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THE INTERPRETATION  
OF GORGIAS' TREATISE  
*HEPI TOY MI ONTOΣ*  
*"H HEPI ΦΥΣΕΩΣ*

Summary\*

The article first surveys 20th century approaches to Gorgias' *Treatise* — from the early essentially negative assessments of it to more recent attempts at positive interpretation. The author then focuses on the third part of the *Treatise* and suggests that it is an attempt — constrained by a referential theory of meaning — to isolate elements of the process of communication and to argue for the, in principle, unbridgeable gulfs between various pairs of these elements, in consequence of which communication by means of λόγος is impossible.

It is often mentioned as a matter for regret that the study of the sophistic movement is made more difficult by the absence of surviving works actually written by individual sophists. Certain anonymous writings, e.g. the *Dissoi Logoi* and the *Anonymus Iamblichi* have been admitted

\* Prepared by the Editor.

as exceptions to this state of affairs. But it is nonetheless a matter for surprise that the one really outstanding example, Gorgias' treatise 'On that which is not, or on nature', has until quite recently received only very scanty attention from students of the sophistic movement.

The reason for this neglect is partly historical. For quite a long time it was common to hold that the treatise expounded a form of complete philosophical Nihilism — the denial of everything whatsoever — and that it was intended as a kind of joke or farce without any purpose other than the provision of amusement<sup>1</sup>. Some who took this view did suppose that it had a serious purpose, but one that was purely negative and destructive. Thus George Grote<sup>2</sup> supposed that his Nihilism was not unlimited in scope, but was directed only against the Absolute Being of the Eleatics, and this view was colorfully expressed by Karl Reinhardt in 1916 when he wrote that 'das Ganze eine Farce ist. Die Eleaten hatten sich überlebt; im regsamen Sizilien lachte man über sie.'<sup>3</sup> But Zeller<sup>4</sup> was not prepared to restrict the object of Gorgias' attack to the Eleatics — he supposed that it involved a more generalised scepticism, in its direction at least, pointing towards a denial of all objective truth.

It is likely that all these essentially unfavourable negative assessments of Gorgias' treatise have had an unhelpful effect in that the discussion of which of them is to be accepted has tended to divert scholars from what is the first requirement of interpretation, namely a careful, precise, and, above all, detailed philosophical analysis and evaluation of the actual arguments used in the treatise. Here at least it is possible to say that we have now seen the beginning of better things. First the text itself. This has come to us in two versions or paraphrases, that of Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* VII. 65 - 87, and that in the pseudo-Aristotelian *De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia* (MXG) 979a12 - 980b21. Most unfortunately the text of MXG was not included in the first three editions of H. Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (1903 - 1912), and although Diels edited the text of MXG separately in 1900 (*Abhandlungen* of the Berlin Academy) this has remained relatively hard to procure. Much worse, it proved to be not possible to include it in the fourth edition of VS (1922) or in *any* later edition down to the present day, despite recognition that its inclusion was needed (cf. VS II<sup>6</sup> p. 425.30). It was however eventually made generally available when it was printed by M. Untersteiner, *Sofisti testimonianze e frammenti* Fasc. ii, Florence 1949 and in subsequent reprints. The text of MXG as a whole, not merely for Gorgias, has now been edited and discussed in detail by B. Cassin, *Si Parménide*, Lille 1980.

