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Gorgias (1) of Leontini, orator, c. 485–c. 380 BCE

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Text and bibliography updated to reflect current scholarship on Gorgias. Keywords and summary added.

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Summary and Keywords

Gorgias of Leontini, orator, c. 485–c. 380 BCE, was one of the most well-known and influential of the early Greek rhetoricians. He spent much of his life as an itinerant speaker and reputed educator throughout Greece and contributed to the early development of the art of speech. His extant works include two complete speeches, *Encomium of Helen* and *Defense of Palamedes*, and ancient authors also summarize, provide fragments from, or report several additional works: *On What-Is-Not*, a *Funeral Speech*, a *Pythian Speech*, an *Olympian Speech*, a *Speech for the People of Elis*, a treatise on the “opportune moment” or *kairos*, and some manuals of rhetoric.

Keywords: Gorgias, Leontini, orator, rhetoric, encomium, Helen, Palamedes, Plato

Life and Works

Gorgias of Leontini, orator, c. 485–c. 380 BCE, became one of the most well-known and influential figures of the early, 5th-century generation of thinkers credited with developing and marketing skills, principles, and ideas related to the burgeoning art of speech. Nothing secure is recorded about the events of his early life, although he must have achieved some degree of eminence and respect in Leontini (presumably in connection with his talent for public speaking), for in 427 he led an embassy to Athens to request assistance for his city in its resistance to Syracusan aggression. He supposedly dazzled the Athenians with his oratorical abilities during this visit; and in subsequent

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decades, he made his living as an itinerant speaker and reputed educator throughout mainland Greece. He is reported to have traveled to or delivered speeches for Delphi and Boeotia, as well as Elis, Olympia, and Argos on the Peloponnese, and he established strong ties to Larissa and the region of Thessaly, where he eventually settled and lived out the remaining years of his life in the court of Jason, the tyrant of Pherae. Ancient biographers report a few other details of his personal and family life as well: he was the son of a Charmantides; his sister married a Deicrates, whose grandson later dedicated a statue to Gorgias in Olympia; his brother Herodicus was a physician; he (probably) never married and had no children; he commissioned a golden statue of himself at Delphi; and despite his lucrative career, he left only a modest fortune at his death. By all accounts he lived an extraordinarily long life, perhaps as long as 105 or even 109 years.¹

Gorgias' extant works include an *Encomium of Helen*, in which he ostensibly attempts to exculpate Helen of Troy, and a *Defense of Palamedes*, a speech from Palamedes' own perspective delivered in response to the charge of treason leveled against him by Odysseus. The pseudo-Aristotelian text *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* (MXG) and Sextus Empiricus also provide two distinct summaries of an additional work, *On What-Is-Not*, in which Gorgias argues for a series of paradoxical conclusions (see section called "PHILOSOPHY"), and ancient sources provide spare fragments from, or reports of, a number of other speeches and works as well: a *Funeral Speech* that eulogizes fallen Athenian soldiers; a *Pythian Speech*; an *Olympian Speech*; a *Speech for the People of Elis*; a work in which Gorgias discusses the nature of the "opportune moment," or *kairos*; and some manuals of rhetoric.

The ancient tradition identifies Gorgias as the student of several important fifth century figures. He is supposed to have studied with Tisias and Corax, who appear to have been among the first teachers of legal oratory in Sicily, and whom both Plato and Aristotle associate, in particular, with teachings about the importance of the "likely," or *eikos*, in legal arguments (for Tisias, see Pl. *Phdr.* 227a-b and 273a-274a; for Corax, see Arist. *Rh.* 1402a16-25). Gorgias also reportedly studied under the philosopher Zeno of Elea, as well as the Sicilian philosopher and mystic Empedocles. Given the tendency of ancient biographers to attribute pedagogical relationships on the scant basis of apparent geographical or chronological overlap, it is unclear whether, and to what extent, Gorgias was a "student" of any of these figures in a traditional sense, although his works and practices may well reflect some influence from some or all of them.

