Discovering Nothing to Create Anything: Gorgias's *On the Nonexistant* and the World-Building Power of *Logos*

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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by tracing instances throughout history wherein the fields of rhetoric and philosophy have quarreled, focusing primarily on how they define their own studies as well as language and its connection to, or lack of, an objective reality. With a close examination of the theoretical framework and definition for *logos* as presented in Gorgias's *On the Nonexistent* or *On Nature*, it is possible to flesh out a better understanding of the connections between any medium of communication and the process of creating and conveying both perceptual and virtual realities. Gorgias, in the context of this paper, refers to the sophist and rhetorician, 483 to 375 BC, and is not to be confused with the character in Plato's Gorgias meant to discount sophistry. In my argument, backed by game studies scholars such as Ian Bogost and James J. Brown Jr., the rhetorical impact of video games as it is relayed through the authorship of code can serve as an alternative medium that parallels rhetorical impact of speech through the authorship of *logos*. Viewing video games as examples of virtually constructed worlds within an outer world can also help demonstrate how Platonic suggestions that *logos* has any direct connection to objective substantiality are inherently flawed. This dismissal of the primacy of *logos* as truth-revealing suggests that rhetoric is an inherent part of all forms of composition and, thus, communication necessarily precedes the ability to convey any philosophical ideas. Looking through the interpretive act for both the communicator and the audience, *logos* can be seen as its own kind of substance with a power far superior to mere persuasion or influence.

The significance of rhetorical input for all communication is amplified, not by the formalistic guidebooks from the likes of Cicero and Aristotle, but rather through Gorgias's profound conclusions regarding *logos*, its limitations, and the resulting profundity of rhetorical choices. Gorgias's *On the Nonexistent*, despite its placement in time, provides an excellent overview of one of the fundamental disagreements between the studies of philosophy and rhetoric—that of the link between *logos* and the dissemination of truth. Ironically, some of the more modern focal points of philosophical scholarship return to the very arguments in *On the Nonexistent*, making Gorgias's seemingly deranged, yet honestly simple stance more sensible. With a close examination of this piece, it is possible to flesh out a better understanding of the connections between speech and the process of creating and conveying both perceptual and virtual realities. There is, however, the long-standing war between style and substance that has held the exploration of this relationship at bay. Although it is understandable to condemn convincing others from ignorance or for selfish gains, the issue here lies with the assumption that truth is simultaneously something that exists outside of the self, can be directly ascertained, and shared with others through an idealized, sterile dialectic method. This concept remained central for much of philosophy's recorded history.

As part of the canonical Ancient Greek texts, Plato's *Phaedrus* is one of the better-known dialogues that bashes sophistry as a misguided, deceitful act akin to selling snake-oil. Socrates gives an absolutely absurd number of speeches, all of which employ metaphorical, flowery language, and convinces young Phaedrus of the importance of using *logos* to reveal truths rather than persuade others with falsehoods. He asks Phaedrus if one must know the truth of what is being discussed prior to speaking (Plato 46). The dire consequences of persuasion without knowledge, based on opinions of the intended audience, or with a focus on probability over actuality are exaggerated. This adds emphasis to what is at stake if we separate speech from adherence to Socrates's theory of what constitutes the good and the true. Much of the argumentation in *Phaedrus* is devoted to analogies that cast the worst light on orators and their craft while upholding dialectic as the quintessential method to gain wisdom.

Despite a rich history of figures attempting to rescue rhetoric from complete dismissal, Peter Ramus, almost two thousand years later in the sixteenth century, reinforces the belittling of sophistry found in Plato's *Phaedrus*. Though he gave some credit to the importance of eloquence, he also reattributed most rhetorical acts to dialectic, leaving only style and delivery for the orator (Bizzell and Herzberg 676).