This means that it is now much easier than it was to make a direct comparison between the Sextus-version and that of MXG. But once again past history has proved to be something of a discouragement: for long the prevalent view was that the paraphrase or version in Sextus was the better one as being clearer and more complete,<sup>5</sup> hence its original inclusion by Diels in VS. But more recent scholarship, over the last fifty years or so, has seen a considerable reversal of this judgment, so that it is now common to express a more or less complete preference for MXG.<sup>6</sup> There is a real danger here of oversimplification, and I have no doubt that Untersteiner is right<sup>7</sup> in saying that what is wanted is rather a reciprocal integration of the two redactions. Let us admit the overall superiority of MXG and the inferiority of Sextus. We must still, in the very difficult situation confronting us in our attempts at interpretation, make the fullest possible use of Sextus as well as the version in MXG.<sup>8</sup>

When we turn to the actual interpretation of the arguments it is possible to see that two developments have come close to transforming the problems confronting the would-be interpreter. The first was the recognition that Gorgias' supposed nihilism is in no sense complete — while the first part of the treatise might seem to deny that anything exists, in the second and third parts the existence of things seems at least implicitly to be accepted. This in itself might not amount to very much as it might be dismissed as exhibiting the method of an advocate rather than that of a philosopher.<sup>9</sup> Far different was the effect of the book by Guido Calogero, *Studi sull'eleatismo*, Rome 1932,<sup>10</sup> which, after some delay, has now come to be seen to have initiated a decisive shift in the modern scholarly interpretation of Parmenides and, as a result, of the Eleatic movement as a whole. Briefly put, Calogero may be said to have argued that what Parmenides was concerned with in his famous distinction between two ways at the beginning of his poem was not some absolute objective Being as such, but rather the form or manner of discourse in which we may speak of anything whatsoever. Calogero went on to argue that Parmenides had confused the "is" of predication with the "is" of existence — thus falling into ambiguity between the copulative and the existential senses of the verb "to be". Subsequent scholars have now come to doubt whether this last formulation is correct — perhaps the whole of what Parmenides was doing was concerned with the use of "is" as a copula.<sup>11</sup> This need not concern us for the moment. What was to prove of fundamental importance was the suggestion that Parmenides was concerned with modes of affirmation, and so with the use of

the verb "to be" rather than with Absolute Being as such. This means that if Gorgias was concerned with the argument of Parmenides, as everyone agrees that he was, Gorgias also may well have been concerned with modes of discourse, rather than with contentions about the existence or non-existence of things. In other words the whole basis for the attribution of complete philosophic Nihilism to Gorgias is undercut, and the way is cleared for a study of his treatise based on the likelihood that in all three parts he may have been concerned primarily with modes of discourse. And in that case there is no reason why, *prima facie*, he should not be supposed to have been talking seriously, and indeed philosophically, throughout.<sup>13</sup> Parmenides had argued that only statements that were positive in form were to be accepted - negative statements, all expressible in the form "is not", cannot be accepted, for it is not possible to say "that it is not". Could it then perhaps be the case that Gorgias was extending the attack to cover not only negative statements but also positive statements - not only "is not" but also "is", so that all statements involving the verb "to be" are unacceptable. It may have been this which led Gorgias' pupil Lycophron to argue that statements such as ὁ ἄνθρωπος λευκός ἐστίν should be rejected in favour of statements in the form ὁ ἄνθρωπος λελευκώται - Diels-Kranz, VS 83.2 = Aristotle, *Phys.* A.2.185b25 ff.<sup>13</sup>

While the escape from the need to attribute complete philosophic Nihilism to Gorgias cleared the way for more positive interpretations, it did not, of course, reveal just what those interpretations should be. What followed (in the period after 1945) was a series of divergent accounts, above all in Italy, possessing the one common feature that they were all prepared to take Gorgias' thought seriously.<sup>14</sup> We stand at the beginning, not at the conclusion of the process of detailed interpretation. What is needed, I believe, at the present stage of Gorgianic scholarship is a *programme* of discussion and research which will proceed from two starting points. While each of these must be kept distinct from the other, they must also be constantly used in relation to each other. The first starting point is the analysis of the two surviving texts, paying close attention to a series of related problems - the precise meaning of the Greek, in the case of MXG involving difficult problems of textual criticism, the identification of the arguments used, the logical relation of the arguments to each other, both inside each version and between the two versions. An excellent example of the *approach* which is required is to be found in the work already mentioned, by G. Mazzara.<sup>15</sup> A second starting point however is surely of no less importance - this is to identify

certain broad philosophic features in Gorgias' thought in order to provide a kind of philosophic sketch-map, within which precise arguments from the two texts may be provisionally located, while at the same time the outline sketch-map itself may be progressively refined and corrected.