Teachings and Practices

Like other orators and sophists of his time, Gorgias apparently performed epideictic “display” speeches (of which his *Helen* may be an example) in the cities he visited. These were memorized speeches designed to enthrall an audience and, at least for some speakers, advertise themselves to potential students. Gorgias was also known in the ancient world for his ability to discuss any proposed topic or answer any given question extemporaneously (see, for example, Pl. *Grg.* 456c and *Meno* 70b-c; and Cic. *Inv. rhet.* 1.7). As an orator Gorgias’ most distinctive feature, however, was his adventurous and flamboyant use of a variety of novel rhetorical devices. Most notably, he was known for employing a poetic or “dithyrambic” style of speech that blurred the boundary between oratory and poetry, supposedly “not wanting the rhetorician to sound like ordinary speakers” (Syrianus, *Hermogenes* I.II.20).² Evidently he also invented extravagant compound words—such as “beggarpoeetflatterer,” or *ptôchomousokolax* (Arist. *Rh.* 1406a1)—and he made rich use of alliteration, metaphor, chiasmus, repetition, and rhythm. While his striking style may have impressed many of his audiences, however, it ultimately came to be viewed in some professional and philosophical circles as garish and tiresome. Plato parodies his style in his *Symposium* (197c-199b), and later critics claim that Gorgias “grossly overused” his rhetorical techniques (Cic. *Orat.* 52.176), which “now seem affected and often appear ridiculous or overdone” (Diod. Sic. 12.4).

Little is known about Gorgias’ pedagogical practices, but according to Aristotle, he was among those educators who had their students memorize lessons and set speeches from written texts (*Soph. el.* 183b36-40). He probably made use of his manuals of rhetoric in his teaching, and he may have had his students learn the sorts of argumentative techniques or *topoi* that are demonstrated in his forensic speech *Palamedes*. Apparently he did not, unlike many of his competitors, claim to teach his students virtue, preferring to focus on oratory instead (Pl. *Meno* 95c).

The ancient tradition is much more promiscuous in attributing students to Gorgias than it is in attributing teachers. Sources identify him as the educator of a long list of important figures among his contemporaries and successors into the 4th century, including Pericles, Critias, Alcibiades, Aeschines the Socratic, Thucydides, Isocrates, Agathon, Polus, Alcidamas, Antisthenes, and Meno. These associations are uncertain, and many are straightforwardly dubious. (If Gorgias’ visit to Athens in 427 was his first one, for example, then it is unlikely that Pericles—who died in 429—was among his students.) Nonetheless, several of these pedagogical relationships are not implausible (Alcidamas, for instance); if nothing else, they reveal something about the way ancient thinkers viewed the landscape of Gorgias’ intellectual interactions and influence. Given his reputation and celebrity during his lifetime, moreover, many or most of the above figures were surely at least acquainted with, and quite probably in some way influenced by, him or his work. In the same way, Gorgias clearly made an impression on Plato: he is one of

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the main characters in Plato's *Gorgias* and is mentioned in several other dialogues (*Meno*, *Symp.*, *Phdr.*, and *Phlb.*), and Gorgias' own *Palamedes* bears tantalizing similarities to, and hence may have been the inspiration for, certain elements of Plato's *Apology*.³

Philosophy

To attribute to Gorgias a "philosophy" is in one sense misleading. His extant works are not treatises, and historians can only speculate about the orator's aims in composing them and the specific contexts for which they were intended. This makes it difficult to determine the extent to which Gorgias himself actually believes the things he writes, an issue that is further complicated by the orator's fondness for irony, paradox, and playfulness in his works. The most cautious approach, therefore, is to speak of "Gorgias' philosophy" not in the sense of the philosophical views to which the historical Gorgias was personally committed, but rather of the views to which he gives voice in his writings. Gorgias' works develop a number of striking and original ideas, and those ideas merit historical and philosophical attention regardless of the orator's own attitude toward them.