With his treatment of rhetoric as closer to jewelry for one's language than to the art of speech-making, Ramus set back the study itself for quite some time. Even in 2007, Donald Phillip Verene begins his article, "Philosophical Rhetoric," with a confession to having bought into this animosity. He admits that until Henry Johnstone "introduced [him] to the importance of rhetoric... [He] had the usual prejudice of philosophers" and even cites the harsh criticism and derision of rhetoricians from Descartes, Locke, and Kant (Verene 27). This anti-rhetoric sentiment in philosophical academia is so deep-rooted that it requires him to address it prior to suggesting the mere possibility of blending the two fields.

Early texts from Gorgias examined issues of experience and phenomena far before these were considered pillars of focus within popular philosophical schools of thought—though the pre-Socratics have plenty of examples prior to the domination of dialectic. Due to more recent conceptualizations of these, it may be tempting, while reading Gorgias's *On the Nonexistent*, to fall down the rabbit hole of metaphysical dualism. By this, I am referring to a notion that there is both an internal and external world, separated by a veil of perception. The veil, in this case, introduces a very tricky issue concerning our ability to peek behind it and ever confirm or deny anyone's sense data or experience. Conceptually, this is then spun out into the crux of epistemological quandaries concerning how we can justify knowledge and what can be proven (Poston). Thus, arguments arise between different kinds of philosophical realism, or the view that things exist outside of our perception of them, and idealism or phenomenalism, wherein the former insists that only our perceptions exist and the latter that unperceived objects can exist because of the "continued *possibility* of experience" (O'Brien).

One can see how messy this becomes once we start considering the questionable nature of "accounting for phenomenological features of perception," or the individual nature of each of our experiences (O'Brien). What is more befuddling is the contemplation of philosophies of the mind, Cartesian hangovers, intentionalism, cognitive externalism, disjunctivism, and an incredibly long list of other "isms" to contend with. The initial reference to a rabbit hole is quite apt when staring at the interconnected jumble of ideals presented here. Keep in mind that Plato's focus on Truth insists that "there is a realm of necessarily existing abstract objects comprising a framework of reality beyond the material world" (Carder). The idea that we could ever access such a meta-reality, given all the nebulous-yet-dense content concerning only the veil and its implications, is improbable—even if it does exist. Let us now return to Gorgias and, as I originally suggested, sidestep these discussions with one of

my favorite stances to take: that of a pragmatic avoidance of absolute certainty and acknowledgment that the answers, to me, are moot. Gorgias does not make hard-and-fast truth claims about the existent or non-existent, and I do not intend to, either.

Instead, Gorgias is playing with *logos* to prove its necessary disconnect from objectivity or Truth. If this is so, then philosophers' insistence that we must use *logos* to uncover said Truth is in vain, and the "stylistic" uses for *logos* are far more crucial than originally assumed. Gorgias lays out his argument by creating a set of syllogisms, in a way beating philosophers at their own game, to set forth a three-part, rather snarky, treatise: "first and foremost, that nothing exists; second, that even if it exists it is inapprehensible to man; third, that even if it is apprehensible, still it is without a doubt incapable of being expressed or explained to the next man" (Gorgias 43). In the first and most extensive argument, Gorgias explores the seemingly basic premise that "if <anything> exists, either the existent exists or the nonexistent or both the existent exists and the nonexistent" (43). Based upon their definitions and the inclusion of *being* as part of their referents (i.e., the nonexistent referring to all that *is not* and the existent referring to all that *is*), Gorgias points out the constant contradictions that unfold.

For if the nonexistent exists, or *is*, then this would mean that all that *is not* is part of all that *is*, thus rendering both nonsensical and proving, through syllogistic opposition, that the existent does not exist. This is preposterous because that "is not, in fact, true," as we would be collapsing both categories into one and proving that everything does not exist in any sense (Gorgias 43). He makes further arguments based upon other interconnected pairs, each with mutually exclusive words, such as: generated or eternal, contained or unlimited, and one or many (43-4). It follows, in applying each word's meaning to *all that is*, that the existent cannot exist if it has the qualities of any of these terms as each would unravel how we define *all that is*. Gorgias spends half of this treatise using wordplay to make perceptually false, yet logically valid deductions, and ultimately contends that "if neither the existent exists nor the nonexistent nor both, and if no additional possibility is conceivable, nothing exists" (45). Gorgias uses referents and their necessary traits to flesh out how certainty through logical syllogism cannot be based upon words, which often have amorphous, situational meanings.

