she did what she did either (a) as a result of the wishes of Chance or the plans of the gods or the decrees of Necessity or (b) because she was carried off by force or (c) because she was persuaded by words (logoi) or (d) because she was smitten with love. We might perhaps provisionally grant that Gorgias had furnished a full list of possible reasons or causes (but see below), and expect him to demonstrate that Helen was influenced by (b), or possibly (a), since (b) is certainly, and (a) possibly, a valid defence. Gorgias, however, undertakes to show that, no matter which of the four was the reason, Helen should be exonerated from blame. He offers four arguments or groups of arguments, one for each reason or cause.

Argument 1. Suppose Chance, Necessity or the gods desired, planned or decreed Helen's journey. By nature (pephuke) the stronger (kreisson) is not prevented by the weaker. No; the weaker is ruled and led (agēsthai) by the stronger. God (a term which evidently includes Chance and Necessity) is kreisson than a human being in might, wisdom, and their other characteristics. If then one should ascribe the causation (or the guilt, aitia) to Chance and God, one should absolve Helen from her bad reputation.

I shall discuss later whether these pleas are novel. For the moment I note that the argument seems to rest primarily on causality, with the will of the divine powers mentioned acting as a cause. The stronger can compel the actions of the weaker. The argument is logically presented; its acceptability is likely to vary from culture to culture. However, not only logic is employed, nor is causality alone invoked. Kreisson does not simply mean 'stronger'; it serves as one of the comparatives of agathos, 'good', so that one may be kreisson also in wisdom or cleverness, (sophia) and other characteristics. The wiser or
cleverer can circumvent the less wise or clever. Furthermore, it was widely held to be appropriate for the more agathos to rule the less agathos (see e.g. Isoc. To Nicoc 14, Plato, Meno 73c9): Greek values have a role to play here. Lastly, agesthai is the not juste for carrying off prisoners or booty (LSJ s.v. I.3). There is rhetorical skill in choice of words here, not merely skill in argument.

Argument 2. The second argument (7) examines the possibility that Helen was carried off by force. There are rhetorical flourishes: note the tricolon ηανθέλη - βηθυστήρια - ουφρική, of which the third carries the highest emotive charge; the manner in which ουφρική is then used to increase the enormity of ηανθέλη; the chiasms εξισελίφήσει βηθυστήριας βηθυστήριας καὶ ηανθέλη; and other tricola λαγω - νομω - ἁγανα (repeated) and βηθυστήρια ... σταυρότατα ... ὀφθαλμίστρατα. But the flourishes neither impede the logic nor substitute for it. The argument turns on the valid distinction between agent and patient; Paris acted, Helen suffered, Paris committed a crime, Helen suffered a misfortune. The argument from force majeure in such circumstances is acceptable in most societies, certainly in ancient Greece. However, in the course of the discussion we shall observe Gorgias several times introducing a distinction which is valid in one context and subsequently applying it more widely.

Argument 3. Gorgias allots much more space (8-14) to the third argument. He writes 'it is not hard to make a defence even in answer to this'; from which we may infer that the case is more difficult to argue. Gorgias proceeds: 'Speech (logos) is a mighty potentate (dunastes) who accomplishes very wonderful (theiotata) effects with a tiny invisible body; for he is able (dunatai) to cause fear to cease, to take away grief, to impart (energazesthai) joy and to increase pity.' The sentence is very skillful rhetorically. Etymologically speaking, a dunastes is simply 'one who can'; and what Gorgias says logos can (dunatai) do is uncontroversial, and based on empirical observation. But since the 'for' clause is an explanation of dunastes, and follows it, the cautious reader may suppose that Gorgias has justified his use of dunastes in the full sense of 'potentate'; as the reader will certainly have interpreted it, since dunastes never occurs in its etymological sense. To think of logos as a powerful ruler allies the persuasion-argument with Argument 2, and points forward to 'compels' in (12). Again, though theoι in Greek of this date may sometimes be translated 'wonderful' (e.g. theia pragmata, Hdt. 2.66), the associations with the divine cannot be entirely excluded, so that assistance may be sought from Argument 1: if logos can accomplish theiotata, one might infer that logos is itself divine, with consequences already argued in 1. Further, all the verbs which follow dunatai are transitive, but energazesthai goes further, emphasizing the entry of a cause from without: a point which Gorgias will use again, particularly in the argument about love (15 ff.), but also almost at once (9).

There is skillful rhetoric here; but I see no sign of philosophical theory as yet. Indeed, Gorgias concedes as much, and engages to prove 'these things', which I take to be the effects of logos characterized in the previous clause. (To do so will not, of course, justify the strong sense of dunastes.) He produces a series of examples of the effects of logos. He defines poetry as 'logos with meter', and says that a terrified shudder, tearful pity and grieved longing enter (eisellethi) those who hear poetry. (The language is vivid; but I cannot agree that the combination of emotional adjectives with nouns of physical description, or vice versa, commits Gorgias to any particular philosophical or psychological theory. Homer does the same, e.g. ἐποιεύετο τὰς κόκκινοι ἵπποι (Iliad 1.45.) The rest of the sentence, literally translated and in Greek order, runs: 'with respect to the good and ill fortunes of other people's pragmata and bodies/a pathema of its own through the agency of logos/the psuche experiences.' Word-order and syntax are very important here. In (8) Gorgias undertakes to exonerate Helen if logos
persuaded her (or her psyche). The rest of (8) elaborates. Now in (9-11) logos does not stand as the subject of a transitive verb; and when it does so again in (12) Gorgias feels himself able to interpret 'persuaded' as 'compelled.' The word-order and syntax of the sentence translated above are a step on the way. Logoi are the agency of persuasion; but they appear merely in a prepositional phrase. To perceive the logos is essential; but there is no word for perception. 'Other people's pragmata and bodies' is closely paralleled with 'its own pathema', as if the pragmata and bodies directly caused the pathema. The causality of logos is the theme of Gorgias' paragraph; but he is moving cautiously, step by step, to the point where he feels able to assert it; and initially that a pragma should cause a pathema, in the relevant sense of pathema (which I shall discuss in a moment) seems prima facie more likely -- without argument; and none is forthcoming -- than that a logos should. (I shall argue that there is a similar device in (12).)

