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## The Turn to Language

Mauro Bonazzi

### Introduction

An interest in and an admiration for those capable of speaking well was a recurrent feature of the Greek world from its most archaic period, and became especially important in the fifth century BCE. It does not come as a surprise, then, that much of the Sophists' controversial fame depended on their ability to speak, and that a prominent part of their teaching was devoted to making their students "clever at speaking" (*deinos legein*), as the young Hippocrates remarks in Plato's *Protagoras* (312d). Speeches, *logoi*, are the Sophists' specialty. At stake, however, was not only the practical issue of how to use words successfully in public debates and private meetings. As George Kerferd, among others, has remarked, *logos* in Greek refers to speeches, words, and arguments, but also to mental processes, and it can even indicate structural principles or natural laws.<sup>1</sup> The Sophists investigated these problems from all angles, with a truly

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<sup>1</sup> Kerferd 1981: 83: "There are three main areas of its [*logos*'] application or use, all related to an underlying conceptual unity. These are first of all the area of language and linguistic formulation, hence speech, discourse, description, statement, arguments (as expressed in words) and so on; secondly the area of thought and mental processes, hence thinking, reasoning, accounting for, explanation (cf. *orthos logos*) etc.; thirdly, the area of the world, that *about* which we are able to speak and to think, hence structural principles, formulae, natural laws and so on, provided that in each case they are regarded as actually present in and exhibited in the world-process." See also Gagarin 2008.

remarkable breadth of perspective and competence. The aim of the present chapter is to offer an overview of their investigations. It will trace three specific areas on which the Sophists brought to bear their interest in *logos*: grammar and the issue of the correct names; the criticism of and engagement with poetry; and rhetoric and the effectiveness of argumentative techniques.

As it will turn out, these explorations cannot be said to be part of, or to aim at, a systematic theory. But they nonetheless helped to inaugurate the study of language for its own sake, a topic which would play an important role in the philosophical debates of the following centuries.<sup>2</sup> For the Sophists, the interest in *logos* aims not only at mobilizing means of persuasion to affect their (or their clients and students') success; it emerges also as a way of stimulating critical reflection on the values of the society and of investigating the human condition in all its complexity and richness. This richness is evidenced by the broad importance of the notion of "correctness" (*orthotês*), which occurs regularly throughout the testimonies and fragments of Protagoras and Prodicus. Certain of the Sophists' approaches are based on the contention that *logos* is our only means of developing a relationship with reality—or, an even stronger thesis associated with Gorgias, that *logos* constitutes and creates its own reality. Whereas for many previous thinkers (think of Parmenides or Heraclitus), *logos* enables us to get in touch with an objective and well-ordered reality, for the Sophists it is a tool that a human can—and must—use to give meaning to things, a meaning that things do not necessarily possess in themselves. The Sophists' claim to be able to define or create such meaning is at the heart of the education they offered.

## Correcting Words

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<sup>2</sup> Guthrie 1971: 220.

Many sources bear witness to the Sophists' interest in grammar. This applies especially to Protagoras, who focused on morphological and syntactic issues: apparently, he was the first to distinguish the gender of nouns (male, female, and neuter, A27/D23), while also proposing several corrections for names in use in his day. Thus, he suggested that the female nouns *mênis* ("wrath," "frenzy") and *pêlêx* ("helmet"), two terms familiar to Homer's audience, should be regarded as masculine—either on the basis of morphological criteria (because names ending in sigma or xi are usually masculine) or because of their meaning (insofar as war is an eminently masculine pursuit: see A28/D24).<sup>3</sup> Protagoras also distinguished four verbal modes (indicative, subjunctive, optative, and imperative), which he linked to four types of speech (prayer, question, reply, and command), once again taking the occasion to criticize Homer, who had addressed the goddess with a command ("Sing, Goddess, the wrath") rather than a prayer (A29/D25). Finally, Diogenes Laertius (9.52) seems to inform us, more controversially, of his interest in the tenses of the verbs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, our source Aristotle uses ἄρρηνα, θήλεα, and σκεύη, this latter term indicating "thing words." On the assumption that this is the Protagorean usage, Adriaan Rademaker has suggested that Protagoras was referring not to the grammatical distinction (in which case he could have used the grammatical term τὸ/τὰ μεταξύ) but rather to a "semantic distinction between words referring to male, females and things that reflects the real-life properties of their referents" (Rademaker 2013: 89; see also Brancacci 2002: 182). In favor of the morphological explanation (cf. Aristotle *Poetics* 1458a9–10) see Fehling 1965: 215 and Huitink and Willi 2021: 74; see also, more generally, Kerferd 1981: 68–9.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Dunn 2001; Rademaker 2013: 93–4.