If this seems chaotic, that is because it purposefully is. This becomes clearer with his second argument: "if anything exists, it is unknowable and incomprehensible to man" (Gorgias 45). Note that Gorgias is beginning with the assumption that the conclusion to his previous argument is obviously flawed, which was cleanly and

completely gleaned through one of philosophy's favorite methods—that of syllogistic argument. He is not sticking to the assertion that nothing can exist. Instead, he immediately concedes that something obviously exists, and in doing so, he exemplifies the break between logical soundness and validity. To clarify, validity concerns true/false judgments that are entirely based on the rules of formal logic. An argument is considered sound, however, "if it is both valid, and all of its premises are *actually true*" (Anonymous, IEP). Although Gorgias's arguments are valid, the conclusion is clearly false, and the preferred means for possibly testing their soundness were the very ones that led to a paradoxical conclusion. The only other means of verification is through escaping the veil. In his second argumentative portion, he considers the underlying differences between external content and our internal perception, thoughts, and sensations that make objective thought impossible.

Looking back to Verene's "Philosophical Rhetoric," we can see this same flaw of logical argumentation crop up as the focal point of the piece. The fundamental division between validity and verifiable soundness serves as the set-up towards an exploration of philosophy's inability to resolve disagreements, as Johnstone put it, "when...formally valid arguments can be produced by both sides" (Verene 28). Herein lies that very paradox presented through an ancient Gorgias, echoing in this twenty-first-century text; "in philosophical dispute...the nature of the thing appealed to is itself" (28). Johnstone posits using rhetoric as a necessary complement to a Hegelian dialectic, which is based on "opposites in the life of the self or spirit" (31). Logical argumentation "is the means to conduct the critical evaluation of ideas," yet this stance conveniently ignores the initial process of composing sound propositions (31). Verene turns to Ernesto Grassi to approach this new problem that "logic cannot provide its own starting points" (32).

As he explores the process of creating ideas, Verene follows Grassi's notion that rhetorical speech-acts are crucial to formulating concepts, then looks to Cassier's point that the synthesis and becoming of the self are also necessarily connected to this. In arriving at self-creation being inherently tied to narrative structure, Verene embarks on his own quest to convince readers that all great philosophical works "are likely stories, which originate in the philosopher's own autobiography and are attempts to move from this...to formulate the narrative of human existence in the world and to speak of things human and divine" (34). This storytelling is obviously rhetorical, and, thus, Verene posits a new philosophical rhetoric that explains how the best of philosophy does not only "gain their authority...from what they say, but from how they say it" (35). This is beautifully put and undermines the very foundation and

history of Plato's Socratic dialectic as the originating means to arrive at objective truth. This challenge and Gorgias's rhetoric are emphasized not only here but also in some of the biggest names in German philosophy, again thousands of years after *On the Nonexistent*.

Michael MacDonald's "Encomium of Hegel" rather quickly points out Hegel's dancing around sophistry to try both to give credit to the likes of Gorgias while maintaining that, maybe, he was just an early "subjectivist" philosopher (22). This, much like Ramus, tries to reappropriate rhetoric to philosophy. Hegel did face backlash for being sympathetic to rhetoric and has been accused by many of being a sophist himself (23). However, Hegel is one of the founding minds of modern philosophy, and it is ironic to me that some of his "most famous chapters," as MacDonald points out, "take up and elaborate the arguments advanced by Gorgias in *On Not Being*" (24). Hegel is known for, among other things, idealism, fierce skepticism, and attempting to bridge the gap between objectivity and subjectivity with a direct view that the very perception of anything is its foundation, or that "appearance is the essence of being" (37). In this vein, he makes the "claim that early Greek skepticism—the free thought that 'annihilates the being of the world'—reaches its most 'profound depth' in Gorgias's *On Not Being or On Nature*" (30).