Rhetorical sleight of hand is most apparent here; but is philosophy also present? Is Gorgias, by using paschein in (7) of physical suffering, here of the psyche, giving 'to this subjective emotion an objective, physical reality?' I have no doubt that Gorgias did not clearly distinguish the material from the non-material; I suspect Plato to have been the first to do so. That being so, the objective physical reality is likely to have been assumed unchallenged. What is more important for Gorgias' case is to represent the events as a causal sequence. For this purpose he employs the range of usage of paschein, pathema. Paschein may mean simply 'happen to,' as when used of the Nile in Hdt. 2.20; and at least in slightly later Greek pathema may mean 'emotion, affection' when used with psyche (Xen. Cyr. 3.1.17) or even of the experience of the psyche in exercising phronesis (Plato Phd. 79d), which is not an emotion and not passive. In the Plato and Xenophon cited, pathema makes no philosophical point; but of course Gorgias chooses paschein and pathema for the passivity implied. But the argument seems to me to be based not on a coherent philosophical position but on a rhetorical transference of paschein from one context to another. I shall argue in favor of my view by pointing out that such transferences are characteristic of the design of the Helen.

Gorgias then (10) turns to another type of logos. Inspired (entheoi) incantations through the medium of logoi induce pleasure, banish pain; for the power (dunamis, cf. dunastes and dunatai) of the incantation consorting with the opinion of the mind (psyche) charms (thelgein) it, persuades (peithein) it and changes (methistanai) it by witchcraft. Once again the presence of deity is alluded to (entheoi, 'with gods in them': cf. Argument 1), and power is set in the foreground. But is the 'for clause a philosophical explanation of what precedes? Surely not, in the sense of an explanation drawing on a coherent theory: 'the dunamis of the incantation consorting...' can really be read only as a metaphor. It explains nothing; but it does make 'power' the subject of the three transitive verbs. This is a stronger expression than pathema...enathen in (9). What Gorgias really offers is a verbal 'slide,' in which one word is replaced by an alleged synonym which in fact has different implications. Thelgein, 'charm,' is the appropriate term with incantations and other magic acts. It has associations of binding with spells against the will: Circe in Odyssey 10 (291, 318, 326) could have thelgein Odysseus with her magic arts and turned him into an animal had he not had a protective herb. Gorgias then writes peithein, implying -- without proof -- that thelgein, when used to instil pleasure and banish pain, is persuasion. He evidently hopes that 'persuasion' will be endowed with all the associations of thelgein, though the examples of thelgein given are solely of imparting pleasure and removing pain. Gorgias needs to show that persuasion not merely can impart emotions willy-nilly, but that the emotions will issue in action willy-nilly; and he has really demonstrated neither, even for thelgein and certainly not for peithein. Gorgias then uses methistanai, 'change.' In a weak sense of 'change' the move is harmless, since presumably all data, if they are to be perceived by the mind, must produce some
changes therein; but Gorgias needs a strong sense of 'change' -- 'producing necessary changes in the psuche which necessarily issue in action.' He has offered no proof that such a sense of 'change' is appropriate; he has merely contrived by skilful use of language to suggest that it is. Once again we have a tricolon, thelgein...peithein...methistanal: a rhetorical device frequently resorted to for emphasis, rhetorical fullness or other stylistic reasons. Its stylistic function might well help to conceal that it is here used also for sleight of hand in the content of the argument.

In (11) Gorgias makes the point that if everyone had knowledge of past, present and future, the effect of logos would not be the same. But as it is, most people in most circumstances have to resort to opinion as counsellor. 'And opinion, which is hazardous and unreliable, involves those who employ it in successes which are hazardous and unreliable.' Is there here allusion to a doctrine, like the Socratic, that no-one goes against knowledge? It seems not. Gorgias is making the common-sense point that if all the facts, including the future, were known, people would act differently; presumably Helen would have acted differently had she known the outcome of the Trojan War. The argument is a digression, and it does not help Gorgias' case. Not all opinions result from persuasion; to 'make a mistake' which is a moral error is not normally regarded as excusable in Greek; and Gorgias offers no reasons for a different evaluation. Furthermore, (11) implies that there are actions which are not the effects of external causes; which reveals other flaws in the alleged comprehensiveness of his defense. I shall return to this point later.9

The opening words of (12), which are hopelessly corrupt, might have contained some attempt to show the relevance of (11); but none of the proposed emendations has this effect, or even uses the term 'opinion.' Gorgias returns to the argument of (10), according to the emendations, at the beginning of (12); and visibly does so in the transmitted text at the end of (12): 'for logos which persuaded her psuche compelled (anankazein) the psuche which it persuaded to agree with (peithesthai) what was said and to acquiesce in what was done. The one who persuaded committed an injustice in using compulsion, whereas the one who was persuaded, inasmuch as she was compelled by logos, is wrongly blamed.' Gorgias now finds himself able to say that logos persuaded the psuche and to slide immediately to 'compelled.' The form of words is more explicit than in (9): Gorgias advances one step at a time. Gorgias' hearers may find it easier to accept that logos compelled Helen's psuche than that logos compelled Helen, since both logos and psuche are 'psychic'; though he has of course justified neither. He now uses the fact that logos is masculine, psuche feminine. He writes ho men omn nelas, 'the one who persuaded,' which might refer either to Paris or to the logos, while he pelthesthai, 'the one who was persuaded,' might refer either to Helen or to her psuche. Since it is not Helen's psuche, but Helen, that is being blamed, the hearer is likely to interpret the second participle as referring to Helen, the first to Paris, with the result that it is suggested that Helen was compelled by Paris using logos as an instrument; a proposition prima facie even less easy to accept than that her psuche was compelled by logos. There is verbal dexterity also in peithesthai. Since it is the passive of peithein, if A peithei B, B peithetal; but the range of usage of peithesthai with the dative spans 'be persuaded, obey, trust in': the word may suggest that logos compelled Helen not merely to be persuaded but to trust in and obey what was said. Once again, I see skilful rhetoric here, but little philosophical theory.