The positing of such a second starting point does, admittedly, involve an element of faith — a faith that Gorgias *was* concerned with the development of an overall philosophic position. But the accumulation of scholarly evidence over the last generation makes such an assumption not wholly unreasonable as a starting point. The structure of Gorgias' *περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ἢ περὶ φύσεως* is tri-partite — as formulated in MXG Gorgias maintains (1) οὐκ εἶναι οὐδέν, (2) εἰ δ' ἔστιν, ἄγνωστον εἶναι, (3) εἰ δὲ καὶ ἔστι καὶ γνωστόν, ἀλλ' οὐ δηλωτὸν ἄλλοις. The main lines of the kind of philosophic sketch map called for above may perhaps be best sought for in the third part of Gorgias' treatise — εἰ δὲ καὶ ἔστι καὶ γνωστόν, ἀλλ' οὐ δηλωτὸν ἄλλοις — and through the kindness and generosity of the Ἑλληνικὴ Φιλοσοφικὴ Ἑταιρεία: it was possible at the International Symposium on the Sophistic Movement held in Athens 27 - 29 September 1982 to include three discussions of Gorgias' doctrine with special reference to just this part of his text<sup>16</sup>. My suggested outline sketch-map would now be as follows. Plato provides us with quite specific evidence (*Meno* 76a8 - e2) that both Gorgias and his disciple Meno of Larissa adopted the account of sense-perception developed by Empedocles. All the senses are to be explained in the same way, that is by effluences — ἀπορροαί — given off by physical objects which enter the human body through pores or passages — πόροι — provided always that the effluences are not too large, or *too small* (my italics), for the pores in question. So colour is an effluence of shapes which is commensurate with sight and therefore perceptible — ἀπορροὴ σχημάτων ὅψει σύμμετρος καὶ αἰσθητός.<sup>17</sup> Now from such an account of perception there results a kind of validation of the process of sense-perception as veridical. Unless the ἀπορροαί are damaged or distorted in transmission, as Epicurus was later to accept as possible, by receiving (undamaged) ἀπορροαί we receive a kind of veridical perception, hereafter referred to as the sense-impression, of the πράγματα or objects from which they are emitted. There is however a fundamental distinction between effluences which fit into the πόροι of one sense, and those which fit into the πόροι of another sense — sights can not be heard and sounds can not be seen. This is exactly what we find also in MXG, see e.g. 980b1 - 2. There is thus a gulf, unbridged and unbridgeable, between what is perceived by one

sense, e.g. sight, and what is perceived by another sense e.g. hearing. This I shall label Gulf (A).

The argument in the third part of MXG opens (980a20 - b3) with the emphatic contention that one person cannot communicate what he has himself seen to another person by means of λόγος. All that the other person can perceive in such a case is the sound of the spoken word, and sound is not sight, so that what has been seen cannot be communicated by sound. This seems at first inspection to be a straightforward application of Gulf (A), that between what is perceived by one sense and what is perceived by another sense. But Gorgias admits an exception, which at the very least complicates his position, by saying that such communication is impossible *unless the listener has himself seen the visible object* — μή ἰδόντι 980a21, and this exception is repeated in 980b5 in such a way as to make it clear that Gorgias supposes that one man can learn from another, in the case of a colour, if he himself has seen it, and in the case of a sound if he himself has heard it. The explanation of this exception remains problematical, but it may be that what Gorgias has in mind is as follows. In the exceptional cases where words can convey information, this is done not in virtue of the *meaning* of the word or words, but in another way. So in the case of speakers of two different languages which are in each case unintelligible to the other of the two persons, a shout by one man may alert the attention of the other towards an object, provided it is *present* to his sight. Of course it is not the *meaning* of the shouted word which has this effect, only its sound acting as a kind of trigger.