The complexity of consideration within *On the Nonexistent* reveals that Gorgias was way ahead of his time. In yet another clear example of brilliance, the final argument of Gorgias's piece rationally guides us down the confusing path from fantasies in the mind being existent in a separate way from sensation and perception to the content of the mind being incapable of having any similar substance to something outside of the self (45). In short, he posits that "the existent is not an object of consideration and is not apprehended" (46). Following this profound conclusion, he again continues based upon the refutation of his previous logic: "even if it should be apprehended, it would be incapable of being conveyed to another" (46). After having explored the possibility of nonexistence for an external reality, then the impossibility of directly accessing it through perception or thought, his final argument now consists of the evident flaw in thinking that words are direct representations of objective substantiality (46). Gorgias's culminating point is that *logos*, having its own kind of substance separate from sensations and perceptions themselves, "does not, therefore, manifest the majority of substances, just as they do not manifest the nature of each other" (46). The implication here is that words, or *logos*, exist uniquely and cannot have direct ties to other kinds of substances—be they internal or external.

Even with limitations, acknowledging that words are one of the few tools,

cumbersome and complex as they may be, with which we can communicate returns us to a view of *logos* as sacred. This is exemplified in Hegel's much later examination, wherein he first points out "how words, not just concepts, mediate our consciousness of the world" (MacDonald 37). It is speech, then, that allows us one possible way to construct and influence another's perception of what we experience. Later, and far more profoundly, MacDonald shows that "the dynastic power of language creates a world, and in this case, Hegel fuses the philosophic and religious senses of the *logos*; it is the speech of man, to be sure, but it is also the creative word of God" (39). The lingering issue, however, is in Hegel's insistence that Gorgias was not a rhetorician but a philosopher. There is a fundamental difference between the two disciplines that lies directly in the act of composition, and it distinctly separates Gorgias from philosophy proper—despite his engagement with the latter. I think that it is with the almost-traditional prejudice against the sophistic profession that those like Hegel are so hesitant to be associated with thoughts under the "rhetoric" umbrella. As MacDonald concludes, "the history of philosophy shows us that exorcising the sophist from the order of truth and reason is never a simple gesture" (40).

Similarly, Heidegger explores the line between the necessity of speech without direct connection to referents and internal philosophical endeavors. Though I have my own issues with Heidegger and his possible solipsism, it is poignant that he, too, concedes that there are phenomena beyond our conceptual abilities that cannot be directly addressed with language. Susan Zickmund points to ways in which Heidegger's philosophy allows for rhetoric's use to have a deliberative discourse concerning those that "resist being 'taken apart'" (411). Further, it is also through rhetoric that we can lead others to be most receptive "to the call of their own conscience," which is paramount to Heidegger's philosophy of being (414). Reliance on asserting the existence of realities separate from the self is still peppered throughout, but these works cannot help but admit the obvious chasm between the object and the explanation of it. Though we still see a strong resistance to admitting the use of rhetorical strategy, the works of MacDonald and Zickmund reveal philosophy's inability to ignore the fundamental, culminating notion in Gorgias's *On the Nonexistent*: that *logos* cannot, by definition and nature, have a direct connection to disseminating objective truth. Thus, verbal communication will always boil down to rhetorical word choices, and this renders the philosophical practice of using language alone to discover transcendent essences unproductive at best and fundamentally absurd at worst.

Building upon all previous examples of the generative power of *logos*, I posit

that while philosophy concerns how we formulate and reflect on ideas internally, rhetoric is the necessary discipline to choose how best to express said ideas and create the closest thing to facsimiles of them within others' minds. Though there is always going to be a semblance of interpretation involved on the part of the audience, this merely enhances the importance of rhetorical strategy and anticipation of the reception of one's attempted world-building. James J. Brown Jr. describes this relationship well: "the act of literary interpretation need not be cut off from the concerns of writing or rhetorical analysis...it will also require rhetoricians to theorize the relation between production and interpretation" (29). He explores the necessity of rhetorical choices prior to communication as it is exemplified throughout the creation and consumption of software-based virtual realities.