In (13) Gorgias speaks of persuasion added to logos 'moulding (tunousthai) the mind as it wishes': the strongest statement yet, and one totally unproved as yet. He adduces as evidence here the arguments of the cosmologists which can take away one opinion and implant (energazesthai) another; forensic arguments,10 in which one argument delights and persuades a crowd not because its statements are true but because it is composed with skill; and philosophical debates, in which quickness of wit can be seen readily making (poiein) opinion easily changed...
(eumetabolon). I see no philosophical theory here; and the evidence falls far short of proving Gorgias' point. He adduces examples of persuasion: he needs to argue that all instances of persuasion are instances of necessary, compulsory persuasion, that 'you were persuaded by that argument, but you need not have been/ the argument is not persuasive' is nonsense. (cf. Aristotle's remarks in EN 1110 a 29, which are relevant to Arguments 3 and 4 of the Helen.) There is less rhetorical skill here: energazesthai (also in (8)) and poiein do not compare with some earlier rhetorical effects. Possibly, however, the statement that the cosmologists 'cause (poiein) what is incredible and obscure to appear before the eyes of doxa' points forward to the fourth argument. 'The eyes of doxa' is a much more unusual expression in Greek than is 'the mind's eye' in English, and presumably was chosen with some purpose. In the light of the fourth argument Gorgias could have elaborated the phrase into an assertion that speech presents to the mind images over which we have no more control than over the manner in which what we see presents itself to us. There is no more than a hint here, but it may prepare for (15 ff.). As we have seen, Gorgias is advancing step by step.

In (14) an analogy is drawn between the effects of logos and those of pharmakeia, 'drugs.' Different pharmaka drive out different humors from the body: some cure, some kill. Similarly, some logoi cause grief; some joy, some fear, some boldness, while others 'through some harmful persuasion "drug" (pharmakeuein) and bewitch (goeteuein) the mind.' Once again, Gorgias is trying to equate peithein with a causal sequence, for the effect of a drug does not depend on the patient's choice: cure or death follows irrespective of the patient's wish. Is there a philosophical theory here? I see none. Gorgias draws an analogy between the effects of logoi on the psyche and drugs on the body, and in justification simply says 'for drugs have effects a, b, c etc., while logoi have effects k, l, m, etc.' No proof is offered that the effects are produced in any analogous way: this is a mere petitio principii. Any conviction must be produced by rhetoric, by skilled choice of words. Gorgias' word-order in discussing the effects of logos may be intended to help his case. The first two examples, grief and joy, do not suggest specific types of action; the second pair, however, fear and boldness, dispose the mind towards types of action: retreat and advance. (Gorgias has not attempted to prove that the emotions cause the relevant actions. He might have used the arguments of 15 ff.: once again he may be advancing step by step.) He concludes with the example of persuasion (after using pleasure and pain as earlier examples, as in 10), and reintroduces a word from (10), 'bewitched,' where he has already argued for a causal sequence. The use of pharmakeuein together with 'bewitched' is rhetorically skilful. The word takes up pharmaka earlier in (14). Now pharmaka may denote both what we should distinguish as medicinal drugs and magical means of affecting others. Being unaware how either worked, the Greeks did not distinguish clearly at this period between natural and supernatural causation.) Pharmaka in (14), closely associated with 'humors' (chumos), a scientific term,12 predominantly suggests scientific medicine; but pharmakeuein, which has the same range as pharmaka, when brought into association with both goeteuein and the earlier use of pharmaka, readily calls to mind the full range of usage, and binds together the argument of (14) with that of (10), where, Gorgias hopes, a causal sequence has already been conceded. The rhetoric is skilful; of philosophical theory, or of valid philosophical argument, there is none. We may note once again the use of a term (goeteuein) to cross-refer to an earlier part of the speech in order to suggest the existence of an argument: it seems to be a Gorgianic device. Gorgias sums up his third argument by claiming to have proved that if Helen was persuaded by logos, she did not do wrong but was unfortunate (atuchein). She was not the agent but the patient.

Argument 4. The fourth argument, designed to exonerate Helen if it was love that 'did' all this, takes a similar line. (Note the immediate ascription of agency, pratein, to love; Gorgias' confidence is increasing.) What we see does not have the nature we wish it to have, but whatever it chances to have; and through sight
the psyche is moulded (tupousthai again, cf. (13)) in its behavior. For example, if sight perceives a terrifying foe, it is thrown into confusion and confuses (tarattein) the psyche, so that often men flee in terror from a danger which is still distant. The powerful habit induced by custom (nomos) is driven out on account of fear induced by sight, and causes one to forget the kalon of not running away and the agathon (benefit) to be gained from victory. Some people (17) have been driven out of their minds by seeing terrifying sights, 'so powerful are the images of things seen that sight engraves on the mind. And the things which terrify are many of them left behind, and those which are left behind are like things said.'

Gorgias claims a causal sequence: visible object → visual image → emotion in the psyche → action. To excuse Helen, he must make one of two further claims: either (a) that the causal sequence is always necessary and inevitable or (b) that when the resultant action is (apparently) reprehensible the causal sequence is always of this nature. (He must argue a general case under which the case of Helen may be subsumed.) When explicitly stated, (b) is a difficult point to take; and Gorgias does not state it explicitly, though the Helen read in conjunction with the Palamedes might be thought to imply it. (Aristotle was aware of such a doctrine, and attacks it, EN 1110 b 9 ff.) Gorgias proves neither (a) nor (b). He takes extreme cases, whose existence few would deny: there are terrors that only superhuman courage could resist, and one might be driven mad by overpowering fear. The proof is valid (for (a)) if we are prepared to infer that the extreme cases are typical of all acts, or (for (b)) if we are prepared to infer that they are typical of all reprehensible actions. Gorgias wishes the inference to be drawn; but even he can say no more than 'often' 'some people' 'many people.' Gorgias needs to argue both that what we see is not under our control, and that the visual image of what we see produces an emotional effect which is necessary and overpowering, and inevitably -- always or in reprehensible cases -- issues in a specific kind of behavior. 'Through sight the psyche is moulded in its behavior' is in form an open generalisation; but 'often,' 'some people,' etc., conceded that armies do not always run away in time of terror. The language does not suggest a scale of terror above a certain point on which terror causes flight; Gorgias' language suggests merely 'sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.' Nothing in his argument, moreover, entitles him to claim that whenever they do run away, it was causally determined that they could not do otherwise. The point is not proved, but the argument is designed to suggest this conclusion; and the closing lines (from 'so powerful') claim the point, and also liken visual (memory?) images to things said, in their effect on the mind, once again cross-referring, this time to logos and persuasion; and Gorgias claims to have successfully defended Helen on this charge already.