Protagoras was not the only Sophist to deal with these problems. Prodicus too was famous for his linguistic classifications, as we will soon see; Hippias investigated rhythms, harmonies, and correctness of letters (A12/D15); and Alcidas of Elaea, a pupil of Gorgias' active early in the fourth century BCE, proposed an alternative to Protagoras' speech-type division (affirmation, negation, question, and address: fr. 24 Patillon). The coining of neologisms can probably be traced back to the same context as well. Among the others, Antiphon and Critias appear to have been particularly keen on inventing new terms, a remarkable number of which survive.<sup>5</sup>

"First, as Prodicus says, you must learn about the correctness of words (*peri onomatôn orthotêtos*)," Socrates tells the young Clinias in Plato's *Euthydemus*, confirming the Sophist's authority on linguistic analysis (A16/D5a). If language was a major topic of investigation for the Sophists, the issue of correctness of names (*orthotês onomatôn, orthoepeia*), a notion with a wide range of applications, seems to be one of the headings under which the problem was discussed.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Prodicus, correctness has to do with detailed analysis of synonyms, which apparently earned him great repute among the men of his day (A17/D5c, A3/P4, A11/P5). By first grouping synonyms together and then distinguishing (*diairein*) them, Prodicus sought to connect each name to its concrete reality.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to determine on what basis Prodicus drew his distinctions: in some cases, he would appear to rely on the traditional use of terms (e.g.,

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<sup>5</sup> See B4, 10, 71–2, 74–5 / D2, 9, 68–9, 70–1 (Antiphon); as for Critias, see B53–70.

<sup>6</sup> Not only among the Sophists: see also, e.g., Antisthenes and Democritus (B20a and 26). Plato's *Cratylus* was "On the Correctness of Names," as its (late) subtitle indicates. As Guthrie 1971: 205 remarks the distinction between these two expressions, *orthotês* and *orthoepeia*, is unclear.

<sup>7</sup> Momigliano 1930; see now Mayhew 2011: 107–59.

A18, partially reproduced in D24), while elsewhere he seems to suggest radical innovations based on their etymology (B4/D9).<sup>8</sup> In any case, his theory presupposes a one-to-one relation between words and their referents, such that the phenomenon of synonymy is only apparent. Whereas Socrates seems to have asked about individual concepts, “what is  $x$ ?,” Prodicus appears to proceed by asking “how does  $x$  differ from  $y$ ?”<sup>9</sup>

Given the scarcity of testimonies, it is also difficult to understand what the role and scope of these distinctions precisely were. As has been repeatedly remarked, such distinctions did not aim only at grammatical analysis, but played a major role in the training of the pupils.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, these explorations aimed concretely at teaching pupils to exploit language to advance their goals. It is by mastering language that one can use it more effectively, which is to say more persuasively, as Aristophanes’ Socrates explains to Strepsiades in the *Clouds* when teaching grammatical gender in a way that recalls Protagoras’ distinctions (*Clouds* 658–93; see Classen

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<sup>8</sup> See Classen 1976: 232–7. As noted by Dorion 2009: 531n22 in relation to A16, Prodicus also investigated the problem of homonymy, which is to say the phenomenon of the semantic ambiguity of a term (the term in this particular case being *manthanein*, which in Greek means both “to understand” and “to learn”).

<sup>9</sup> Classen 1976: 232; Kerferd 1981: 74. Interestingly, as Guthrie 1971: 275 has rightly remarked, in Plato’s dialogues Socrates often presents himself as one of his pupils (see Plato *Protagoras* 341a, *Cratylus* 384b, and *Meno* 96d), despite being roughly of the same age (they were both born around 470 BCE).

<sup>10</sup> Classen 1976: 223–5; Untersteiner 1996<sup>2</sup>: 325. More recently, see Huitink and Willi 2021, though, arguing for Protagoras’ systematic interest in grammar.