Metaphysics

In the first section of *On What-Is-Not* Gorgias presents a series of arguments for the view that nothing is or exists, or (alternatively rendered) that there is not anything that is or exists. The issue of how to interpret the details of Gorgias' arguments, along with the precise meaning and scope of his conclusion, is controversial. Some scholars take Gorgias to be defending the extreme conclusion that nothing of any sort exists, including ordinary perceptible objects, while others take him to be defending only some more modest conclusion.⁴ Whatever the precise nature of his position, it is helpful to consider the broader historical context for such ideas. Early Greek philosophers had offered, and were continuing to offer, competing accounts of what is or exists, and of how many things are or exist, in the natural order, and Gorgias' work is clearly engaging with that tradition. (See, for example, Isocrates' critical perspective at *Antid.* 168). His arguments themselves draw on Eleatic themes and dialectical styles, and some appear to be borrowed from or inspired by the arguments of earlier thinkers such as Parmenides, Melissus, Zeno, and the Atomists (see ATOMISM). According to the author of the *MXG*, Gorgias deliberately exploits philosophical disagreements among his predecessors in support of his nihilistic conclusion (979a12–20). Gorgias argues, for example, that if anything is or exists, it must either be ungenerated or come into being; but it is impossible for it to be ungenerated (according to one line of argument) and impossible for it to come into being (according to another line of argument); therefore, it is impossible that anything is or exists (979b20–35).

Epistemology

In the second section of *On What-Is-Not*, Gorgias adds to his radical ontological thesis an epistemological one: that even if anything did exist, it would be unknowable (*agnôston*).⁵ His main argument memorably appeals to our ability to think things we take to be false, or to think of things we take to be fictitious. Gorgias' argument assumes that, if we *did* have knowledge of the things that "are" (i.e., exist or are real), then that would mean that the things we have in our minds or think about (*ta phrounoumena*) exist or are real. This assumption is made possible in part by Greek grammar and vocabulary, in a couple ways. First, the verb *einai*, "to be," has a rich meaning that allows for a phrase like "believing the things that are" to act as a substitute for "believing things that are *real*" or simply "having true beliefs" (e.g., at Pl. *Resp.* 413a). Hence it does not entirely offend the logic of his language for Gorgias to assume that *knowing* what exists entails that what we have in our minds or think about are real things. Second, the verb *phronein* can have both the strong sense of "understand," which implies knowledge, or the weak sense of "think about." Gorgias' argument seems to exploit some of these ambiguities and nuances. The idea is that if whatever we *know* is real, and if *knowing* is identical with or closely connected with "understanding" or "thinking about" (*phronein*), then whatever we think about is real. The problem, of course, is that we seem to think of much more than we are prepared to admit in our ontology. The *MXG* explains, "But if this is so, nothing could be false . . . not even if one said chariots race in the sea" (980a11–12). In other words, allowing that we know or think about things that are (i.e., exist) entails that everything we think is true or real, which is manifestly absurd. Sextus' version also includes a converse point: if the things that exist are the things we think, then the things that do not exist cannot be things we think; but we obviously do think of fantastical things like the Scylla or Chimera; therefore, we must not think things that are and hence must not have knowledge of them (B3.80). Like the ontological conclusion that precedes it, Gorgias' epistemological thesis has been interpreted in a variety of ways. On the most extreme interpretations, it denies that it is possible to have any kind of knowledge of (and perhaps even any kind of thought about) anything. On more moderate lines of interpretation, Gorgias' skepticism denies only, for example, that knowledge of transcendental realities is impossible, or denies some version of the Protagorean principle that "human being is the measure of all things," but leaves open the possibility that we can achieve knowledge of the ordinary objects of everyday experience (see PROTGORAS).⁶

Whatever exactly the orator has in mind in composing the second section of *On What-Is-Not*, however, several signs outside of that passage suggest Gorgias holds or takes for granted a kind of common-sense empiricism, according to which: (a) human beings sometimes *do* sometimes acquire knowledge, and (b) their primary mode of acquiring it when they do is sense-perception. First, in his *Helen*, Gorgias claims that because knowledge of everything past, present, and future is difficult, most people have mere belief about most things (B11.11). The implication is clearly that some people have knowledge of some things. Second, his *Palamedes* distinguishes between the knowledge of a crime that an eyewitness to it possesses and the mere conjecture about it that non-

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witnesses have (B11a.22–24). Third, the final section of *On What-Is-Not* denies that—if knowledge *were* achievable—one person could ever communicate their knowledge to another (see section “CONCEPTION OF LOGOS”): it is impossible, the text argues, for a speaker to put what he has *seen* or *heard* into words (MXG 980a21–b4). In context, the reasoning does not actually affirm the possibility of knowledge, but it does imply at least the conditional claim that if knowledge *is* attainable, it is attained through the senses. Finally (somewhat more speculatively), Plato associates the orator with a physicalist Empedoclean theory of vision (*Meno* 76c–e), and in the *Helen*, Gorgias himself likewise argues that visual perception involves a process in which external objects “impinge” on the soul through sight (B11.15–17). Although such a view does not necessarily entail an empiricist openness to the possibility of knowledge, it could naturally be used to support one by providing the resources to countenance a mode of cognitive access to the perceptible world.

