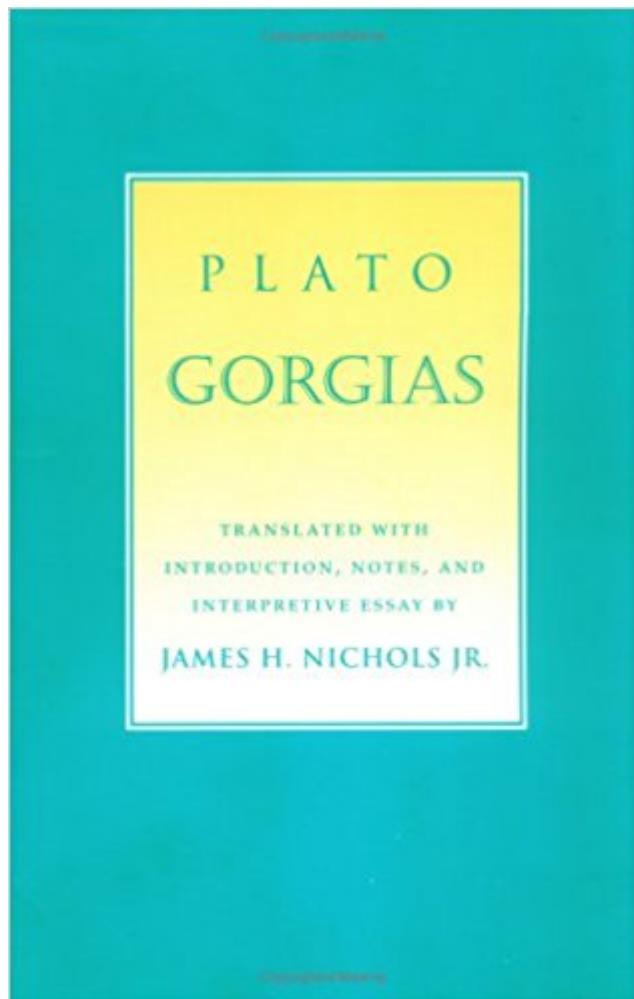


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Gorgias (Agora Editions)



Synopsis

With a masterful sense of the place of rhetoric in both thought and practice and an ear attuned to the clarity, natural simplicity, and charm of Plato's Greek prose, James H. Nichols, Jr., offers a precise yet unusually readable translation of one of the great Platonic dialogues on rhetoric. The *Gorgias* presents an intransigent argument that justice is superior to injustice •to the extent that suffering an injustice is preferable to committing an unjust act. The dialogue contains some of Plato's most significant and famous discussions of major political themes, and focuses dramatically and with unrivaled intensity on Socrates as a political thinker and actor. Nichols's attention to dramatic detail brings this dialogue to life. Plato's striking variety in conversational address (names and various terms of relative warmth and coolness) is carefully reproduced, as is alteration in tone and implication even in the short responses. The translation renders references to the gods accurately and non-monotheistically for the first time, and includes a fascinating variety of oaths and invocations. Nichols believes that Plato's thought on rhetoric has been largely misunderstood, and he uses his translation as an opportunity to reconstruct the classical position on right relations between thought and public activity.

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Customer Reviews

Text: English (translation) Original Language: Greek

The "Gorgias" looks rather elementary but, on inspection and reflection, turns out to be less so. In

the main, Waterfield is a very safe and helpful guide to the meaning of Plato's words and the significance of his arguments. Waterfield's translation is preceded by an introductory essay of about 25 pages, as well as a 'select' (but, in fact, rather comprehensive) bibliography, and is followed by a further 30 pages of explanatory notes, addressing both philosophical and historical issues, and brief biographical comments on people mentioned in the work. The ostensible theme is the nature and value of rhetoric. The discussion gets extended to the nature of value and the value of nature, and that extension is not unreasonable. For the rhetorician must supply some "content" to his rhetoric; he must talk about something, and so he must be an expert not only about talking but also about this something about which he is to talk. Matters of value readily supply this requirement of content. So the "Gorgias" has as much to say about how to live well as about how to talk well; it considers the nature of speakers in the same measure as their speech. Moreover it hones these themes with art and grace; the message does not so much supplant the medium as complement it. Waterfield is admirably sensitive to these hermeneutic subtleties. His translation reads clearly and easily; and his notes address the right issues. In my view it is unfortunate that he has followed the habit of inserting his own summaries into sections of the translation. This practice not only represents an intrusion into Plato's text of material which is alien and which he might disown; the additions necessarily occur -- and therefore break the argument -- at points of Waterfield's rather than Plato's choosing. That said, Waterfield's judgement in the exercise of this practice is mostly to be commended. The best elements in Waterfield's treatment are the first and third episodes in the Gorgias -- the interrogations of Gorgias and Callicles, while his presentation of the second Polus episode is less sure. The discussion between Polus and Socrates takes us into areas where the focus is more explicitly upon issues of value, but even so rhetorical themes persist. Polus is worsted by Socrates because he is insensitive to hard questions concerning the agent's thoughts about values and the value of the actions which result from such thoughts. In particular Polus feels no qualms about countenancing a gap between conventional or public valuations and the individual agent's values; and this is his undoing. For Socrates affects to assume, and probably really did believe, that no such gap can exist. If something is wrong (in any sense, including 'morally wrong'), then there can be no scope for the suggestion that it is in fact the best thing to do. Language is crucial in this debate. Polus allows a part of the vocabulary of value ('kalos' and 'aiskhros') to become detached from the central elements ('agathos' and 'kakos'). It stretches the translator's skill to get these matters right; and Waterfield does not altogether succeed. He uses 'admirable' and 'contemptible' to render the value terms which Polus is supposed to disown. In the subsequent argument the two key features are, first, Polus's acknowledgement that these terms express different values from those

