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Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

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A Feast of Strange Opinions: Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes on the English Renaissance Stage

Edited by Marco Duranti
and Emanuel Stelzer

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CEMP - Classical and Early Modern Paradoxes in England

The series of CEMP volumes offers studies and fully annotated scholarly editions related to the CEMP open-access digital archive. This archive includes texts pertaining to the genres of the paradox, of the paradoxical fiction, and of the problem, which were published in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and which are currently unavailable online and/or not open access (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/bib-arc/cemp). Our digital archive features diplomatic, semidiplomatic, and modernised editions of selected works, furnished with critical apparatuses and editorial notes, alongside related documentary materials, which, in turn, are relevant to poetic and dramatic texts of the English Renaissance. These texts provide fundamental testimony of the early modern episteme, functioning as a hinge joining widespread forms of the paradoxical discourse in different genres and texts and within the development of sceptical thinking.

The project is part of the Skenè Centre as well as of the Project of Excellence Digital humanities applied to foreign languages and literatures (2018-2022) Department of Foreign Languages and Literature at the University of Verona (https://dh.dlls.univr.it/en/).

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2

Paradoxical Agathon and His Brethren

Robert Wardy

Abstract

This essay engages with the history of paradox in ancient Greek philosophy. It starts with the historical figure of Agathon, the triumphant Athenian playwright of the fifth century BCE, and reviews some of the fragments of and reports on his rhetorical drama, inspired by the paradoxical Gorgias. It goes on to analyse both the speech in praise of *Erōs* Plato's character Agathon delivers in the *Symposium* and Socrates' critical reaction. The final part of the essay extrapolates from the historical Agathon and the Platonic Agathon to a speculative taxonomy of paradoxes in Greek philosophy. Its major hypothesis is that both the two original, major lineages, serious and seriocomic, survive, and that reflection on the nature of paradox in these terms promises to enrich our understanding of philosophy.

Keywords: Agathon; Gorgias; Plato; *Symposium*; paradox; philosophy

Who was Agathon? He lived in the fifth century BCE (*c.*445-*c.*400), and was initially regarded as one of the leading lights of Athenian culture at a time when Athens was the glorious epicentre of ancient Greek drama, music, literature, mathematics, science and last but not least, philosophy. Yet despite his true stature, not many years after Agathon died his reputation was reduced to that of a tedious, decadent show-off.

Agathon is hardly a name to conjure with, outside the circle of learned Classicists. There are two reasons for his general anonymity. First, as with so many of the great thinkers of antiquity, all that is preserved to us are a few tantalising fragments and some telegraphic reports. Second, as a rule the little that is left of Agathon is unthinkingly dismissed because people evaluate the remains having *already* decided he is poor stuff. And why is that? Plato's

hatchet job, executed in the *Symposium*, proved lethal. I hope to make out a persuasive case that to the contrary, Agathon is in fact of huge and abiding cultural significance.

The Platonic corpus positively teems with paradoxes. Some are explicit and substantive: for example, the 'Socratic paradox' that no one knowingly does wrong. Others are tacit: for example, the irony that Alcibiades in the *Symposium* unknowingly assimilates Socrates to Socratic *Erōs* personified. Others are, if you like, engineered and 'situational': for example, again in the *Symposium*, the both conventionally ugly and unconventionally beautiful Socrates' placement between the two conventional beauties, Agathon and Alcibiades. The dialogues warn us that rhetorical theorists – Gorgias above all – exert a malign influence on all manner of people: but rhetoric is the foil Plato employs to define philosophy itself. Perhaps we can think of this as a 'paradox of assimilation'.[1] Agathon is a Gorgianic artist *extraordinaire*, and I mean to demonstrate that he too is peculiarly important to Plato. Agathon's paradoxology will serve as our springboard into this essay's final section, which enhances our general understanding of paradoxical thought in ancient Greece.

Next we turn to the pitifully exiguous remains of and reports on the *real* Agathon, in preparation for our experience of the paradoxical *character* Agathon as he appears in the *Symposium*. As Agathon puts it, "if I tell the truth, I'm not going to please you; but if I please you at all, I won't be telling the truth" (κατὰ τὸν Ἀγάθωνα εἰ μὲν φράσω τἀληθές, οὐχί σ' εὐφρανῶ· / εἰ δ' εὐφρανῶ τί σ', οὐχὶ τἀληθὲς φράσω, fr. 12).[2] Confirmation, surely, of a Socratic's darkest suspicions – were it not that the provocation comes from a lost, anonymous tragedy, speaker and context unknown. "Judgement is stronger than the hands' strength" (γνώμη δὲ κρεῖσσόν ἐστιν ἢ ῥώμη χερῶν, fr. 27). If this is *sound* judgement, the line merely preserves an unobjectionably pious sentiment; but if it is saying that a mind amorally empowered by intelligence can defeat

1 Another possible instance: the materialist Democritus is the great *bête noire*, so much so that Plato never mentions him by name, but nevertheless in the *Timaeus* an atomism subservient to cosmic providence is rehabilitated.

2 Citations are from Pierre Lévêque's collection of fragments and testimonia.

physical force, then it might be coordinated with the omnipotence of *logos* as proclaimed by Gorgias in his *Encomium of Helen* (more on this anon). I leave "*logos*" untranslated, since in Greek it is remarkably polyvalent, perhaps approximated by "discourse" (which I avoid on account of its theoretical connotations in some circles). Testimony that Gorgianic *stylistics* pervaded Agathon's compositions is plentiful: for example, "Agathon . . . in his iambics frequently expresses himself in the manner of Gorgias" (καὶ Ἀγάθων . . . πολλαχοῦ τῶν ἰαμβείων γοργιάζει, Philostratus, *de vit. Soph.* I). What should catch our notice is how appropriation of Gorgias seems to have been a package deal, including a taste for both the assertion of self-reflexive linguistic paradox and a highly-wrought, obtrusively artificial language for its expression – as if such language should be the medium for messages mysterious, and perhaps indecipherable.[3]

The claim that Agathon was an innovator in both plot and style recurs. Such reports can be neutral, or even admiring: Aristotle says "in this play [the reference is to the *Anthos* = *Flower*] he created both the subject-matter and the phrasing, but pleases none the less" (*Poetics* 9, 1451b21-3).[4] Agathon is unusual because unlike his Classical predecessors who adapted Homeric material or other preexisting mythology, for *The Flower* he invented his own plot.