Conception of Logos

The third and final section of *On What-Is-Not* defends a further paradox—that even if we *could* achieve knowledge of something, we could never communicate or reveal that knowledge to others. His arguments partly appeal to the nature of speech, *logos*, itself: “A speaker speaks, but [does] not [speak] colors or objects. Thus how does one person get into his mind what he did not have in mind from someone else through speech or some other sign of the object, except by seeing it if it is a color <or hearing it if it is a sound>?” (MXG 9804–8). The basic idea is that *logos* is something fundamentally different from external objects and their properties, and thus speech conveys words, but not (knowledge of) things. To put the point somewhat differently than Gorgias does: what we say (*logos*) is distinct from what we know (perceptible objects); therefore, no act of speech ever constitutes a transmission of knowledge.

Despite his skepticism about the ability of words to convey knowledge, Gorgias is by no means pessimistic about what speech can accomplish. On the contrary, in his *Helen*, the orator advertises the extraordinary power of *logos*.⁷ His defense begins with the premise that the notorious adulteress could only have run away with Alexander on account of one of four causes: the will of the gods, physical force, persuasion by speech, or having been overcome by erotic love. Gorgias then argues that in none of the four cases is she truly blameworthy for her action (B11.6). In his defense of Helen’s innocence in the case of persuasion, Gorgias calls speech “a mighty potentate” that is capable of “impressing the soul” in the same way drugs affect the body. *Logos*, on Gorgias’ conception, is distinguished by its ability to have irresistible effects on our psychology and behavior: it can cause emotional reactions such as fear, grief, pity, or joy, and it can also deceive listeners, change their beliefs through persuasion, and ultimately make them act according to the speaker’s will. The power of words to accomplish these psychological effects is so strong that it can be likened to a compulsive physical force.⁸ This is precisely the feature of *logos* that excuses Helen’s behavior if it resulted from persuasion: in that case, Gorgias proposes, she was “led by the power of speech as unwillingly as if she was ravished by force” (B11.8–12). Modern commentators have appropriately characterized this conception of speech, which emphasizes its ability to influence the way human beings think and act—but which does not assume its ability to convey knowledge—as a *behavioral* conception.⁹ In any event, Gorgias’ focus on the power of speech to manipulate an audience appears to have been a well-known feature of his views: in Plato Gorgias himself identifies oratory as “the source of rule over others in one’s own city” (*Grg.* 452d), and the character Protarchus claims to have heard Gorgias frequently claim that oratory is the greatest skill because “it makes all things its slaves willingly, not by force” (*Phlb.* 58a–b).

Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics

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Although Gorgias' views on aesthetics, ethics, and politics are relatively sketchy, four are worth mentioning in brief: (1) In his *Helen*, Gorgias characterizes poetry as "logos in meter" and emphasizes its power (as a form of speech) to deceive (B11.9-11). Elsewhere he is credited with the view that the aim of poetry—and perhaps, by implication, of all art—is to produce deceptive illusions (B23).¹⁰ (2) The arguments of his *Helen* have important implications for moral responsibility. Gorgias argues that Helen is not responsible for her action even if she was persuaded to behave as she did or acted under the influence of love: both persuasion and emotion, he argues, have effects on human thought and action that are as irresistible as divine force or physical violence. Although Gorgias is speaking only of Helen in particular, many commentators have noted that his case for her blamelessness can be readily applied to other, and perhaps even to all, cases of wrongdoing by other agents as well.¹¹ Thus some commentators have seen in the *Helen* a precedent for the Socratic or Platonic principle that no one does wrong willingly.¹² (3) In Plato's *Meno*, the dialogue's namesake recites what he identifies as a Gorgianic account of virtue, according to which virtue is something that varies for each type of person and activity: virtue is different, for example, for men, women, slaves, and children (71c-72a). Plato contrasts this sort of view with Socrates' insistence that virtue is some single thing that all virtuous individuals have in common. Aristotle, too, identifies Gorgias as someone who "enumerates" the virtues in this way (*Pol.* 1260a27-28). (4) Gorgias' political speeches may have urged a policy of Panhellenic unity: he distinguishes victories over barbarians, which should be celebrated, from victories over Greeks, which should be lamented (B7); and his *Olympian Speech* praises the men of Greece and reportedly exhorted them to political unity (B8, B8a).¹³