expressed by 'good' and 'bad', and secondly his readiness to accept pleasure and benefit as criteria for the apparently disowned values, which has the effect of re-importing them into his own scheme. Waterfield's method makes Polus's claim at 474c that doing wrong is better and more contemptible than suffering wrong, which in turn is worse and more admirable than doing it, too unintelligible to be interesting. No help would be gained by importing explicit talk about "morality" (which Waterfield unjustifiably does at 470c and 471a). Perhaps the best solution is to use terms like 'worthy' and 'rotten', which do connote values but ones which a given agent, such as Polus, may well be unlikely to hold.

I give this book 5 stars just for the 2 commentaries that contained in here. The first essay discusses rhetoric and how it is being utilized in Gorgias and in Phedrus. The second essay (that comes after the translation) discusses the Gorgias itself in greater details. I believe that if you are serious in studying Plato, you need to read the commentaries. Plato's work is complex and multi dimensional, its essence cannot be understood on the first reading or by reading the text alone without the commentaries. My interpretation of Gorgias which slightly differs from Nichols is the following: While Nichols argues that in Gorgias Socrates attempts to find the best form or rhetorics to "persuade" the demos of Athens. I argue that in Gorgias, Socrates acknowledges that rhetoric is a necessary part of dialectic, even though it is not sufficient. Dialectic by itself is incapable of persuading people, rhetoric, however, because it lacks the true knowledge, only gives us beliefs. Socrates argument is that both rhetoric and dialectic are needed. He illustrates this in several places in which he relies on Gorgias to persuade Callicles to continue with the argument. Without Gorgias (ie without rhetoric) the dialectic between Socrates and Callicles will end in an impasse. Rhetoric, after all is needed for dialectic to reach its conclusion. Just like in the Republic, Gorgias ends with a myth, and not a logos.

Anyone interested in political science, Ancient Greek Thought, or Plato will want to read the Gorgias, so I will not presume to argue why it should be read, save thus: if you wish to be educated, you need books of this caliber. Translation: Arieti and Barrus have done a conservative, literal job in giving us English for Plato's Greek, and thus there is much to praise. Occasionally the literalness seems excessive, as when they routinely insert bracketed phrases not literally present in the Greek, but I have no major complaints. Plato's style is polished and playful; the translators point out various places where he puns on different words or cracks jokes. Included in this translation are rhetorical examples taken from Thucydides; very illuminating. Aesthetics: A pretty book. The text is well-sized and the index is helpful. The size is perfect for casual reading, for it's lightweight and

compact. Durability. As with most Focus books, quite durable. I treat my books (especially paperbacks) with kid gloves, and if you do the same it will remain in pristine condition, but it could stand up to a far greater abuse than it does under me. Price: Quite cheap and competitive with Nichol's translation. You will get a lot of book for your buck if you buy it.

An easily approachable work is not a common phrase for Plato, but this rendition of the *Gorgias* presents diction and translation in an accurate and approachable manner, and luckily for the reader includes the necessary Stephanus pages. The only gripe I have is the constant flipping to the rear of the book for the notes of the author. I much prefer chopped pages to a constant back and forth. A student of philosophy and most classics students will find this a good enough translation, but of course anyone pursuing this into graduate studies will want to look at the original.

I must say that I believe my ability to make successful argument has increased an iota or two after imbibing some of this wisdom that Plato was able to pass down to us through the ages. Books like these remind me why I have felt at certain moments that Western Civilization is truly a good thing.

As expected.

Great classic book with amazing translation and explanatory notes.

What can I say? It's Plato. It is what it is and I like it.

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