But Agathon does not uniformly win Aristotle's approval. He upbraids him for introducing disconnected, "intercalary" choral interludes, so-called ἐμβόλιμα (*Poetics* 18, 1456a29-32), merely ornamental passages lacking any organic connection to the play. I think this criticism is noteworthy on two counts. First, there is a connection with Euripides, whose choruses likewise have been

3 I like Pierre Lévêque's nice conclusion: "le mérite d'Agathon fut sans doute . . . d'introduire dans l'art dramatique la réforme que Gorgias venait d'opérer dans l'éloquence, c'est-á-dire de fonder *la tragédie oratoire*" (1995, 130, emphasis added; "Without doubt Agathon's achievement was to introduce into drama the innovation that Gorgias had recently made in rhetoric, which is to say that Agathon created *rhetorical tragedy*").

4 "Pleases" translates "εὐφραίνει", Agathon's own word in fr. 12 ("if I *please* you at all, I won't be telling the truth"): mere coincidence, or might this hedonistic term have had a programmatic role for the playwright?

excoriated as functionless, decadent embellishments.[5] Second, readers of Plato who heartily dislike Agathon in the *Symposium* disparage his performance as only a semblance of connected-up thought. For them, its climax is an aria-like outpouring which sacrifices sense to sound. The nineteenth-century scholar Hug suggested that the aria is a Platonic pastiche of Agathon's trashy choruses.[6] Here is the damning verdict of the Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, Richard Hunter: "in the closing section of the speech, an almost untranslatable incantation of rhythmical phrases, *a beautiful sound signifying nothing*, brings Greek prose as close to metrical poetry as it ever got" (2004, 73, emphasis added).[7]

The richest pickings are to be gleaned from Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*. In this play Euripides is beside himself with worry that the women of Athens will assassinate him in vengeance for his misogynistic portrayal of female characters. Intent on infiltrating the female-only festival of the *Thesmophoria*, he sends an aged relative to attempt to persuade Agathon to act as his spy. The effeminate Agathon, reclining and surrounded by toiletries, is wheeled out on the *ekkuklēma*, the staging machine used to bring a domestic interior out onto the stage. Thus Agathon emerges from within his own house, the private space which is the setting for the party of the *Symposium*, and which Aristophanes attends. Agathon is already in drag, the better to penetrate female characters. "I wear my clothes along with my mentality. A man who is a poet must adopt habits that match the plays he's committed to composing.

5 Such was Goethe's view (*Briefwechsel zwischen Goethe und Zelter*, Letter 29).

6 "Durch den Stil der Rede, in welchem der musikalische Klang alles überwuchert, der ganze Vorrat Gorgianischer Figuren gleichsam ausgeschüttet ist, eine Menge von Versen und Halbversen beigezogen sind, bis schließlich der zweite Hauptteil in eine förmliche Monodie ausartet, welche den ἐμβόλιμα in den Tragödien Agathons ähnlich sein mag, hat Platon an einem anschaulichen Beispiele zeigen wollen, zu welch *unwürdigem Phrasengeklingel eine Poesie und eine Beredsamkeit herabsinke, welcher Spiel und Klang alles, die Wahrheit nichts ist*" (Hug 1884, liv, emphasis added).

7 One might be forgiven for scenting a whiff of paradox in Hunter's lambasting Agathon without acknowledging what would seem to be a bravura performance by Hunter's own lights.

For example, if one is writing plays about women, one's body must participate in their habits . . . If you're writing about men, your body has what it takes already; but when it's a question of something we don't possess, then it must be captured by imitation" (148-56).[8] Euripides' stunned relative, not knowing what to make of Agathon's confusion of properties marked feminine with masculine ones, wonders "what has the sword to do with the looking-glass?" (τίς δαὶ κατόπτρου καὶ ξίφους κοινωνία; 140)]. Agathon is lost in narcissistic contemplation of his most beautiful, feminised self. Much of this carries over to *The Symposium*, where the effeminate Agathon basks in his guests' erotic idolatry. And the brazen effeminacy was itself *socially* paradoxical. Convention dictated that pederastic couples consisted of a mature man, 'the lover', and an adolescent, 'the beloved'. So a strictly transitory relationship. But Agathon's erotic relationship with Pausanias, also a speaker in *The Symposium*, survived the years, as Agathon continued to play the role of the no longer adolescent but effeminate partner (*Symposium* 193b). Agathon the person is a *social* paradox. His transgressive sexuality is mirrored in an excessive use of paradox.[9]

And now let us turn directly to the paradoxical Agathon of *The Symposium*. "Symposium" literally means "drinking together", but there could be much more to an ancient Greek symposium than a

8 In Sommerstein's fine translation. Duncan 2001 mounts the case that Agathon's self-presentation is at once "constructionist" and "essentialist". I am not persuaded. She believes that while the tenor of lines 148-56 is "constructionist", a later passage is on the contrary "essentialist": the poet Phrynichus "was himself beautiful and garbed himself beautifully, and that is why his plays too were beautiful. For it is necessary that one compose poetry in accordance with one's nature" (165-7, my translation). Her interpretation relies on the supposition that the attractiveness of Phrynichus' body and clothing was straightforwardly masculine, while the likely implication of the earlier passage is that on the contrary his beauty delivers mixed signals. She nevertheless makes some nice points.