James J. Brown Jr. makes the very compelling argument that "computer programs are…are *compositions* and sometimes even arguments...that new media technologies have opened up new modes of expression" (29). While the focus of his piece is on interdisciplinary study, he makes the crucial observations that "any interpretive effort is an *authoring effort*...to make sense of an object" and there is "no interpretation without production; no production without interpretation" (30). Under this cyclical, constantly folding in upon itself notion, the process of honing communications to better connect with audiences and explicate experience as best as the medium allows sheds light on the relationship between *logos* and the existent as being inherently separate entities. The tethering of an author's translating the internal to audience and their interactivity with the composition as required to create meaning is very well exemplified through video games.

As Ian Bogost points out in "Procedural Rhetoric," the first chapter of his book related to this concept, the interlocked relationship between composer and consumer is foundational to his whole analysis of the persuasive power of video games:

> Rhetoric thus also came to refer to *effective expression*, that is, writing, speech, or art that both accomplishes the goals of the author and absorbs the reader or viewer...rhetoric "provides ways of emphasizing ideas or making them vivid." Success means effective expression, not necessarily effective influence. (19-20)

Bifurcating influence from expression defines rhetoric as far more powerful, despite the ominous warnings from Plato's *Phaedrus* of all the severe consequences of nefarious persuasion. This would entail that in all mediums for communicating anything to others, one must consult rhetorical strategy to effectively express ideas. In terms of games, any rules that govern that virtual reality "are authored in code,

through the practice of programming" (29). What makes this medium an ideal example of Gorgias's relationship between *logos* and objective reality as opposed to Platonic forms lies in the parallel connections shown through code and the player.

Much as we experience reality, gameplay is an exploration of "the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the game's controls" (Bogost 43). We, too, when walking the world, are interacting with and manipulating our bodies within reality to observe and record both our experience of it and its limitations or parameters. Further, a game and its "complex rules that simulate real or imagined physical space and cultural processes...[and] rely on user interaction as a mediator...earns the second spot on the continuum, directly under actual experience" (35). One does not have to write or even understand code to see or play the game, similar to Gorgias's notion that "when external reality is involved, it would not become our *logos*" (Gorgias 46). However, if one understands the code of a game, one could find ways to warp the game's reality. As James J. Brown Jr. realizes when he reveals a hidden table embedded in HTML code, he can bypass the program's required interactions from the user and "just cheat" by filling out the table itself (Brown Jr. 27).

In the first years of the twenty-first century, when I constantly played *American McGee's Alice*, a first-person horror-adventure game, I would pull up the command prompt, type in cheat codes, and reshape the game's parameters. For the sake of clarification, pressing the '~' key for the command prompt is accessible only in the original PC or Mac version as it was removed in the later edition that came bundled with the game's sequel, *Alice: Madness Returns*. As many gamers may be familiar, I was able to use shortcut, key-phrases of code, also commonly referred to as cheat codes, to bypass perceived limitations and rules of the game's narrative and environment. No longer held by the parameters of what one could call a basic experience of the game's reality, my avatar of Alice could become invincible, have unlimited resources, access all weapons in the game without "unlocking them," hop around check points or levels of the game as I chose, and a whole host of other boons offered only through the game's authored code. This is akin to how Gorgias uses syllogisms based upon specific definitions of words to make the valid but seemingly impossible argument that nothing exists. The perceptible rules of both our and a game's reality should not allow these bypasses, yet for the rhetorician, *logos'* world-building and altering power reigns supreme.

My favorite cheat code to type into that little command prompt had to have been "noclip." With this, I was able to ignore all "clipping," or the simulation of physical rules regarding collision of objects in a game. Essentially, I could run through walls,

sink through the ground to subterranean "floors" of a level, hover or fly in the air, and generally move about any given map's space as I pleased. Considering his use of *logos* to build a conception of a world wherein nothing exists, Gorgias seems to be interacting within the defined parameters of a composed reality in the same way that I was when I played that game. If Gorgias were to be a gamer, he would find loopholes and exploitations within code to bend reality to his will and achieve the goals he sets out for himself. He could be a speed runner, running through walls and proving that the reality we construct, rather than directly access, using *logos* is as malleable as collision detection in the original *Alice* game.

