1. *The title ‘On Nothing’ and its content is meant to call to mind another famous philosopher/ philosophical text. Which philosopher / which text? Explain your answer.*

Both the title and the contents of Gorgia’s work ‘*On Nothing*’ are turned towards Parmenides (more specifically, towards his work titled ‘*On Nature*’) and the Eleatic school in general. The contents of ‘*On Nothing*’ essentially consist of a series of arguments defending a world view completely opposite to that maintained by disciples of the Eleatic school, affirming non-existence over existence. It is unclear whether the text is significative of an ontological stance being taken by Gorgias (which would seem to agree with the sophistic Zeitgeist described in Sedley), or simply a sort of demonstration of rhetoric dexterity through the persuasion of the listener to refute the theories of a man as wise as Parmenides.

1. *Analyse and discuss the logical structure of § 1. Does the argument convince you? Why (not)?*

The argument presented by Gorgias proceeds from the simple statement that “if something is, either what-is is or what-is-not is, or both what-is and what-is-not are. Gorgia now begins the ambitious project of proving each of these options to be impossible. Most obviously, what-is-not cannot be, for its existence would create a paradox (as what-is-not would simultaneously not be by its own definition and be by the definition of existence and, furthermore, if we were to admit the existence of what-is-not, we would be forced to admit the impossibility of what-is, as the two are necessarily opposites, which is itself also a paradox). If what-is is, it must be either eternal in nature, or generated, or both eternal and generated. It clearly cannot be both, as being eternal implies the absence of generation, and *vice versa*. If what-is were to be eternal, it would be without beginning or end, and thus *unlimited*, and therefore it would be nowhere, as for it to be anywhere, it would have to be either enclosed within something else or in itself. It could not be in itself, for that would be absurd, as it would at once be place and body, and neither can it be contained in something else, as this something would be greater than it, but nothing can be larger than what is unlimited, therefore what-is cannot be anywhere. But if what-is is nowhere, it cannot be at all. Furthermore, what-is cannot be generated either, as (as Melissus already pointed out himself) then it would have to either come from something that is or something that is not. But since what-is cannot come from something that is not, nor can it come from what-is (as through eternal regress the necessity for the existence of something eternal would become evident), it cannot be generated at all. Gorgias then goes further, stating that even disregarding this proof, if we were to admit the existence of what-is, we would then be forced to admit too that what-is must be either one or many. However, if it is one, it must be a quantity, a continuous, a magnitude or a body, and all these entities can be divided, cut, expressed in a multiplicity of dimensions or otherwise reduced to smaller parts. Therefore, what-is cannot be one, as that would lead to contradiction. If it is many, it would simply be a collection of ‘ones’, and since the one has been refuted, so have the many. It is also now clear that what-is and what-is-not cannot both be, as what-is has been proven to not be, and that would make what-is the same as what-is-not, but if they are one and the same, they cannot both exist. Therefore, through a process of programmatic proof of impossibility of each of the possible existing ontological options, we are left with no viable one, meaning that nothing can exist. The argument presented is, in a way, extremely thorough, insofar as it examines every possible case of the nature of existence, but it is clearly not very convincing when contrasted with our daily experience of reality as something that very clearly is. There are, however, still objections to be made to a great number of argumentative tactics being employed – the proof of the impossibility of eternal *what-is*, for example, relates temporal eternity to spatial unlimitedness, implying a sort of equivalence between the forms of time and space. This equivalence seems everything but obvious, as Aristotle’s refutation of Zeno’s arguments against motion has shown, and it relies on certain qualities that Gorgia assigns to both terms (namely, their extendedness and divisibility into portions). For if one were to assume time to be either an eternal moment (as Parmenides does) or an indivisible continuum (as Aristotle seems to do), then there would be no grounds for Gorgia’s statement that the eternity of what-is would implicate its being nowhere (or, perhaps, *no-when*), as the absence of its beginning and end, without the added premise of the divisible and quantifiable nature of time (and thus the existence of a sort of timeline), does not translate into the necessity of its delocalisation. Meaning that, if we take time to be anything other than a straight line made of quantifiable and divisible intervals, the eternal existence of what-is does not necessarily imply that its being “somewhere”, or rather “everywhere” on this straight line means for it to be enclosed in either something else or in void (therefore, what-is not). One could argue that this very same line of time must in turn be enclosed in something else (or immersed in a void of “not”), and thus that time itself must be eternal and delocalised. It is not clear, however, what nature Gorgias attributes to time (even the afore mentioned characteristic are mere suppositions based on his pattern of argument), and thus it is unclear whether time is to be considered as an eternal dimension, whose existence transcends and, in a sense, is necessary for, the existence of sensible things, or whether it exists *in function* of those other things that (perhaps) exist, and therefore somehow participating in their ontological nature (in which case, the existence of time would be dependent on the existence of what-is, for if nothing is, it is clear that time itself cannot be). Even if, in *bona fide*, we were to accept the latter interpretation, meaning that the existence of time itself is contingent to the existence of what-is, the other characteristic attributed to it (divisibility, extension, in short, an essence assimilable to that of space in everything but materiality), do not logically follow from its sole existence, and can thus be shown to be assumptions not made explicit and in need of justification. This fact alone is enough to refute Gorgia’s argument, for the possibility of existence of eternal what-is is on its own enough to negate the conclusion that nothing can be.