1976: 221). Mastering words was one of the tools that would help students to be successfully persuasive.<sup>11</sup>

But there is also more at stake, as Prodicus' case shows. In most cases (but not all: see B4/D9), his distinctions refer to terms and concepts pertaining to the field of ethics or moral psychology.<sup>12</sup> This has led some scholars to set Prodicus in contrast "to people the likes of Callicles and Thrasymachus," as an opponent of the relativism and immoralism typical of those thinkers and the upholder of a certain foundation for the moral principles that are to govern people's lives.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, it is debatable that we can label the Sophists as relativist, and the notion of immoralism is highly controversial.<sup>14</sup> That said, it is tempting to suggest that Prodicus' distinctions and classifications, and more generally the debates on the "correctness of names," were not driven by erudite interests only, but also had more concrete aims, both in the sense of practically training the pupils and stimulating them to reflect on the values of their society.<sup>15</sup> As we will shortly see, this attitude holds as much for many other Sophists as it does for Prodicus.

### ***Correcting Poets***

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<sup>11</sup> On Protagoras and Aristophanes see now Balla forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Untersteiner 1996<sup>2</sup>: 323; Dumont 1986; Wolfsdorf 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Momigliano 1930. In this respect, it is interesting to note that, in the *Euthydemus*, Plato mentions Prodicus twice as a potential opponent of Sophists and eristic debaters such as Euthydemus and Dionysodorus: see *Euthydemus* 277e and 305c.

<sup>14</sup> See Bett 1989 on sophistic relativism.

<sup>15</sup> Cole 1991: 100.

The notion of *orthotês* is also important for Protagoras, one of whose works, Plato reports in the *Phaedrus*, was entitled *Orthoepeia* (“*The Correctness of Language*”; *Phaedrus* 267c).

Regrettably, the content of this book is unknown, but it is a reasonable assumption that the issue of correctness played a role in his above-mentioned grammatical interests.<sup>16</sup> Most interestingly, correctness emerges again in relation to the study of poetry, as Protagoras explains in the eponymous Platonic dialogue, when he illustrates the aims of his teaching:

I think . . . that for a man the most important part of education consists in being expert concerning poems; and this means to be able to understand what is said correctly (*orthôs*) by the poets and what is not (Plato *Protagoras* 338e–9a).

In the dialogue, this claim is followed by the reading of a poem by Simonides, one of the great lyric poets of the Greek world, with the declared aim of highlighting its incongruities and contradictions with respect to questions of virtue and the good. It is not easy to assess the historical reliability of this specific discussion, but Plato’s dialogue offers an insightful description of the way this kind of investigation and debate might have looked.<sup>17</sup> Protagoras follows a method of literal interpretation, which unfolds in three successive stages: understanding (*synienai*), analyzing (*diairein*), and giving account (*logon dounai*).<sup>18</sup> Protagoras’ above-mentioned linguistic observations on Homer probably also belong to this context and show how he confronted the poets. As many scholars have recently made clear, Protagoras

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<sup>16</sup> See *Cratylus* 391c and Diogenes Laertius 9.55 with Gagarin 2008: 28–30.

<sup>17</sup> See also Themistius *Oration* 23, 350.20 Dindorf. As Segal 1970 suggests, an interesting testimony for these debates is Aristophanes *Frogs* 1119–97; another parallel is the interpretation of Pindar in Plato’s *Gorgias* (484b).

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Protagoras* 338e8–339a3; see Brancacci 2002: 177.



developed a linguistic apparatus to critique Homer, rather than using Homeric verses to explain his linguistic theories.<sup>19</sup> Thus, the notion of “correctness” serves as a tool to explore the use of words, whether they properly describe their referent (as in the case of Protagoras’ criticism of the feminine *pêlêx* and *mênis* referring to masculine things, A28–30/D24–5, 30), but also, more generally, to investigate the relation between different parts of a phrase or of a given text.<sup>20</sup> Finally, in the case of a reasoning or arguments, correctness refers to soundness, as I discuss below. All this has to be taken into account when reading a poem.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, it is not only a matter of exegesis. More importantly, the goal is to discuss a text critically and thereby fulfill an educational goal. The study of poetical texts was an important part of traditional Greek education. As Xenophanes famously said, “from the beginning everyone learned from Homer” (B10). Pupils were expected to assimilate the moral values of their community by learning by heart epic and didactic poems. Hence, Protagoras’ interest in poetical texts seems a natural extension of traditional education. In his case, however, innovations are

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<sup>19</sup> Fehling 1976: 343. On Protagoras and Homer, see also Capra 2005 and Corradi 2006: 56–63. More specifically, a likely polemical target of this method of literal exegesis is the allegorical exegesis developed by Theagenes of Rhegium in the sixth century BCE and later taken up in Athens by another great intellectual of the period, Anaxagoras of Clazomenae, and by his pupil Metrodorus of Lampsacus (who were wont to interpret theomachies as symbolizing the oppositions between natural elements, such as hot and cold or dry and moist; on these authors, see Morgan 2000: 98–101).