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Notes:

(1.) Ancient sources on the life of Gorgias include Philostratus, Diogenes Laertius, Diodorus of Sicily, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Isocrates, and Pausanias. For further biographical details about Gorgias, see Chapter 4 of Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (Oxford: Alden Press, 1954).

(2.) Texts and translations of primary sources are based on Daniel W. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the*

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Major Presocratics, Part 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), with modifications. Numbering of Gorgias' texts and fragments follows Diels-Kranz.

(3.) See, for example, discussion in Guido Calogero, "Gorgias and the Socratic Principle *Nemo Sua Sponte Peccat*," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77, no. 1 (1957): 12-17; and James Coulter, "The Relation of the Apology of Socrates to Gorgias' Defense of Palamedes and Plato's Critique of Gorgianic Rhetoric," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 68 (1964): 269-303.

(4.) For a range of interpretations, see William K. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 3: *The Fifth-Century Enlightenment* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969); Chapter 9 of George Briscoe Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Mario Untersteiner, *The Sophists*, trans. Kathleen Freeman (Oxford: Alden Press, 1954); and Paul Woodruff, "Rhetoric and Relativism: Protagoras and Gorgias," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. Anthony A. Long, 290-310 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

(5.) For a detailed examination of the second section of *On What-Is-Not*, see Victor Caston, "Gorgias on Thought and Its Objects," in *Presocratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, ed. Victor Caston and Daniel W. Graham, 205-232 (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002).

(6.) For a range of interpretations, see Caston and Graham, *Presocratic Philosophy*; Scott Consigny, *Gorgias: Sophist and Artist* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001); Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy* (1969); and Untersteiner, *The Sophists* (1954).

(7.) For discussions of the *Helen* and Gorgias' views on *logos*, see Chapter 2 of Susan C. Jarratt, *Rereading the Sophists: Classical Rhetoric Refigured* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991); Chapter 8 of Kerferd, *The Sophistic Movement* (1981); John Poulakos, "Gorgias' *Encomium to Helen* and the Defense of Rhetoric," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 1, no. 2 (1983): 1-16; Edward Schiappa, "Gorgias's *Helen* Revisited," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 81 (1995): 310-324; Vessala Valiavitcharska (2006), "Correct *Logos* and Truth in Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 24, no. 2 (2006): 147-61; and especially Alexander P. D. Mourelatos, "Gorgias on the Function of Language," *Philosophical Topics* 15, no. 2 (1987): 135-70.

(8.) For detailed treatment of Gorgias' view of the psychological effects of *logos*, see Charles P. Segal, "Gorgias and the Psychology of the *Logos*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 66 (1962): 99-155.

(9.) For example, Mourelatos, "Gorgias on the Function of Language" (1987).

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(10.) For discussion of Gorgias' aesthetic theory, see Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1981); Thomas Shearer Duncan, "Gorgias' Theories of Art," *The Classical Journal* 33, no. 7 (1938): 402-415; and Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, "Gorgias, Aeschylus, and Apatē," *The American Journal of Philology* 76, no. 3 (1955): 225-260.

(11.) See, for example, Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*. For a more nuanced reading, see Rachel Barney, "Gorgias's Defense of Helen," in *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy*, ed. Eric Schliesser, 1-25 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

(12.) See, for example, Calagero, "Gorgias and the Socratic Principle," (1957).

(13.) Panhellenism in Gorgianic thought is explored in Chapter 8 of Jacqueline De Romilly, *The Great Sophists in Periclean Athens*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