1. *In §2, Gorgias builds his argument on a principle that he does not argue for. Which principle is this? Should we accept this principle? Why (not)?*

The principle in question is that “*being thought of”* is to be treated as an attribute of the object of perception, meaning that between things-that-are and things-that-are-not, because of their opposite nature, only one can possess the attribute of “*being thought of*”. This principle leads Gorgias to claim that “*if things that are thought of are things-that-are, things-that-are-not will not be thought of*” (if things-that-are possess the attribute of “*being thought of*”, it necessarily follows that things-that-are-not do not possess the same attribute, as they would no longer be wholly opposite to things-that-are). This principle, it is worth noting, extends to sensation as well – “*being heard*”, for example, is an attribute of audible things, and we recognise a thing to be audible when we recognise it possesses this attribute. Acceptance of this principle leads to interesting conclusions, as, if sensory and epistemological qualities of things are attributes of things themselves, our senses simply become receptacles for these qualities, rather than, as we seem to understand them, tools of inquiry into reality: it is not that I *hear* the ringing of a bell, but rather that bells *possesses* the attribute of being audible, and my senses are simply witnesses to this property of bells. Likewise, it is not that through reason and thought I imagine reality, but rather that things themselves should (or shouldn’t) possess the attribute of “*being thought of*”, of being knowable. This is where Gorgia’s argument for the impossibility of knowledge of things comes from, as imagination of things-that-are-not is, at least according to common sense today, not a symptom for their existence and, certainly, its possibility does not preclude us from the possibility of knowledge of those things that are. Acceptance or not of this principle has incredibly big implications, for it means to, essentially, decide whether the knowability and imaginability of things resides within things themselves (which seems to be contradictory, as Gorgias points out, because we can very well imagine thing that do not, in facts, exist), within living beings (including animals) through sensory perception, or within the intellect. Regardless of any further questions that might originate from this perilous gnoseological crossroads, it would be absurd for us to walk along the road marked by Gorgias, as it seeks to prove the unknowability of reality by placing the criterion for knowability itself (the attribute of “*being thought of*”) in things of the world, the existence of which is itself unsure. If we were to suppose knowledge, as it is common to do, as a function of beings or intellect (which is itself a seemingly unproblematic task), then Gorgias’s argument would not stand.

1. *In § 3, Gorgias presents a theory about language. Describe this theory in your own words. What criticism could be directed against this theory?*