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, from one scholium to *Iliad* 21.240 = A30/D32, we know that Protagoras also commented on Homeric narrative techniques about composition.

<sup>21</sup> See Rademaker 2013: 96–104; Brancacci 2002: 177–8.

more important, because the wisdom of the poets is no longer taken for granted.<sup>22</sup> Literary criticism is a useful intellectual exercise that enables the individual to grow familiar with the works of the poets and hence with traditional values. But, in addition, as the confrontation with Socrates in Plato's *Protagoras* shows (where the example of incorrect poetic composition involves two apparently contradictory ethical generalizations), scrutinizing the consistency of poetical texts will also put pupils in the position to engage with these traditional values, either approving or rejecting them.<sup>23</sup>

If this is correct, two further points are worth observing. First of all, it is now clear how the study of poetry becomes part of Protagoras' teaching. Clearly, analysis and criticism serve also to teach pupils to discuss issues of right and wrong; as a consequence, they also train them to hone their own ideas and to discuss and challenge their interlocutors' views more generally.<sup>24</sup> We need not repeat how important this was in the competitive world of the fifth- and fourth-century cities.

As for the teacher Protagoras, the confrontation with poets gave him a unique opportunity for self-promotion. As already mentioned, poets were traditionally regarded as the educators and as the custodians of the most genuine Greek tradition: poetry was a treasure trove of useful knowledge, an encyclopedia of ethics, politics, and history that every good citizen was expected to assimilate as the core of his education. The poet's task was to preserve and transmit the system

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<sup>22</sup> Rademaker 2013: 98

<sup>23</sup> See also Gagarin 2002: 27.

<sup>24</sup> Morgan 2000: 94. The examples of Xenophanes criticizing Homer's and Hesiod's anthropomorphic gods (22B11) or of Heraclitus attacking Hesiod's *polymathiê* show that there already was a critical tradition before Protagoras.

of values on which the life of his community was founded. To engage with poetry, therefore, was to engage with the tradition. By showing his ability to discuss such great authorities as Homer or Simonides, while at the same time taking the liberty of criticizing them, Protagoras reinforced his claim to be the new teacher, the educator capable of imparting teachings suited to the needs of the new world of the *polis*.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Protagoras' most famous claim, that "man is the measure" (B1/D9), seems to target, among others, the poets. Several poets had already drawn upon the idea of "measure" to assert their importance: a poet—to quote Solon and Theognis—is someone who, by grace of the Muses, knows the "measure" of loving wisdom (Solon fr. 1, 51–2 Gentili-Prato) and possesses the "measure" of wisdom (Theognis 873–6).<sup>26</sup> A poet, in other words, is someone who, by virtue of the divine protection he enjoys, is capable of speaking the truth and distinguishing it from falsehood; he is the custodian of the order of reality and this justifies his prominent role in society.<sup>27</sup> Opposing this tradition, Protagoras argues that the truth is no longer guaranteed by gods and inspired poets, since humans are now the measure of all things, each according to their

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<sup>25</sup> Together with Homer and Pindar, Protagoras seems to be also confronting Hesiod in the myth that the Sophist tells in Plato's *Protagoras*; see Bonazzi 2020 [a or b? Mauro: There are no a or b, but Just one Bonazzi 2020]: 71–2. More generally, see Pfeiffer 1968: 16–17 and Ford 2002: 202–3. Very interesting reflections are also to be found in Most 1986, who stresses the importance of the interpretation of literary texts as a distinctive feature of the Sophists. Indeed, the Sophists' penchant for the written word constitutes a distinguishing element with respect to the oral culture in which poets found themselves operating; see again Pfeiffer 1968: 24–30.

<sup>26</sup> See Corradi 2007.