9 Despite the danger of extreme anachronism, I am tempted to characterise Agathon's self-presentation as camp. There is of course something amusingly *paradoxical* about camp when it works, since effective camp is performed with a straight face, pretending to be straightforwardly conventional when of course it is anything but.

modern-day convivial gathering fueled by alcohol.[10] Symposia were private affairs, and as such could nurture hidden thoughts – political intrigue, perhaps. They were suffused by eroticism. There is a genre of archaic Greek lyric poetry in the form of educational reflections addressed by a mature man to an adolescent boy (the best-known exemplar is Theognis) that reveals how the symposium could function as an erotic *rite de passage*. The dramatic occasion of Plato's *Symposium* is the celebration of the young Agathon's first victory in Athens' tragic competitions. But it is a most unusual affair. Many of those in attendance are badly hungover from the festivities of the day before, and agree to forgo deep drinking. That is paradoxical. Some clichés are clichés because they embody prevailing truths. A good example is the opinion that the ancient Greeks were extremely competitive people. A run-of-the-mill symposium might involve bibulous competition with riddles or simple drinking games. But this, after all, is Plato. Agathon's party is not only a relatively sober affair; it also has another odd feature, namely that the flute girl is dismissed. Flute girls were hired performers more likely than not to end up copulating with the guests. But although this potential, subordinate sexual partner is sent away (and hands are kept off the slaves, who also at a regular party would have been fair game), the participants agree to engage in a competitive erotic exercise: they are to deliver a sequence of speeches in praise of divine *Erōs*. The explicit focus of the competition is our triumphant host, the playwright Agathon, pitted against the philosopher Socrates. Agathon's contribution is through-and-through Gorgias.

First, its style.[11] This is extremely difficult, indeed verging on impossible, to convey in translation. Greek syntax readily lends itself to expression in measured phrases captured in contrastive structures which can be combined into more and more complex

10 The informative essays in Murray and Tecusan 1995 provide a comprehensive introduction to the workings of ancient symposia.

11 Norden 1898, 15-25 and 63-78 remains the classic treatment. The damning verdict of a great expert on the history of Greek prose style: "in the case of Gorgias the influence [on Greek prose style] was, I believe, *wholly bad*. What he did was, in fact, to take certain qualities inherent in Greek expression, balance and antithesis, and exaggerate them to the point of absurdity" (Denniston 2002, 10, emphasis added).

inclusive patterns. The linguistic kernels are statements organised on the pattern of we can do no better than to woodenly translate as "on the one hand . . . and on the other". A speech by Gorgias is as it were a fractal enlargement of such patterning. Another salient feature of Gorgianic style is deliberate redundancy. For example, ancient Greek grammar permits use of the so-called "internal accusative": one can say things like "I see a sight". Gorgianic compositions are replete with such unnecessary expansions. "Unnecessary" with regard to the strict sense of the message: however necessary to the rhythm and other auditory qualities of the piece. Agathon's speech is a pure, very extreme exemplification of all aspects of Gorgianic stylistics.

Second, its explicit methodology and meticulous plan. A very important feature of Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* is that it articulates criteria for successful persuasion to which it claims to adhere. Likewise Agathon. He begins with a criticism he levels at all the previous speakers: that they praised *Erōs* for what he *does*, rather than what he *is*. Agathon declares he will put that right not only by first praising *Erōs* for what he is and only then for what he does, but also by showing how the good he does us flows from what he is (194e-195a); and for sure he does go on to rigorously execute this plan. The formal development of Agathon's speech could not be more perspicuous. (1) The opening salvo of the methodological critique; (2) the grand thesis, that *Erōs* is happiest because most beautiful and best; (3) proof of "most beautiful": (3a) youngest, (3b) softest and most delicate, (3c) supple (with a flowery appendix (perhaps an allusion to his play *Anthos* = *Flower*?)); (4) proof of "best": (4a) justice, (4b) moderation, (4c) courage, (4d) wisdom; (5) concluding hymn; (6) Gorgianic cap. But despite this formal perspicuity, its appreciation confronts a hermeneutic challenge springing from quality (3c) adduced to prove that *Erōs* is supremely beautiful, that the god is "supple of form":[12] that Agathon's complementary, liquidly elusive thought is not to be pinned down. In the reading, this cleanly articulated structure feels something like an exoskeleton *containing* the speech, without *imposing* an

12 ὑγρὸς τὸ εἶδος (196a2). Kenneth Dover helpfully glosses ὑγρός as "'moist', i.e. 'supple', 'pliable'" (Dover 1980, 126). And R. G. Bury: "another sense of ὑγρός, in erotic terminology, is 'melting', 'languishing'" (Bury 1932, 75).

intrinsic form on the lyrical flow; the musical movement cannot be apprehended by anatomical study.

Third, its paradoxicality. A couple of examples. The first example is Agathon's purported demonstration that *Erōs* possesses the virtue of justice, since he neither wrongs anyone nor suffers any wrong. The establishment of erotic justice is signalised as "*most* important" (4a: 196b6): why? Because on the ordinary view of things, the injustice of *Erōs* bulks most inconveniently large. Of course in ancient Greek culture the most notorious case was Helen's unjust abandonment of her husband Menelaus when she succumbed to the immoral blandishments of Paris. How on earth can she be exculpated? Well, in his *The Encomium of Helen* Gorgias had boggled generic expectations by transforming the anticipated apology or defense of her actions into positive praise; or rather had conjoined an apology for her unresisting, impotent soul, impotent to withstand seductive rhetoric, with praise for potent *logos*, which is to say praise for Gorgias' *own* verbal mastery.[13] Hence Agathon's underlining of justice is the apt pupil's genuflection towards his teacher's example of paradoxical juggling with opposites. Implication: we are all Helens, eager to be found soft enough for an invited erotic touch which cannot do us wrong. *Encomium of Helen*/*logos*/*erōs*/Agathon/*logos*/*erōs*, in an indefinitely replicated rhetorical cycle.