Gorgias next (18) observes that painters delight the sight, while sculptors' works furnish a pleasant sight to the eyes. Many objects produce (energazesthai again, cf. (8) and (13)) in many people a love and longing for many things and bodies. Gorgias presumably discusses the effects of painting and sculpture, and visible objects in general, to emphasize the status of Paris as a physical object in space, Paris as a speaking human being having been discussed already; but painting and sculpture hardly help his case, since an aesthetic response is not characteristically, and certainly not necessarily, accompanied by action. (Perhaps Gorgias is asserting that one always desires to possess any beautiful painting or sculpture that one sees, but it would be difficult to argue that one is inevitably constrained to steal it.) 'If Helen's eye (19), pleased by the body of Paris, handed on an eagerness and a struggle of love to her psyche, what is surprising about that?' This sentence again claims a causal sequence, but without explicitly taking the step of translating emotion into action. Gorgias ends with a series of different points drawn from his earlier arguments. Taking up 'love' from the previous sentence, he says that if love is a god with divine powers, a mere mortal, being weaker, could not resist (Argument 1); whereas if love is a human disease and ignorance in the psyche, one should not blame it as an error but reckon it as misfortune (not ex-
licitly discussed, but possibly hinted at in Argument 3, (11); it came by the
snares of Chance, (Argument 1), not the plans of the mind and by the necessities
of love, not the devices of art. 'Necessities' once again introduces the idea
of compulsion by a stronger.

Is there philosophy here? What is said about sight is evidently compatible
with the view ascribed to Gorgias by Plato (Meno 76 A ff.) that color is an
effluence from objects, fitting the passages of the eyes, since it asserts a flow
from objects into the perceiver; but the argument of (15)ff. rests on observable
human behavior, would be compatible with many theories of perception, and would
be rendered no more valid by any theory that stopped short, as Gorgias' does, of
claiming more than that certain results 'often' follow. There is curious Greek
here: it seems strange to say that 'sight is thrown into confusion and confuses,'
that it 'engraves images in the mind' and that Helen's eye was pleased and then
caused effects in her psuche. There may be a philosophical theory; but it is
worth observing that similar phrases occur in tragedy. Opsi, here translated
'sight,' is a word whose range spans 'sight, appearance, face, eyes.' The connotation
of the word perhaps renders it easier to write that opsis is thrown into con­
fusion, disturbed, by terror. Similarly, Electra says to Orestes that his omma
('eye, face, etc.' ) is thrown into confusion (tarattein), when Orestes' experiences
have driven him mad (Eur. Orest. 253). Hades in Aesch. Eum. 275 is said to watch
over everything ἀνεπίγνωστην, "with a mind that records on tablets." Again,
the Guard in Soph. Ant. 317 asks 'Are you pained in your ears or in your psuche?'
The idea is used somewhat differently; but the distinction drawn between effects
in ears and psuche is comprehensible in the absence of any philosophical theory.13
(The date of Antigone makes it impossible to suppose the line affected by Gorgias'­
famous visit to Athens.) There might be a philosophical theory here nonetheless;
after all, metaphor is sometimes a source for philosophical theory, and I shall argue
below that there are precedents for some of Gorgias' causal expressions in earlier
Greek. It remains true, however, that the theory does not materially assist the
argument, which rests shakily on empirical observation -- extrapolated -- and
rhetorical sleight of hand.

It is worth noting that Gorgias' four arguments do not exclude all possibility
of condemning Helen. In 11 the possibility of moral error arising out of mistake
about one's best interests was mentioned, though not very clearly; and now in 19
we have mention of 'the plans of intellect' and 'the devices of art' as possible
sources of action which are not relevant to Helen's case. (Gorgias does not ex­
plain why they are not relevant; and this is of course a serious flaw in his argu­
ment.)

If my analysis is correct, Gorgias is throughout manipulating language with
great rhetorical skill to prove a case ad hoc. He is not setting out a philosophi­
cal theory held on other grounds, and drawing from it conclusions which serve to
acquit Helen. (Nor is he indulging in rhetorical flourishes for their own sake; language is manipulated in a very purposeful manner.) Gorgias' concern is to acquit
Helen, and he draws on all his resources of ingenuity to construct a case for so
doing. In (8) ff. and (15) ff. he begins from empirical observation, drawing from it
conclusions which go far beyond what is justified, but demand no coherent theory,
and invoke none. The motive power of the arguments is verbal dexterity sustained
over the whole work: I have noted the manner in which Gorgias uses words and phrases
to allude and cross-refer from one argument to another in order to support one point
-- not by argument, but by verbal association -- with a point he claims to have
proved, or is going to 'prove' later. (Note how he carefully sets the two less
controversial defences first, and reverses the order (20) when all are 'proved,' so that the more difficult proofs may be thrust into the foreground.) The argu­
ments of the Helen can be understood without reference to a philosophical theory.
That they would be valid only if a particular type of philosophical theory were
held does not prove that Gorgias held such a theory. The structure and method of
the Helen point in the opposite direction; and the kind of theory needed would have further consequences which, I shall argue, Gorgias seems not to have accepted.

(Another philosophical explanation of the structure and method of the Gorgias represents it as a consequence of Gorgias' doctrine (B3) 'Nothing exists: if it existed it could not be known: and if known it could not be communicated.' Knowledge is assured in the Helen, it is argued, because Gorgias takes all the possible reasons why Helen might have gone to Troy, and proves her innocence in each case. The method employed, the logic, guarantee certainty. But Gorgias, as we have seen, acknowledges (11, 19) that he has not exhausted all the possibilities in his four arguments; and the reasons I have offered for supposing that Gorgias is not drawing on a philosophy of any kind apply to this theory also.)