<sup>27</sup> Detienne 2006: 113–24.

own perspective.<sup>28</sup> And Protagoras can present himself as the teacher who can help others find their bearings in the ambiguous world that surrounds them, in which contrasting opinions take the place of absolute truth and falsehood. Again, we see that the Sophist's strategy is one of appropriation, in which an engagement with traditional knowledge represents the starting point of his attempt to acquire a dominant position in the Athenian and, more generally, Greek cultural scene. The character Protagoras claims as much at the beginning of Plato's *Protagoras* when he proclaims himself as the heir of a centuries-old tradition of sophistry going back to Homer and Hesiod (316d-e). This claim is designed not merely to place Protagoras under the aegis of a well-rooted tradition; it contributes to a more complex strategy of appropriation, which, through an apparently faithful adherence, brings about a reversal.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> By contrast with the way Plato and Aristotle introduces this theory (as a first manifestation of an empirical model of knowledge; consider the example of the wind at *Theaetetus* 152a–b), Protagoras' view seems to reevaluate human experience. The measure is not humanity generically taken nor "man" being abstractly taken, but each person with their personal history, opinions and expectations. The true measure is therefore each individual experience (Mansfeld 1981: 44–6). From this epistemological thesis derives the practical task of reconciling these different views into an agreement (see A21/D38), which is what Protagoras was proud to teach (A5/D37); for a more detailed reconstruction, see Bonazzi 2020: 13–26 [a or b?] with further bibliography.

<sup>29</sup> Goldhill 1986: 222–43; Morgan 2000: 89–94. Only part of this passage is included in the Diels-Kranz edition, as A5 (the whole text appears in Bonazzi 2009 as T6 and LM as Soph. R11).

Protagoras was not the only Sophist to have an interest in poetry in relation to traditional education.<sup>30</sup> The names of Critias and Hippias can be mentioned, and the case of Gorgias deserves special attention, as we will see in the next section.<sup>31</sup> As already remarked, we know that Hippias dealt with the division and length of syllables, probably in relation to metrical and rhythmic issues (see A2/D14b, A12/D15). He was also interested in Homer (A10/D25, B9/D26, B18/D24). Moreover, he was well known in antiquity for his “antiquarian” interests: that is, for having gathered and catalogued quotes from the great masters of past centuries—most notably poets such as Orpheus, Musaeus, Homer, and Hesiod, among others (B6/D22).<sup>32</sup> It is not entirely clear what the use of these collections was: concretely, they provided a series of quotes that could be used in speeches and discussions. More generally, however, this work of selection and collection may also be seen to promote a more detached approach to the tradition, which is no

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<sup>30</sup> It is worth recalling that some Sophists were also the authors of poetical works: Hippias (A12, B1/ D2, 4), Critias (elegiac and hexametric poetry: B1–9, and tragedies and satyr plays: B10–25), and possibly Antiphon (see A6a9/P8).

<sup>31</sup> Wolfsdorf 2008: 4–8 makes the reasonable suggestion that Prodicus’ classifications were somehow dependent on (and were meant to explain) the poetic texts of the tradition (Hesiod’s, most notably).

<sup>32</sup> Hippias’ “antiquarian” interests were not limited to poetic extracts, since he also made lists of the winners at the Olympics (to establish a reliable chronology of Greek history, B3/D7), the founding of cities, human genealogies (A2, B2/D14b, 30), and many other items pertaining to mythological, ethnographic, geographical, and philosophical traditions (B6–9, 12/ D22–3, 26–8). On Hippias’ pursuits as a polymath, see Pfeiffer 1968: 51–4; Brunschwig 1984; Mansfeld 1986; Patzer 1986; Balaudé 2006.

longer viewed as the depository of unquestionable truths, but rather from a historical perspective as a pool from which to draw in order to produce new ideas.<sup>33</sup> Within this context, the testimony informing us that he presented himself in the garb of a rhapsode need not be taken as the sign of eccentricity but as another concrete proof of the Sophists' attempts to challenge educational authorities by appropriating their role (A9/P18).

The case of Critias is more problematic. Probably following Philostratus' lead, Diels reckoned him among the Sophists. Certainly, Critias' interest in antiquarian traditions and poetry finds a parallel in the work of other Sophists.<sup>34</sup> However, his ideology seems to follow a radically different direction, insofar as he apparently upholds a return to tradition and poetry (a genre he practiced extensively) against the threats posed by the new rhetorical education.<sup>35</sup> If his

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<sup>33</sup> This work of critical revision of poetic lore finds further confirmation in the method of memorization that made Hippias famous (A2, 5a, 11–12, 16/D12–13). Up until then, memory had served as the poet's key "religious" tool, preserving knowledge of present, past, and future. With Hippias—and Simonides before him—memory becomes a "secular" technique, a psychological faculty that each person exercises according to well-defined rules, rules that are available to everyone." This engenders a new attitude to time, regarded not as the "power of oblivion," but as the context in which human endeavors take place (Detienne 2006: 191–2). See also Morgan 2000: 95–6.