This passage is maximally saturated by the provision of grammatical complements "unnecessary" to the sense, as Agathon runs through all possible permutations and combinations.[14] As I have explained, the stock explanation of this verbal saturation from those with no taste for such rhetoric is that here we have a tedious example of fulsome Gorgianic inanity, a childish obsession with mechanically generated sonorities. But maybe a reaction of sophisticated tolerance

13 My *The Birth of Rhetoric* (Wardy 1998) discusses how seduction broadly conceived lies at the heart of the vexed relationship between philosophy and rhetoric at the inception of their self-reflexive projects. That book takes only fleeting account of the *Phaedrus*. Future analysis of the *Phaedrus*' paradoxical speech attributed to Lysias pleading that a boy should grant his favours to a non-lover rather than a lover and Socrates', which only pretends to urge the same case (230e-241d), will take the discussion further.

14 Ἔρως *οὔτ'* ***ἀδικεῖ*** *οὔτ'* ***ἀδικεῖται*** *οὔτε ὑπὸ* ***θεοῦ*** οὔτε ***θεόν***, *οὔτε ὑπ'* ***ἀνθρώπου*** *οὔτε* ***ἄνθρωπον*** (196b6-7), etc.

is in order: perhaps such exhaustive enumeration can playfully work to keep all options whatsoever — including previously neglected, or even formerly unimaginable ones — on the table. Agathon's "unnecessary" sonic grammaticalisation can captivate the generous auditor.

Our second example of paradox: moderation or self-control. (4b) "Moderation is, by definitional agreement, the mastery of pleasures and desires; since no pleasure is stronger than *Erōs*, he masters them all, and so is superlatively moderate". Sophistry, we are firmly assured by serious, sober philosophers, is a prevaricating counterfeit of philosophy, the most disreputable business of reasoning fallaciously to hoodwink us into the concession of dubious propositions, all for the sake of personal aggrandisement. The Plato who wrote Agathon into the *Symposium* is not so minded, for whatever else Agathon might be, he is no sophist. One could, of course, disassemble his "argument", as if it were a logical trap set by a wicked sophist, and shake one's head over the invalidity — but what would be the fun in that? Agathon's fallacies are not *real* — which is to say would-be deceptive — paralogisms because there is no intention to deceive: who, after all, is so stupidly innocent as to be taken in by them? Only a quibbling logic-chopper senses any intellectual danger here. Again for sure Gorgias is there before us: he says that in some cases of beguilement, "the deceiver is more just than one who does not deceive, and the one deceived wiser than one who is not; the deceiver is more just, because he has done what he undertook, and the one deceived is wiser, because not being insensitive is a matter of susceptibility to the pleasure of speeches".[15] Since the original context (Plutarch, *De gloria Atheniensium* 5) brings in the Gorgias to illustrate the heyday of Athenian tragedy, it is possible that Gorgias himself so argued specifically to illuminate the paradoxical character of theatrical illusion. The communal delight with Agathon's speech would not have suffered eclipse, had some vigilant logician pronounced "fallacy of equivocation", for his guests

15 ὅ τ' ***ἀπατήσας δικαιότερος*** *τοῦ μὴ* ***ἀπατήσαντος***, καὶ ὁ ***ἀπατηθεὶς σοφώτερος*** *τοῦ μὴ* ***ἀπατηθέντος***. *ὁ μὲν* γὰρ ***ἀπατήσας δικαιότερος***, ὅτι τοῦθ' ὑποσχόμενος πεποίηκεν· *ὁ δ'* ***ἀπατηθεὶς σοφώτερος***· εὐάλωτον γὰρ ὑφ' ἡδονῆς λόγων τὸ μὴ ἀναίσθητον (fr. 23).

connive in the make-believe argument, as if for all the world *Erōs* might be trapped by analytical definition.

And the concluding "aria": "every man must follow in his train hymning *Erōs* beautifully, participating in that song with which singing *Erōs* casts a spell on the mind of all gods and human beings" (ᾧ χρὴ ἕπεσθαι πάντα ἄνδρα ἐφυμνοῦντα καλῶς, ᾠδῆς μετέχοντα ἣν ᾄδει θέλγων πάντων θεῶν τε καὶ ἀνθρώπων νόημα, 197e3-5). So as far as Agathon, he who must be obeyed smilingly dictates, the only pious, decent response to the beauty he and *Erōs* share and share out is to take one's place submissively within an emulative chorus, replicating, not analysing, his love song. To rephrase the hermeneutic puzzle. We seem to be faced by a queer dilemma: either to leave the shimmering verbal tissue of the speech inviolate - and so uncritically prostrate ourselves — or to pulverise Agathon's delicate beauty with a dialectical hammer — and so boorishly do intellectual violence to a plaything. The least ambition of an unmesmerised connoisseur is the collection of impressionistic verdicts, at once sympathetically engaged, but not supinely uncritical.

And after all, one might think that our yielding to his rhetorical seduction is something of a foregone conclusion, since we have learnt that submission to *Erōs* is exceptionlessly voluntary and so just. Agathon's elegant way is to assume our cooperation, to take for granted our acquiescence in his lovely conceits. But this tasteful presumption of amused amity is, to a degree, coercive; sophistication, whether achieved or aspirational, had better play along, since the social penalty for recalcitrance is to cut an unrefined figure, not *au fait*, coarsely negligent of the amusing conventions governing this artful transaction.