I now turn briefly to the Palamedes, to discuss the compatibility of the presuppositions of Gorgias 11 and 11a. In the latter, Odysseus has accused Palamedes of treachery; and Palamedes argues that he has committed no treasonable act (5): 'for I could not have done it even had I wanted to; and I should not have wanted to even if I could have done it.' He works out this contention in detail. In (6)ff. he adduces evidence of impossibility on practical grounds. In (13) ff. he argues that he could have had no adequate motive: he could not have hoped for absolute rule over either the Greeks or the Trojans (13, 14); mere possessions would not have attracted him (15); and honor is not to be gained by treachery, so that even a moderately phronimos person would not attempt treachery for honor's sake (17 ff.). Palamedes turns to Odysseus and says that Odysseus is relying on mere opinion (doxa), whereas he, Palamedes, has knowledge of his own innocence (24). He accuses Odysseus of inconsistency in imputing to him at one and the same time cleverness (sophia) and madness (mania): for the details of what Palamedes is alleged to have done would require sophia, whereas the attempt as a whole is a clear indication of mania.

The situations of Palamedes and of Helen are quite different. Pace Stesichorus and Euripides, that Helen went to Troy is undeniable, and it is this fact that requires excuse; whereas Palamedes is denying that he has done anything wrong. The arguments supplied to him are arguments ek tou eikotos, a form of reasoning apparently invented by Gorgias' Sicilian predecessors Corax and Teisias (Plato, Phaedrus 273 A-C, Aristotle Rhetoric II.24.11.) Eikos spans the probable and the reasonable. It is here better rendered 'on the basis of what is reasonable,' since Palamedes' arguments, where they do not rest upon a claim that a course of action is impossible to carry out (6 - 12), rest upon an estimate of what a reasonable person might be expected to do in the circumstances described. Palamedes claims to be a reasonable person of moderate desires (15). He does not claim that all are such, but contrasts himself with 'those who are slaves of pleasure....' He offers evidence of his past life as guarantee that he is speaking the truth.

The emphases of the Palamedes differ from those of the Helen. We have seen that the Helen does not equate all action, even all reprehensible action, with action externally caused: something is left for 'the plans of intellect,' 'the devices of art,' and mistakes about one's own best interests. (I shall have more to say on this topic later, p. 11.) But in the Helen externally caused action is in the foreground; in the Palamedes the reasonable person occupies that position. Indeed, one may go further: 'Palamedes' offering of character evidence (15) conflicts with the use which Gorgias seems to wish to make of the argument in Helen (16). Granted, even well-trained armies of brave men do sometimes run away under extreme conditions; and there is no conflict with character evidence offered by Palamedes in very different circumstances. But Gorgias' argument, which emphasizes the loss of 'the powerful habit induced by custom,' and attempts to extrapolate from extreme cases to all cases, would, if taken seriously, render it impossible to offer any character evidence at all. It would never be possible to forecast how anyone is likely to act on the basis of previous behavior, since what is presented to the mind (15) -- and the effects are similar to those of what is said (17) -- has whatever nature it chances to have, and the effects follow, whatever they may be, with the reason of the reason-
able person playing no role whatever. On the basis of the arguments of the Helen one could draw from the fact that the army did not run away on a particular occasion the conclusion that the visual (or in different circumstances, verbal or aural generally) stimulus was insufficient to cause flight, and one might add 'to an army of persons so disciplined and with such a character;' but one could only argue thus after the event, for one could not forecast the effects of a visual/aural presentation which in all its individual details could never have occurred before. Accordingly, the arguments of Helen (16) would render it impossible for Palamedes to argue, as he does, 'because I have such and such a character, I did not behave in such and such a manner.' If the arguments of the Helen are pressed as Gorgias needs to press them to achieve the goal of his reasoning in that speech, the position of the Helen is seen to be incompatible with that of the Palamedes.

We may be tempted to conclude that such discrepancies are a mark of the paignion, interpreted as a work lacking in seriousness: Gorgias, we may suppose, simply makes whatever assumptions he needs for the argument in hand. The meaning of paignion has been much discussed: it has been compared with lusus in Catullus and paignia in Philetas, to indicate that works so termed may have been seriously and carefully composed. There is of course a difference between poetry and philosophical argument: one might work long and seriously at a poem on a frivolous topic and produce an excellent poem; but serious work on the production of clever but invalid arguments will be differently evaluated. Gorgias' seriousness about his skill as a rhetorician cannot be doubted; but, as indeed continuing scholarly debate on the subject would suggest, I doubt whether it can be conclusively demonstrated whether or not Gorgias believed his arguments in the Helen to be valid. He may have done so, for these are the early days of logic and philosophy; or if he knew that there was something wrong with the arguments, he may not have known what it was. He is certainly not the only Presocratic to argue for extreme conclusions. What can be demonstrated, however, is that similar discrepancies occur in different kinds of work in which there is no question of deliberate rhetorical trickery; and to this I now turn my attention.

For even if the Helen and Palamedes are rhetorical and contain discrepancies, it does not necessarily follow that their being rhetorical is a sufficient explanation for the discrepancies. A rhetorician cannot take any presuppositions he chooses: they must appear plausible to those whom he is trying to convince. Now though his arguments about logos and visual data may be novel, Gorgias was not the first Greek to trace action back to causes outside the agent. Action is frequently so characterized in Homer; and similar language appears in fifth-century writers. In a famous and much-discussed passage, Iliad 19.85 ff., Agamemnon, having discovered the disastrous effects of offending Achilles, says: 'Often indeed did the Greeks tell me this, and abused me. But I am not aitios of this. No; Zeus and moira and the Fury who walks in darkness are the cause; for they put fierce blindness, ἀτε, into my mind in the assembly when I myself deprived Achilles of his prize. But what could I do? The god brings all things to pass.' Again, one may yield to one's thumos; in Iliad 9.109 Agamemnon's behavior in slighting Achilles is thus explained. Here -- and numerous examples could be cited -- we have ascriptions of cause very similar to those of Gorgias' Helen; and Agamemnon even says that he is not aitios. If Gorgias' Helen can be so characterized, she is freed from blame (6). Occasionally, similar moves are made in Homer. In Iliad 3.164 f., Priam excuses Helen from responsibility for the war, saying 'You are not aitios; in my eyes the gods are aitioi, who have stirred up against me the woeful war with the Greeks.' But this attitude to divine causation is unusual, in Homer and later. Indeed, Zeus' complaint, Odyssey 1.32 ff. (which is not really required by the situation in the poem at this point), that the accusations men bring against the gods are unjustified since mankind bring woes upon themselves ἀπ' ὑπέρ moron, seems designed as a rejection of the kind of view expressed by Priam; and set where it is at the beginning of the first book, it is given great prominence and seems programmatic. In Iliad 19, Agamemnon does not expect to be excused for what he has done: he offers recompense to Achilles, and
indeed follows his statement that three deities were aitioi with 'I myself (autos) deprived Achilles...'. Autos is very emphatic, and expresses Agamemnon's agency very strongly.