<sup>34</sup> Pfeiffer 1968: 54–5. An eloquent example of Critias' antiquarian interests is B2 on inventions; see also B6 on the Spartan traditions.

<sup>35</sup> See Brisson 2009: 395 and more extensively Iannucci 2002 on Critias' poems. See, for instance, the celebration of Spartan traditional moderation and the aristocratic code in D6–7 or B22 on the opposition between character (*tropos*) and law (*nomos*) and rhetoric.

knowledge of and engagement with many of the issues discussed in fifth-century Greece is unquestionable, his overall production seems to express more a reaction than an adherence to the new ideas introduced by the Sophists.

### **Gorgias on Language**

Gorgias deserves special attention, among the Sophists, for the breadth of his investigations into the problem of *logos*. While Protagoras seems to focus entirely on the rational and rationally analyzable aspects of (poetic) language, Gorgias shows an interest in its psychagogic and creative aspects as well—without, however, overlooking the importance of rational arguments (as I will show in the following section). The assumptions and aims, however, are the same: to assert the centrality of *logos*, around which most of Gorgias’ speculation and activity revolves, and to establish one’s own credentials as the most successful teacher (A21/D47).<sup>36</sup>

A major difficulty in the case of Gorgias is how to reconcile the two apparently incompatible claims that we find in his two of his texts, the treatise *On Not-Being* and the declamation *Encomium of Helen*. Whereas the former ends with an acknowledgment of the failure of words, the latter assigns words a sort of divine omnipotence. Upon closer scrutiny, however, it might be argued that these two texts explore two different conceptions of language,

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<sup>36</sup> The decision to set up a golden statue in Delphi for himself, so great was his success in teaching, is an eloquent confirmation of Gorgias’ ambition (A7/P33); there was also a statue was dedicated to Gorgias in Olympia, where two eloquent inscriptions have been found (A8/P34b).

with the conclusion reached in the former text paving the way to the alternative conception of the latter.<sup>37</sup>

Of the three theses explored in the *On Not-Being*—“nothing is; and if it is, it is unknowable; and if it both is and is knowable, it cannot be indicated to other people” (B3/D6)—the first thesis has attracted much of the scholarly interest, with many interpretations.<sup>38</sup> Much less attention has been dedicated to the third one. Yet it might be argued that the most interesting one, and perhaps even the most important for Gorgias, was this third thesis, for which, unlike the first two, no alternative is given. The progression of the arguments suggests that the problem at stake in the text is not only the denial of reality, which has been the object of many discussions about Gorgias’ nihilism, but also the problem of language, the acknowledgment that an unbridgeable gulf separates things from words. Unfortunately, the corrupt state of Gorgias’ text prevents an exact reconstruction of the specific arguments. But the general claim is clear. Just as sight does not see sound, so *logos* does not speak things, but merely words. We can grant that reality exists and that we know it, but we cannot communicate our knowledge: *logos* is always heterogeneous with respect to reality. *Logos* (words, speech) is a failed translation of reality because it is incapable of taking the place of things.<sup>39</sup>

This conclusion seems to be very different from what we find in the *Helen*, which was apparently composed to defend the memory of Homer’s famous heroine, guilty of having fled

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<sup>37</sup> Ioli 2010: 90. On the function of language in Gorgias, see also Calogero 1932: 262; Mourelatos 1985: 627–30.

<sup>38</sup> See Rodriguez, this volume.

<sup>39</sup> Kerferd 1984: 218–21; Palmer 2009: 87–8. Interestingly, this conclusion can also be read as a polemical reference to Prodicus: see above in section I and Untersteiner 1996<sup>2</sup>: 322.



with Paris and bringing about the Trojan War. As often happens in this period, a mythological theme, one of the most conspicuous in the Greek tradition, is used to convey new and provocative ideas.<sup>40</sup> Among the various reasons that may have led Helen to flee to Troy, Gorgias considers the arguments by which Paris might have persuaded her, and this allows him to embark on a famous digression on the power of *logos* and what constitutes it, namely words:

Speech (*logos*) is a great potentate that by means of an extremely tiny and entirely invisible body performs the most divine deeds. For it is able to stop fear, to remove grief, to instill joy, and to increase pity (B11/D24, 8).