The brief flourish of the coda economically makes three significant points. (i) The speech is a religious object, a votive offering dedicated to the god *Erōs*. (ii) It shares "partly in play, partly in moderate earnestness" [τὰ μὲν παιδιᾶς, τὰ δὲ σπουδῆς μετρίας (197e7)]. (iii) They are present — or, perhaps, effectively combined? — to the extent of Agathon's capacity. (ii) is a riff on the conclusio — of *The Encomium of Helen*: "I wished to write this *logos* as an encomium *of* Helen, but *my* plaything" (ἐβουλόμην γράψαι τὸν λόγον Ἑλένης μὲν ἐγκώμιον, ἐμὸν δὲ παίγνιον, *Encomium of Helen*, 21); it encapsulates the flirtatious, seriocomic rhetoric of the speech.

The reaction? "*All* present burst into applause" (198a2-3): *everyone* loudly recognises how very well Agathon has done by both himself and the god.

I shall now glance briefly at Socrates' reactions to this paradoxical extravaganza before drawing together some preliminary thoughts about the ancient history of paradox.

What rhetorical competitor, Socrates asks, would not be perturbed on hearing the words of Agathon's beautiful peroration? "And indeed the *logos* put me in mind of Gorgias, so that I suffered just what one reads in Homer: I was frightened lest Agathon in his conclusion would, by sending a frightfully eloquent head of Gorgias in his speech against mine, turn me to unspeaking stone".[16] According to the punning Gorgon trope, what menaces Socrates – or so he says, in effusive relief – is the petrification of speechlessness. But of course what the myth warns us off doing is ever *looking* at the Gorgon. And so Socrates has transposed the visual threat to an auditory one, in keeping with the perceptual, perhaps even synaesthetic, effects in which Gorgianic rhetoric specialises.

Socrates proceeds to break the rhetorical butterfly on philosophy's wheel. This is not the occasion for analysing the critical dialectic Socrates applies to Agathon's speech. But I do need to cast light on the form rather than the substance of the inquisition. The third point of the coda was that Agathon's *logos* combines the playful with the serious – *moderate* seriousness, that is. But Socrates ruthlessly insists on testing for only Agathon's earnest commitments, negating his experiments in tonal hybridisation. An airy disrespect for boundaries as evanescent love slips into and out of lovable souls displayed in infinitely malleable language — philosophy will tolerate none of this. Maybe Socrates assumed the fear of falling mute because philosophy really has nothing to say in its own voice to Agathon and his *Erōs* speaking in theirs; it is the poet who must be stopped in his tracks, petrified, if there is to be discussion with

16 καὶ γάρ με Γοργίου ὁ λόγος ἀνεμίμνῃσκεν, ὥστε ἀτεχνῶς τὸ τοῦ Ὁμήρου ἐπεπόνθη· ἐφοβούμην μή μοι τελευτῶν ὁ Ἀγάθων ***Γοργίου*** *κεφαλὴν* ***δεινοῦ λέγειν*** *ἐν τῷ* ***λόγῳ*** *ἐπὶ τὸν ἐμὸν* ***λόγον*** πέμψας αὐτόν με λίθον τῇ ἀφωνίᾳ ποιήσειεν (198c1-5). Appropriately, this is a wicked pastiche of Gorgianic diction with all the stops pulled out.

Socrates, within the peremptory normative constraints of dialectical analysis. Paradox.

The technical term for Socrates' testing of the beliefs espoused by his interlocutor is "*elenchus*"; and it is well nigh invariably the case that the test ends in refutation. Agathon does not elude this fate. Those undergoing an *elenchus* elsewhere in Plato are sometimes so dramatically dim-witted, evasive, disingenuous, impatient, sarcastic or furious that describing questioner and respondent as dialectical *partners* is an effortful stretch. Yet if Agathon is nothing but agreeably agreeable, all-yielding, isn't he just too soft to be Socrates' real partner? Socrates compels Agathon to strengthen his relatively noncommittal "likely enough" (ὡς τὸ εἰκός γε, 200a7), the habitually conjectural stance of rhetoric, into admissions of absolute logical necessity.

Anti-platonists for whom dialectic is nothing more than Socrates' unrewarding manipulation of assorted logically naive, emotionally confused gulls and straw men are and always have been thick on the ground. However it might be elsewhere, that charge cannot stick here in the *Symposium*: Plato has gone to considerable lengths to invite us to attend to Agathon's impotence, once he stops singing. I propose that Plato's idea is to make us think hard about the compositional strategies available when the deepest, defining presuppositions of *logoi* are well and truly irreconcilable. With the best will in the world, Agathon cannot remain himself and deal in philosophical *logos* – ironically enough, he is too willing to submit. That in itself is a paradox. But not the only one lurking in the vicinity. For the serious philosopher, the refutation of Agathon is, as it were, business as usual. The thing is that this concise dialectical episode is insulated from not only the non-philosophical matter that precedes, but also the following erotic mysteries expounded by Diotima, high priestess of Platonism. Her hyperbolically paradoxical *esoterica* – that we are all pregnant, some in the *psyche* rather than in the somatic womb, that there is an absolute Beauty transcending space and time, and so forth – are fantastic doctrines she delivers *de haut en bas*: they are innocent of argumentative underpinnings. But nevertheless essential to Platonism, a philosophy that proclaims its absolute commitment to ratiocination. Paradox.

I conclude with my take on the ancient history of paradox: some confident opinions and also some speculative conjectures.