In the fifth century it remains unusual to excuse behavior on the grounds that it was caused by deity. There are two recorded instances of Delphi excusing human agents for actions which, the oracle reveals, the gods have caused themselves (the priestess Timo and Evenius, Hdt. 6.135 and 9.93); but the conclusion that, if a god caused the action, the human being is not responsible for it, is not usually drawn. Aeschylus in Agam. 1468 ff. displays a sensitivity to problems of divine causation and human responsibility which is not apparent in his earlier plays. In the Agamemnon the chorus speaks of the daimon that has fallen on the accursed house. The form of expression is common enough; but Clytemnestra unusually tries to employ it to disclaim responsibility. Later the chorus speaks of Agamemnon as 'smitten...by a two-edged weapon wielded by the hand of a wife.' Clytemnestra realises that such language ascribes responsibility to her as agent. She denies responsibility, claiming that the Alastor, the avenging spirit of the accursed house, took her shape and killed Agamemnon. The chorus rejects the defence: 'Who will bear witness that you are anaitios of this murder? Yet the avenging spirit sprung from a father's crime might be a sharer in the deed.'

Even in the extreme case of the accursed house of Greek tragedy, the accursed may not appeal to the language of divine causation in order to plead that they are not to be held responsible for their actions. The Alastor may be a contributory cause; but, to quote what I have written elsewhere, 'while some may be predisposed to do evil by supernatural agency, none are so predestined.' Clytemnestra had a choice.

The gods caused Agamemnon to slight Achilles by sending ate upon him (Iliad 9.115 f., 19.136 f., etc.); and ate is frequently cited in later Greek as influencing action for the worse. Usually, the ascription to ate furnishes no excuse; and Dodds seems to be correct in supposing that it serves primarily to distance the agent psychologically from the act.20 Agamemnon feels that had not 'something' prevented it, he would have acted sensibly, with a proper calculation of advantages. Clytemnestra, in a psychological revulsion from what she has done -- for the scene is psychologically sound; it is not merely a philosophical debate -- feels that she would not 'herself' have done what has been done.

In earlier Greek, accordingly, it was not uncommon to ascribe the source of actions, particularly -- but not solely -- actions whose consequences had been, or might be, disastrous, to causes outside the agent, or external to the agent's ego, usually identified with the practical intelligence. That the agent would otherwise have behaved 'sensibly' is a tacit assumption of this belief: there is no implied general determinism of action. Now Gorgias' Palamedes is denying that he has done anything wrong; he claims to have acted with the prudence and common sense that would ensure that he would not commit treachery in the circumstances. Helen has performed, or been involved in, an important action with disastrous consequences; and Gorgias has furnished her with a choice of chains of causation beginning outside the agent. In this respect the difference between the analysis of Helen's situation and that of Palamedes is traditional.

I have noted that even in the Helen it is conceded -- or seems to be conceded; but see below -- that not all actions are externally caused, that there is no assertion of a universal determinism of action; and this too is traditional. Gorgias departs from the mainstream of Greek tradition partly by the rhetorical ingenuity with which he argues for and elaborates his causal chains, but more importantly by his insistence that the causal chains furnish grounds for exonerating Helen from blame. It is at this point that the contradictions between the Helen and the Palamedes become apparent. So long as the causal explanation furnished psychological relief, but not an excuse, it was not important to determine criteria for the class of actions to which the causal explanation was relevant: as we have seen,
Agamemnon in the Iliad can cite three deities as external causes, and say emphatically that he himself did the deed, all within the space of a few lines. In these circumstances it is comparatively unimportant whether or not the causal explanation is invoked in any particular case. Gorgias, however, in the Helen has furnished causal explanations which are intended to excuse, and which could be applied, so far as I can see, to any misdeed whatever. Gorgias may allude to miscalculations of interest, to the plans of intellect and the devices of art; but one can always say of any action 'I did this because...'; and if the agent wished to obtain or avoid something (as presumably he did) then at least Argument 4 will be available to excuse him. Furthermore, good actions have motives too: Argument 4 could furnish a causal explanation for all actions which do not fall under Arguments 1, 2 or 3. A universal determinism of action could easily be generated from what is said in the Helen; and such a determinism is not consistent with the Palamedes.

Gorgias may have failed to realise all the implications of his arguments in the Helen: he is arguing a case for one important action of one important person, and does not overtly generalise his findings. He does not say explicitly -- and it would have been shocking to Greek sentiment -- that armies which run away are not to be held responsible for their actions. Further, since Paris was presumably under the influence of eros in his behavior towards Helen he should, under the terms of Argument 4, be absolved from blame; but Gorgias does not wish to draw this conclusion (7, 12).

I conclude that Gorgias' Helen and Palamedes owe much more to rhetoric than to philosophy, but also that each draws on certain assumptions about behavior and causation which date back at least as far as Homer. Gorgias was not taking up different positions in different speeches with conscious sophistry, but in each case elaborating positions which would have been familiar to the Greeks of his day.