It is possible to counter the parallels between code/*logos* and virtual/perceptual reality with the idea that code represents, not language defining a reality, but the very peeking behind the veil of the game's playable space to view the objective reality within. While this may seem enticing on the surface, it inherently ignores the authorship required behind code—both with complex algorithms or self-sustaining rules and with more basic "chunks" of code that represent specific qualities, textures, shapes, functions etc. Although there is a more direct relationship between what is written and what we experience, necessitating a connection that Gorgias argues cannot exist between objectivity and *logos*, this is not because code is the same as some divine intentions behind reality, representative of forms. Rather, code is something that was carefully constructed for a purpose that involves rhetorical decisions regarding what kind of reality to construct. The specificity of kind here and the sheer number of different game realities available point directly to the lack of formalism in code. It is moldable to communicate *this* reality for *this* rhetorical reason, just as Gorgias chooses specific words with specific meanings to convey specific ideas to others. It is the same when we try to share ideas with one another, regardless of medium. Our experience of gameplay, much like our interpretation of *logos*, is subjective.

It becomes obvious that an attempt to discuss some semblance of objectivity or "forms" in reference to a digital world either devolves into discussions of categories and definitions or completely removes us from the specificity of the game at hand. Attempts to categorize and define aspects of any given game would ultimately dissolve back into the initial interaction between experience and precision of language instead of ever directly accessing the reality in question—or "that by which we reveal is *logos*, but *logos* is not substances and existing things" (Gorgias 46). The very act of communication will always be rhetorical as it will always require strategies involving how best to represent ideas. As represented through video games, what we perceive

and how we interact with reality is separated from the Platonic transcendental realm. As Gorgias admits, even with direct perception and comprehension, we would still be barred from using any form of language to convey the totality of our experience to another.

Further, the idea that we could use code to grasp a reality beyond the game is meaningless, as "*logos* arises from external things impinging upon us, that is, from perceptible things" (Gorgias 46). Anyone familiar enough with programming can manipulate code until it matches a desired effective expression via a digital reality. This world, built by *logos*, is exactly like the speech acts that try to communicate our internal sense data, ideas, and even, as Gorgias entertains for argument's sake, glimpses of transcendent forms. Gorgias suggests that "*logos* is not evocative of the external, but the external becomes the revealer of *logos*" (Gorgias 46). By attempting to express our experiences of whatever we may have access to regarding the external, we are constantly using rhetoric and *logos* to build perceptual realities for others in the hopes of passing our interpretation on to them. What of the meta-experience involved in a person viewing a game's reality from the outside? For digital worlds, the conclusion that *logos* is incapable of revealing objectivity remains the same *even though* we know beyond any doubt that there is an "external reality" that exists with regards to inside the parameters of the game versus an outside observer.

To me, this is far more profound specifically because the world within a world example here mirrors the idea of perceptual reality within a transcendent reality of forms. Even though I exist within the outside reality of a game, I am still woefully incapable of accessing any Truths about the game at hand, no matter how fluent in its code I may be. This suggests, too, that the philosophical endeavor to connect with anything beyond perception is necessarily flawed no matter how many realities we manage to escape. No matter how different the outside of the cave is, we're still going to be using the same faculties to interact with and describe it. Without the ability to compare *logos* with referents in a direct, confirmable way, our rhetorical choices constitute variants in the reception of any reality that we wish to communicate to others. Rhetoric is responsible for influencing an audience's sense of the world that we are trying to convey to—or build in—their mind. Thus, any expression, through any medium of language, will always result in a new conceptual, phenomenal, virtual, etc. world, and the composition of such expression is necessarily a rhetorical process. The likes of Ramus and Plato were sorely mistaken for dismissing the sophistic in favor of the dialectic method—which is secondary to rhetoric.

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