As humanity did not have to wait for Aristotle to think logically, so too we can be sure that people said all manner of very strange things before Greek thinkers designedly formulated paradoxes. But both Aristotelian logic and the ancient paradoxes mark most important intellectual sea changes. Whitehead did not in fact claim that all subsequent philosophy is footnotes to Plato;[17] but the Eleatic Stranger, the anonymous central character of *The Sophist*, does refer to Parmenides as his philosophical father (241d), and it is not outrageous to conjecture that perhaps there is more than a little of Plato himself in the Stranger. And thus it is also not altogether unreasonable to think of Parmenides as the great ancestor of philosophers. And Parmenides propounded a philosophy than which no other *can* be more paradoxical. The first part of his philosophical poem, the oldest piece of extended, would-be rigorous deduction preserved to us and quite possibly the oldest full stop, argues that all there is is a radical, absolutely immutable unity. Which is stranger than odd: with the best will in the world one cannot believe that, since the mutable extension of our beliefs contradicts Parmenides' monistic thesis. And if I am wrong to believe in multiplicity then I am right, since my mistake is necessarily different from Parmenides' supposedly correct belief.[18] The impression one gets from the remains of the poem is of a lofty character, and that certainly is how Plato depicts him in his dialogue the *Parmenides*. Zeno also appears in the dialogue, where he says that he devised his paradoxes to prove that the opinions of Parmenides' pluralist opponents were *no less incredible* than Parmenides' monism.[19] The Eleatic paradoxes are both ontological and epistemological. And finally, Protagoras, greatest of the so-called "sophists", invented a theory of extreme

17 "The safest general characterisation of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato. I do not mean the systematic scheme of thought which scholars have doubtfully extracted from his writings. I allude to the wealth of general ideas scattered through them" (Whitehead 1978, 39).

18 Parmenides fell prey to an ancestor of the *Cogito* about two and a half millennia before Descartes.

19 Kirk, Raven and Schofield 2007 is a compendious source for both Parmenides (373-407) and Zeno (408-32). Zeno's claim about the pluralists is Text 327.

relativism, according to which what *seems* true to *X* is true *for X* and also what *seems* true to *Y* is true *for Y*, although their beliefs are incompatible. That is an extraordinary epistemological paradox.[20]

I complete my set with Gorgias, who composed a nihilistic work entitled *On What Is Not*, obviously a *riposte* to Parmenides' *On What Is*. Were there a competition for most paradoxical thinker, Gorgias would be a hot contender, since *On What Is Not* argues that there is nothing; that even were there something, it would be unknowable; and that even were there something knowable, it would be incommunicable. But surely this is a mere spoof of *real*, serious philosophy? Why think that? How is it any *more* outrageous than Parmenides' monism? But surely Gorgias is just kidding? Gorgias: "I wished to write this *logos* as an encomium *of* Helen, but *my* plaything"; and Agathon: my speech shares "partly in play, partly in moderate earnestness". Furthermore, we have good if not compelling reasons to suspect that when Gorgias' self-avowed disciple Meno propounds the paradox of enquiry in the eponymous Platonic dialogue – that it is impossible, since the object is either known or unknown, and if known enquiry is forestalled, while one cannot enquire into what is unknown – he is following in the master's footsteps (see Scott 2009, 78). If so, Gorgias also invented a paradox whose philosophical legacy in Platonism and beyond can hardly be exaggerated, connected as it is with innatism. He would have deployed the paradox of enquiry in the anarchic spirit animating *On What is Not*. Gorgias and his followers both set out to undermine generic divisions, and unsettle our confidence in their tone: serious? Comic? Seriocomic? Seriously enigmatic: or should that be amusingly obscure?[21]

Here is my major historical hypothesis. The early history of Greek paradox reveals that from its inception there were austerely serious and anarchically seriocomic lineages. In the first we find Parmenides, Zeno and Plato; in the second, Gorgias and Agathon.

20 Rediscovery of the historical Protagoras is fraught with difficulties. Plato's dialogue the *Theaetetus* is the most formidable reconstruction.

21 My *The Birth of Rhetoric* (Wardy 1998) contains an extensive interpretation of Gorgias. Gorgias systematically erodes antecedent confidence that there is any prospect of a clean demarcation between the serious and the playful, segregating the latter beyond the confines of philosophy proper.

The first lineage is philosophical; the second is… what, exactly? Gorgias was a man of impressively many parts. His first claim to fame was leading a successful embassy from his home city of Leontini to Athens, where he took the Assembly by storm with a speech composed in his ostentatiously overwrought, paradoxical style. Politics. And then as I have argued, Agathon brings Gorgias into the theatre: which is not *not* politics, given the sociopolitical centrality of the theatre to ancient Athens. Nevertheless it's a different kind of politics, and of course also an entirely novel artistic *locus* for Gorgianic expression.

Now one might not unreasonably infer that my hypothesis is that in its early days the Greek paradoxical tradition encompassed both serious and entertaining variants, albeit entertainment that could subserve serious purposes; but then the second variant went extinct, leaving the field free for the serious if very strange work of the philosophers. In the next generation Plato in *The Sophist* creates two series of paradoxes, both of non-being and of being (237a-239a and 243d-250e): they contribute to the ultraserious task of proving the un- or even anti-Eleatic thesis that falsehood is possible. No laughing matter.

One might then think about the Stoic school of the Hellenistic age. Who more paradoxical than a Stoic? Their patron saint was Socrates, and they endorsed paradoxes at least as extreme as those attributed to him. They claim: everyone but the Sage is a downright fool; all fools are insane; that love is a vice; that moral virtue is not only the sole good, but also sufficient for happiness. And to top it off, that the state of affairs in the world is exactly how it should be.[22] Stoic philosophy is exceptionally austere, and hence an excellent example of the surviving lineage.