Whatever be the correct explanation of this problem, the inability of λόγος to communicate in normal circumstances may be said to have established two further gulfs: Gulf (B) between the λόγος and the πρᾶγμα — stated explicitly in the conclusion at 980b18 - 19, and Gulf (C) between the λόγος and the sense-impression. Gulf (C) will follow necessarily from Gulf (B) if I am right in arguing that on the the Empedoclean schema the sense-impression is to be accepted as veridical in relation to the πρᾶγμα. But there is more to come. Without warning it would seem, at 980b7 we are told of a further impossibility — it is not possible to think (διανοεῖσθαι = ? to think conceptually, or to conceptualise) a colour or a sound, but only to see a colour or hear a sound. This introduces a fourth gulf — Gulf (D), that between sense-impressions and the (corresponding) thoughts, a distinction which might seem to pre-figure Plato's distinction between δόξα and ἐπιστήμη.

While it is left unclear what are the relationships envisaged between

Gulfs (A), (B), (C) and (D) outlined above, it seems to me that they are so firmly established in the text of MXG that they must all four be accepted as part of Gorgias' thinking, and so as elements in the tentative sketch-map of his philosophic position. It is always possible that there may have been some further clarification in Gorgias' actual treatise, since all we have are paraphrases or summaries, both in MXG and in Sextus. In default of further direct evidence I can only speculate unashamedly. In MXG 980b8 - 14 we seem to be told that it is not possible for one person to *think* the same as another person because in such a case "the one" would have to become two or more. This is often taken as another way of saying that two people cannot have the same sense-impression, which is indeed what we find said in the immediately following sentence at 980b14 - 17. But this following sentence is introduced by  $\delta\epsilon$  in such a way as to show, I would argue, that in it Gorgias is proceeding to a further point, and is not merely reformulating what has been said in the previous sentence. This would suggest that the one-many argument was intended to apply *both* to "thoughts" *and* to sense-impressions. We would then have two further gulfs — Gulf (E) between one man's sense-impressions and those of another man, and Gulf (F) between one man's thoughts and another man's thoughts.

If this was the way in which Gorgias' argument was proceeding he was introducing a kind of atomising or isolating process which might seem only to be a further example of a completely destructive technique. Yet just such a process of isolation of ingredients in a situation is often the necessary first step for progress in philosophy. It might be that the sequence of Gorgias' thought was as follows. Because of gulf (A), (B) and (C) it is impossible for communication to take place by means of  $\lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$ . It is true that Gulf (A) may be circumvented though not bridged in cases of auditory phenomena, but this does not avoid Gulfs (B) and (C). Gorgias has introduced a decisive breach into the relation between words and things, and by so doing also between words and sense-impressions. Yet from Parmenides onwards it was part of the received wisdom that words must refer to something. Another way of putting it would be to say that all thinkers in the fifth century B.C. were still imprisoned in the constraints imposed by the search for a referential theory of meaning. This was something from which even Plato could not escape — in default of any other possible objects of reference for words he ended up by proposing fresh entities, the Platonic Forms. No such solution was available to Gorgias. The furthest that he was able to go was to suppose that it is thoughts in people's minds which function as objects of refe-

rence. Even so communication seems still to be blocked by Gulf (F). Gorgias can accordingly be criticised for failure, but it was failure over a problem which has eluded solution at least until Frege's distinction between Meaning and Reference made towards the end of the nineteenth century. Gorgias' awareness of the problem may well be felt to qualify him for the epithets used by Mazzara in the title of his book - *Gorgia ontologo e metafisico*.