Nor is it impossible for an acknowledged philosopher to hold that wrongdoing is involuntary, right-doing voluntary. Aristotle argues against the position (EN 1110b9 ff.), defining action done under compulsion as action whose first cause lies outside the agent (εἴτε ἡ ἀστήρας ἢ ἡ ἐνέπεφτη ἡ ἀκατάστασις). The definition seems unexceptionable; but Aristotle is aware that it might be argued that actions performed to obtain what is pleasant or kalon are involuntary, since these objects are outside the agent and exert force to compel him (anankazein, cf. Helen (17) with cross-reference to (12)). Aristotle replies that such a theory renders all action involuntary, since the desire for what is pleasant or kalon actuates all men in all their actions; and no-one, Aristotle is confident, would accept any theory which had such consequences. (Gorgias, as I said above, seems not to have realised all the possible consequences of his arguments in the Helen; and I see no reason to suppose that he would have welcomed them.) Aristotle adds a further point: actions done in pursuit of the pleasant or kalon are pleasant, and so cannot be done under compulsion; and be observes that it would be absurd to take the credit for noble actions performed in pursuit of the kalon or pleasant while disclaiming responsibility for bad actions performed for the same motives. Aristotle's own view is that actions done under compulsion are not simply those whose first cause lies outside the agent; the person compelled must have contributed nothing at all; and he holds that being persuaded, or moved to action by desire for the kalon or pleasant, are elements of action over which the agent exercises some control. Argument 2 of the Helen (force majeure) remains valid, as possibly does Argument 1 in some circumstances; but the practical wisdom of the Palamedes is restored to Arguments 3 and 4 of the Helen, thereby breaking the chain of causation.

A little later (EN 1111 a 24 ff.) Aristotle considers the internal, non-rational springs of action: thumos and epithumia. If actions performed under their constraint are involuntary, then no child or animal will ever act voluntarily. Once again, Aristotle is confident that no one would accept a theory with such consequences. He then points out that both good and bad actions may be prompted by thumos or epithumia; and it would be absurd to claim credit for good actions, but excuse oneself for bad
ones, when the ascribed cause of each group of actions is the same. He concludes (EN 1111 b 1 ff.): 'It seems that the irrational passions are not less human than reason is. Accordingly, actions which result from thumos or epithumia are the man's actions too.... It is absurd, then, to suppose that these are involuntary.'

The arguments, particularly those of 1110 b 9 ff., could have Gorgias for their target: they are especially relevant to Argument 4. However, Gorgias cannot be the sole target. More prominent thinkers than he had held that no-one is voluntarily kakos without also maintaining that no-one is voluntarily agathos, notably Socrates and Plato. The Socratic position could be regarded as a more enlightened version of Helen (11): if we were not ignorant of our best interests in the full sense of the phrase, we should act differently. My concern here is not to discuss the Socratic position as such, merely to show that discrepancies of the kind found in Gorgias 11 and 11a are not confined to rhetors and sophists; and for that purpose a brief discussion of the rather different account of 'no-one is voluntarily kakos' which appears in the Timaeus will be suitable. Timaeus treats the basic stuff of the cosmos as being triangles, a shape from which may be constructed every plane figure and thence every solid. Earth, air, fire and water differ because they are constituted of different geometric shapes. God made human marrow from primary triangles of the highest quality, and bound human psuche into it. He divided the marrow between the head and the spinal column, the head receiving the divine seed of reason, the other parts of the psuche being bound into the spinal column. A psuche so bound to its body may be affected by it, and some of Timaeus' words (e.g. 86 B) would suggest that psuche is under the control of body. There exist diseases of the psuche which result from the condition of the body. Madness in the familiar sense of the term is included; and this is uncontroversially involuntary. But the greatest diseases of the psuche are pleasures and pains in excess. The abundant flow of one substance, resulting from the open texture of the bones, is the cause of sexual excess; while bad temper, rashness, cowardice, forgetfulness and stupidity -- all 'diseases' of the psuche -- are ascribed to the presence of acid and salty phlegms and bitter and biliary humors, which wander through the body (86 E) and 'find no exit but are pent within the body and blend their vapor with the movement of the psuche and cause all manner of diseases to the psuche.' It is wrong, says Timaeus, to reproach anyone in any of these conditions as if he were voluntarily bad: no-one is voluntarily kakos (86 D-E). The kakos is so as a result of the unskilled nurture of his body, and the condition is universally detested by its possessors, and occurs against their will.

Nowhere else in Plato do we find an explanation of human behavior in such mechanistic terms. One might expect to find an explanation of arete in similar terms, for the psuche seems entangled in a nexus of causes over which it has no control. But consider the following (87 B): 'Furthermore, when men are in such an evil condition (kakos), and the political constitutions are kakai and speech in the cities, both in private and in public, is kakos, and when lessons which would cure these conditions are nowhere learnt from childhood, as a result of this those of us who are kakoi become kakoi on account of two altogether involuntary causes. We must always regard the parents as responsible for the situation rather than the children and the nurses rather than those in their care; yet each of us must endeavor, so far as in him lies, to flee kakia and pursue the opposite by means of his motive, practices and studies.'

The Timaeus is a work of philosophy, not composed by a sophist or a rhetor. The speech of Timaeus is presumably to be taken seriously, even if the account is only 'probable' (44D, etc.). Yet the speaker does not consider the possibility -- indeed, the necessity, in terms of the account of kakia given above -- that the bad parents and nurses are involuntarily bad, but is prepared to find fault with them; just as Gorgias does not consider that his causal explanations for Helen's behavior, particularly in Argument 4, could be used to excuse Paris too. Again, despite the far-reaching explanation of temperaments and behavior in mechanistic terms, Plato adjures adults to flee kakia by their own endeavors. It may be argued that this position need not be self-contradictory; but it requires more defense than it receives in the
Timaeus. There is no close analogy with curing one's own physical ailments, for any cause, such as apathy, which prevents one from fleeing kakia must surely be itself a disease of the psyche. Again, the only sense of 'involuntary' which would exculpate is 'completely involuntary,' the result of a cause or nexus of causes over which one has no control.