But although the inference that my hypothesis is that the entertaining variant died out is not unreasonable, it would nevertheless be false. Socrates was not the only ancestor of great importance to the Stoa. There was also Diodorus Cronus, the supreme dialectician of the Hellenistic era. Diodorus invented the Master Argument, a fiendishly difficult piece of reasoning to the

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22 See Long and Sedley's section on Stoic ethics (344-437 in vol. 1, 341-431 in vol. 2).

conclusion that what is possible either is or will be (Giannantoni 1990, 428-9). From this definition of possibility it is possible to argue that we are not free moral agents. The Stoics, who were determinists, strove to prove that despite the Master Argument, determinism is compatible with unfettered agency. Serious business, this.

However, the Master Argument is far from all there was to Diodorus. Consider his position that although nothing can move, it can *have* moved (Giannantoni 1990, 420-4).[23] If Diodorus is responding to Zeno the Eleatic's paradoxes purporting to establish that motion is impossible, then we have a nice example of paradoxes not so much dissolved as displaced by others. It is much better that we be justified in maintaining that motion exists than either capitulating to Zeno or clinging to the unjustified belief[24] that things move. Therefore if the cost of justification is acceptance of Diodorus' account, then the rational reaction would be to rest content with his paradoxical theory, rather than seek for its demolition. The moral being that there might be provinces of philosophy in which we are best advised to aim no further than the establishment of relatively tolerable paradox.[25]

23 Consult Denyer 1981 for a fine exposition of Diodorus' reasoning.

24 We are told that Diogenes the Cynic's reaction to the paradox was to silently stand up and walk off (Simplicius, *On Aristotle's Physics* 1012.22). Of course it might be argued that this pragmatic rebuttal of Zeno suffices, so far as it goes; but that does not alter the fact that within the philosophical arena only arguments count.

25 There are other relatively tolerable paradoxes arising within a Zenonian context. If as our standard for sameness of number we adopt the attractive criterion of one-to-one correspondence, we have to countenance different sizes of infinity (e.g. the cardinality of the reals is greater than that of the natural numbers) and parts as big as wholes (e.g. all the natural numbers are equinumerous with all the odd numbers). Apart from their intrinsic interest, these results show us that degree of paradoxicality can be relative to time: when Cantor introduced transfinite mathematics it seemed awfully strange, but we have become inured to what was once very surprising. Sorensen 2003 contends that philosophers also "relativise *paradox* to the best available reasoners. What counts is what stymies those in the best position to answer". As it stands this cannot be right, since there is no *a priori* reason to suppose that philosophers are competent to identify the best reasoners, "available" or not. As philosophers the best we can do is flag up the logical or conceptual conundrums that stymy *us*.

The tangled origins of "technical" grammar – in some respects a sort of precursor of the philosophy of language – lie in Stoic metaphysics. An early task for the grammarians was to build on the insight that not all words are names, so as to divide words into functional classes. Two ancient Greek particles are the words μέν and δέ. We have met them before: "on the one hand" and "on the other". They are fundamental to the language, which delights in generating all kinds of contrastive structures and patterns. According to the grammarians, μέν and δέ do not *name* anything. Diodorus gave a feast and bade his slaves serve food and wine. Their names? Μέν and Δέ, of course! (Giannantoni 1990, 416-17).[26] And here is a lovely irony: μέν/δέ structures are some of the building blocks Gorgias uses to compose his rhetoric. One might protest that so far from supporting my contention that Diodorus is a key player in the Gorgianic lineage, the μέν/δέ paradox is actually evidence that he belongs in the other camp, since it probably figured as part of a serious argument denying lexical ambiguity and claiming that linguistic significance derives exclusively from the speaker's intentions, so-called "speaker's meaning". The objection fails, and for instructive reasons. The ancients did not ever create a theoretical model for the use/mention distinction. However, Chrysippus' thesis of "universal ambiguity" was intended to explain how linguistic items can (also) signify themselves, and thus allow us to talk about them and not what they (also) signify, and doubtless he had predecessors who also appealed to ambiguity to do useful logical work for them (Atherton 1993, 298-310). On my reconstruction Diodorus is confounding such logicians, and early grammarians to boot. Diodorus was a terrific showman of a dialectician and spinner of paradoxes. And I submit that he falls into the anarchic lineage springing from Gorgias, which did in fact survive well past the early history of Greek philosophical paradox. That lineage impedes facile appeal to any easy intuition that paradoxical turns in the ancient dialectical theatre are of an unproblematically serious character.

26 Some of the testimonia have the strengthened form of μέν, ἀλλαμήν, and some say that the name of the other slave was an unspecified connective rather than δέ.

I have as yet to investigate how my hypothesis fares in application to an appropriate, much more extensive sample of Greek paradoxes. To go no further, what to do with Heraclitus? Where to put Protagoras is a pressing question. His epistemological paradox is extremely serious. But on the other hand, consider "the Paradox of the Court" (Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 5.10). Protagoras schooled Euathlus in rhetoric, with payment deferred until after the student's first victory in court. But Euathlus' career ambitions changed and he abandoned the law for politics, whereupon Protagoras sued him for the tuition. Protagoras argued that his suit must succeed: if he wins, he wins; but if Euathlus defeats him the tuition must still be paid, since the student has won his first case! However, the apt pupil had a riposte that elaborated on the paradoxical structure: if he wins, he wins; but if Protagoras defeats him he need not pay, since he would not have won his first case! A superb brace of paradoxes in dramatic combat, and such as to earn Protagoras a place in the ludic lineage.

In the second part of Plato's dialogue the *Parmenides* (137c-166c), the august Parmenides generates a mind-blowing series of antinomies, than which nothing could be more paradoxical. He undertakes to prove that a series of the most basic predicates and their negations (including "is" and "is not") are at once applicable and inapplicable to subjects designated One and Many. The opinion of some readers both ancient and modern is that these antinomies are of profound significance to both Plato and philosophy in general; but the opinion of others is that they are very weird philosophical jokes.[27] Which is their lineage?