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### Notes

1. So W. Windelband, *Geschichte der Philosophie*, 1900, p. 72: Dieser Nihilismus machte wohl kaum den Anspruch, ernst genommen zu werden. Schon der Titel sieht wie eine groteske Farce aus. cf. H. Gomperz, *Sophistik und Rhetorik* (1912) 1965, 35: Die Schrift über die Natur war ein *παίγνιον*. Der "philosophische Nihilismus" des Gorgias ist aus der Geschichte der Philosophie zu streichen. Seine Scherzrede über die Natur hat ihren Platz in der Geschichte der Rhetorik. The only positive aspect of the work, according to H. Gomperz, is its intention to demonstrate the power of the art of rhetoric to make even the incredible credible. In this view he is followed in essentials e.g. by E. Bux, *Hermes* 76 (1941) 393 - 407, and C.M.J. Sicking, *Mnemosyne* 17 (1964) 245.

2. *Plato and the other companions of Socrates*, Vol. I, 1875, 107 - 109.

3. *Parmenides und die Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie*, 1959, 39. For essentially similar views see Th. Gomperz, *Greek Thinkers* (Eng. Trans.) Vol. I (1901) 480 - 496, H. Maier, *Sokrates* (1913) 223 - 226, K. Joël, *Geschichte der antiken Philosophie* (1921) 726, and W. Bröcker, *Hermes* 86 (1958) 438.

4. *Philosophie der Griechen* I.2<sup>5</sup> (1892) 1104, followed subsequently by W. Nestle, *Hermes* 57 (1922) 554, R. Mondolfo, *Problemi del pensiero antico* (1936) 177 - 182, C.M.J. Sicking, *Mnemosyne* 17 (1964) 225 - 247, and A. Levi, *Storia della sofistica* (1966) 204 - 238, who however supposes that in some sense moral truths were for Gorgias excluded from his otherwise universal scepticism. A rather special position is adopted by V. Di Benedetto, *Rend. Acc. dei Lincei*, Ser. viii vol. 10 (1955) 287 - 305, who argues for a specific polemic by Gorgias against Protagoras.

5. So e.g. H. Gomperz, *op. cit.* 18, and Nestle, *Hermes* 57 (1922) 555. More recently the same view is found in E. Dupréel, *Les sophistes* (1948)



64 ff. and J.H.M.M. Loenen, *Parmenides, Melissus, Gorgias* (1959) 179 - 180.

6. E.g. W. Bröcker, *Hermes* 86 (1958). This is carried so far by H. J. Newiger, *Untersuchungen zu Gorgias' Schrift über das Nichtseiende* (1973) 161 ff. that he supposes that in the third part of the treatise Gorgias is *completely* dependent upon MXG.

7. *Sofisti testimonianze e frammenti* Fasc. ii (1949) p. 38.

8. For an excellent view of this problem see G. Mazzara, *Gorgia ontologo e metafisico*, Ila Palma 1982, 99 - 101.

9. As e.g. by O. Gigon, *Hermes* 71 (1936) 191.

10. Reprinted Florence 1977, also in German translation, *Studien über den Eleatismus*, Hildesheim 1970.

11. See e.g. A.P.D. Mourelatos, *The Route of Parmenides*, New Haven 1970.

12. It is interesting that a logician, I. M. Bochenski, *Ancient Formal Logic*, 1951, p. 17 could argue that the treatise displays such a high level of logical skill that this is to be taken as one of the reasons why the treatise cannot safely be ascribed to Gorgias.

13. I attempted an analysis of the first part of Gorgias argument along these lines in *Phronesis* 1 (1955/6) 3 - 25.

14. See survey in G. Mazzara, *op. cit.* above n. 8.

15. See above n. 8.

16. By Prof. A.P.D. Mourelatos from Texas, Prof. A.A. Long from Liverpool and by myself from Manchester. It is expected that these papers will be published as part of the Proceedings of the Symposium in 1983.

17. For the reading in Plato's text and the interpretation see R.S. Bluck, *Plato's Meno*, Cambridge 1961, p. 252.