One might expect to find in the Timaeus an explanation of arete too in mechanistic terms; but none is offered. It is assumed that once kakia is by some means removed, one is agathos of one's own free will. The analogy with physical health and illness may -- not altogether logically -- help Plato here. No-one would ask whether another person was voluntarily or involuntarily healthy, for health is a desirable. Yet whether one has a healthy or a sickly constitution may well be determined at birth, and be out of one's control: it is not easy to see why the same may not be true of the psyche. Again, illness characteristically restricts action, whereas health does not; but the question whether the actions of a healthy psyche or body are free or determined must present itself to a modern thinker. Plato, however, like Gorgias and indeed like all Greeks, philosophers or not, prior to the Epicureans and Stoics,25 does not find it necessary to discuss the problem of free will which arises from a universal determinism, however clearly the Timaeus seems to pose the problem.

The lesson which I wish to draw from the Timaeus is that in Greece at this time not only rhetors and sophists held not completely consistent positions on the kind of topics discussed in the Helen and Palamedes; and one might add that the account of 'no-one is voluntarily kakos' differs from that given elsewhere in Plato. It follows that if Gorgias' account of truth and knowledge reported by Sextus Empiricus (Gorgias B 3) does not harmonize with the view of truth, knowledge and communicability expressed in or implied by the Helen, Palamedes, or any other Gorgianic work, if the view of human action in the Helen fails to agree with that in the Palamedes, or if Gorgias overlooks some of the implications of the position he is holding, these features of his work need not be imputed to the fact that Gorgias is a sophistical rhetorician. Gorgias is a sophistical rhetorician, and his arguments in the Helen depend on rhetoric and linguistic slight-of-hand; but if the work of a Plato can display inconsistencies or discrepancies when discussing matters of this kind it follows that the inconsistencies and discrepancies -- as opposed to the rhetorical arguments -- in Gorgias too may not be the mark of a sophistical rhetorician but characteristic of thinkers of the period.

I conclude with some general reflections. I have argued that some of the content of Gorgias' Helen, and its discrepancies with the Palamedes, result from presuppositions about human behavior shared with many earlier Greeks; and that some of it is rhetorical, and takes the form it does because of Gorgias' need to argue a case. (Very few, if any, of the words in the arguments of the Helen and Palamedes are there merely to furnish rhetorical flourishes: the rhetorical figures and the language in general subserve the interests of the argument.) Finally, some of the discrepancies in the account of human behavior can be paralleled not merely in non-philosophical presuppositions but also in Plato.

If the arguments are accepted, they suggest the need for a very careful analysis of Presocratic philosophy; for if some of the presuppositions of Gorgias are shared both by non-philosophical Greeks and by Plato, similar phenomena might appear in any Presocratic: we cannot suppose other Presocratics to be necessarily more immune to influence from the presuppositions of their culture than was Gorgias, nor more coherent in their arguments than was Plato. And here, surely, we encounter a serious difficulty. I elected to discuss Gorgias because his fragments are quite long. The fragments of most Presocratics are much shorter. Doctrines have to be reconstructed; presuppositions are rarely apparent. In our endeavors to reconstruct doctrines we inevitably argue on the assumption that the doctrines are coherent and the presuppositions fully ascertainable: 'but he couldn't have held doctrine X together with doctrine Y, for they are not logically consistent; so this report of his views is wrong, and he must have held doctrine Z instead.' For many years I have been uneasy about this type of argument; and in this paper I have tried to set out my reasons. I hope that some other student of the Presocratics may be able to reassure me.

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NOTES

(1) I assume that both are genuine Gorgianic works. See e.g. the discussions cited by Diels-Kranz ad loc.

(2) I use 'rhetoric' to denote not merely text-book devices (e.g. the 'Gorgianic figures'), but also the skilful use of words whether merely to give pleasure (or cause amazement) or to suggest the presence of valid argument where none exists. For a discussion of Gorgias' style, see e.g. G. Kennedy, The Art of Persuasion in Ancient Greece, Princeton 1963, 62 ff. 156 ff. and 168 ff.

(3) Pp. 7, 8.

(4) Pp. 9 ff.

(5) Force majeure can be pleaded as a defence (by a non-warrior) already in Homer, Odyssey 22.351. For divine compulsion and influence, see below p. 9.

(6) As C. P. Segal argues in 'Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos,' HSCP 66 (1962), 99-155, and especially 106. It seems to me that in his very valuable and illuminating paper Segal is in fact demonstrating what would have to be the case in order to validate Gorgias' arguments, and claiming that Gorgias held the appropriate tenets. I argue that the structure of the Helen indicates that Gorgias is not deriving his defence of Helen from a theory of action held on other grounds, but ingeniously trying to convince his hearers ad hoc that empirical observation and ordinary language justify his startling conclusions.

(7) 'Pràmàta and bodies' appears in a prepositional phrase too; but allotrión with pràmaton, idion with pàthema, point the parallelism (and contrast) of thought.

(8) Segal (n. 6) p. 105.

(9) Pp. 7, 8.

(10) This seems to me to be the most likely rendering of 'tous anankàious...agonas.'

(11) For example Hdt. 3.85, Plato Rep. 406d.


(13) It seems apparent from the context in the Antígona that Sophocles expected the distinction to be immediately comprehensible.


(16) To go no further, neither Heraclitus nor Pamenides seems to have been worried by the prima facie implausibility of their conclusions.


(18) There is usually a common-sense contrast between results and events, for which the gods may be believed to be responsible, and the actions of the agent; see e.g. Iliad 9.254 ff. and Sophocles, Philoct. 1316 ff.

(19) The oracles given on behalf of Tho and Evenlus antedate the Oresteia (produced 458 B.C.) and may be symptomatic of a new belief from which Æschylus is dissenting.


(21) At least in those circumstances in which the gods were believed to have interfered in human affairs in actual presence, in the manner of very powerful human agents.

(22) Plato maintains even in the Laws (861 d 2 ff.) that no-one is voluntarily kakós, long after his psychological analyses of action would have enabled him to offer a less misleading analysis.

(23) It is interesting to compare Gorgias' account of the constraint of external impressions with the Stoic account. The Stoics, while agreeing that we have no control over the nature of the external impressions which reach us, argue for human freedom on the grounds that the human agent is free to take what attitude he will to those impressions.