And to complicate the picture yet further, there is also, of course, an ancient lineage hostile to paradoxes, whose most prominent representative is Aristotle himself. Although he declares that philosophy begins in wonder (*Metaphysics* 982b), Aristotle's

27 Profoundly significant: e.g. amongst the ancients, the Neoplatonists; see amongst the moderns, Schofield 1977. Weird jokes: "for some of them [the modern adherents of the logical interpretation] the second part of the *Parmenides* is a humorous polemic, designed to reduce the Eleatic doctrine of a One Being to an absurdity, through the mouth of its founder. This theory, originating with Tennemann and elaborated by Apelt, escapes the accusation of anachronism; but in its extreme form it charges the prince of philosophers with the most wearisome joke in all literature" (Cornford 2010, vii).

conservative methodology finds paradox most uncongenial: in his lexicon ἄτοπον, "strange" (literally "out of place") signifies an unacceptable oddity which must be either rejected or shown to be not that odd after all (a particularly clear example is his swift dismantling of the Socratic paradox that no one willingly does wrong, *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.2). The impression that Aristotle speaks for the broad sweep of humanity is reinforced by reflection on semantics. While it is good to have a fishmonger in the vicinity, "paradox-monger" is unfailingly pejorative. We can say that someone "spins" paradoxes without judging the activity either way; but tellingly there is no title of admiration, despite its being evident that e.g. both Cantor and Russell deserve high praise for their paradoxical results in mathematics and philosophy. The sobering truth is that the nature of majoritarian culture is to love *doxa*; no wonder that there is no general positive term for a violator of deeply rooted convictions.[28] In the light of these complexities, how should we best situate the lineages *pro* and *con*?

Agathon deserves a last look. Someone might be prepared to acknowledge the ludic lineage, but only to belittle it on the grounds that its members are lightweights, Agathon himself being no more than a powderpuff. One might parry the criticism by pointing out that it is tantamount to question-begging, since it assumes that what counts is "weight", namely, seriousness. For an alternative response let us return to his "if I tell you the truth, I'm not going to please

28 It is surprising that entire monographs devoted to philosophical paradoxes are thin on the ground. One of the few, Sainsbury's, is excellent, although his attitude is at least slightly ambivalent: on the one hand, "paradoxes are fun"; but on the other, "paradoxes are serious" (Sainsbury 2009, 1). He defines "paradox" as "an apparently unacceptable conclusion derived by apparently acceptable reasoning from apparently acceptable premises" (ibid). Sainsbury's historical component is casual. In contrast, Sorensen 2003 – also excellent – is avowedly historical, taking us from Anaximander to Quine. He rejects Sainsbury's definition on the grounds that "the paradox can be in *how* you prove something rather than in what you prove. This point causes indigestion for those who say that all paradoxes feature unacceptable conclusions. Their accounts are too narrow". Sorensen's alternative definition: "paradoxes are questions (or in some cases, pseudoquestions) that suspend us between *too many* good answers". Adjudicating between their conceptions lies beyond the scope of this essay.

you; but if I please you *at all*, I won't be telling the truth" (emphasis added). The minimum implication of "at all" is that his falsehood is the *only* source of our pleasure; and at a maximum maybe it is saying that *any* admixture of truth would spoil the fun. Perhaps some members of the audience of a tragedy whose plot derived from traditional mythology believed that the events depicted were historical, or at least could have happened. But if the tragedy is one of Agathon's for which he made the plot up from whole cloth, then we have left even potential truth behind. Outside the territory of fiction, we deprecate even trivial falsehoods and deplore major ones. Hence it is something of a paradox that the prospect of experiencing good fiction inverts our everyday preferences. This we might call an 'attitudinal' paradox. If some of the phenomena associated with "the willing suspension of disbelief" are perennially surprising, then one might say that Agathon's epigram entertains by inviting us to step back and enjoyably appreciate the oddity of what we delight in. And since we are amused by a funny fact about ourselves, we might think of Agathon's conceit as a comic version of that most solemn of injunctions, the Delphic "know thyself", a virtuosic ploy that achieves substance without getting heavy.

There are also the non-philosophical but nevertheless related groupings. It is typical of Gorgias that he not only contributes to philosophical paradox, but also is the first ancestor of a rhetorical family tree, in the next generation represented by Isocrates' mock encomia the *Helen* and the *Busiris*. Finally, a comprehensive investigation would venture beyond Western philosophy: to look no further, the paradoxes of Chuang Tzu invite us to expand our field of study to embrace ancient China, especially the ramified Taoist tradition.[29]

Ever so much work remains to be done. In the course of this essay I have mentioned different kinds of paradox. I started with types culled from Plato: substantive paradoxes; explicit paradoxes; implicit paradoxes; situational paradoxes; paradoxes of assimilation; paradoxes of dialectical obligation. Agathon himself is a social

29 My "On the Very Idea of (Philosophical?) Translation" (Wardy 2018) compares and contrasts paradoxes of ineffability in Heraclitus and Chuang Tzu.

paradox, Oscar Wilde's ancestor. We might dub Agathon's, which invite us to collude in acts of make-believe persuasion, paradoxes of complicity and attitudinal paradoxes. Then there are the ontological and epistemological paradoxes of the grandly serious philosophical tradition. And the μέν/δέ paradox of Diodorus Cronus is performative. This is only the rough beginnings of a taxonomy: what about paradoxical sophisms? And I allow myself a joke: it is nothing less than paradoxical that no one has ever attempted to construct a *catalogue raisonné* of paradoxes!

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