Indeed, the acknowledgment of this power of words, a power that is also magical and divine,<sup>41</sup> seems to be at odds with the conclusion of the treatise *On Not-Being* about the weakness of *logos*. To be sure, maybe one need not reconcile such different texts of an author who was clearly not interested in articulating a systematic thought. An alternative reading, also appropriate to his style of thinking, however, is that these two texts were exploring different functions of language. What is under attack in the *On Not-Being* is the view that the task of language is to provide an objective and faithful description of reality, as if reality were something that could accurately be represented. But can we really speak of an isolated and stable reality, removed from the contingencies of human culture and language? As a matter of fact, Gorgias argues, the true nature of things is always beyond our reach (see also 82B11a35/D25.35 and B26/D34) and resists any unitary reconstruction. What remains, then, is a world of seeming and opinions. Human *logos* is always subjective or relative. By expressing one specific

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<sup>40</sup> On Gorgias' (and other Sophists') use of myth as a way of confronting the cultural tradition, see Morgan 2000: 119–131.

<sup>41</sup> de Romilly 1975: 16.

perspective on this elusive reality, it always reflects a given point of view or opinion, and not absolute truth. Interestingly, the *Helen* complements this view by underlining the autonomy of *logos*. Language is not a reflection of things or the natural means by which to objectively describe reality. *Logos* is its own “master” (*dynastês*), it is autonomous: its function is not of stating the truth or describing reality, but of creating emotions and opinions which are our ways of giving meaning to reality, of turning the multiplicity of our experiences into some kind of order—a provisional order, yet one still capable of orienting human actions. *Logos* is the creator of its own reality and can prove successful because—as we have seen—despite its apparent non-referentiality, it is actually very powerful.<sup>42</sup> Paradoxically, Gorgias’ emphasis on the limits of human experience ultimately leads to a celebration of the creative power of *logos*.<sup>43</sup>

Gorgias’ emphasis on *logos* as a creative power finds another interesting confirmation in a testimony on deception (*apatê*), which provides us with some information about his aesthetic views.<sup>44</sup> According to Plutarch, Gorgias described tragedy as

a deception, in which the one who deceives is more just than the one who does not deceive, and the one who is deceived is more intelligent than the one who is not deceived (B23/D35).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cassin 1995: 73 and 152.

<sup>43</sup> This does not exclude, especially in the case of Gorgias, that it is also difficult to control the power of *logos*; see Cole 1991: 146–52.

<sup>44</sup> See also *Helen* 8 and 10 with Rosenmeyer 1955; Verdenius 1981; Horky 2006. This idea is also taken up in the *Dissoi Logoi* 3.10–12, which quotes verses by the poets Cleobulina and Aeschylus. Similarly, see also the anecdote about Simonides saying that the Thessalians were too stupid to be deceived by him (Plutarch *De Audiendis Poetis* 15d).

The notion of deceit can probably be traced back to Parmenides and to the poetic tradition of earlier centuries. In Gorgias, however, it lacks the negative valence that it possesses in Parmenides and the poets. When Parmenides describes his cosmology as deceptive, he is not saying that it is false or fallacious but is warning his audience that what they are dealing with is still the world of appearances and not that of true reality.<sup>46</sup> Much the same holds true for the poets.<sup>47</sup> In Gorgias, by contrast, there is no longer any room for a “true divine reality” beyond the changing world of appearances: all that remains is phenomena and the uncertain opinions of men (see *Helen* 11). The importance of deception stems from this precarious situation. But it is evident that in this context deception loses all negative connotations: for such is the human condition. *Logoi* are intrinsically deceitful, to the extent that they cannot faithfully represent a reality that cannot be faithfully represented.<sup>48</sup>

It is from this situation that poetry can set out to achieve its goals, proving its “justice and wisdom.” The aim of the “deception” embodied by a poetic composition such as a tragedy is to

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<sup>45</sup> Other testimonies on Gorgias’ interest in tragedy: B24/D36 on Aeschylus; Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1406b14 on Gorgias’ joking about tragic style.

<sup>46</sup> See B8.52/D8.57 with Verdenius 1981: 124.

<sup>47</sup> See for instance Homer *Iliad* 1.526 and 22.229; Hesiod *Theogony* 224, Pindar *Olympian* 1.28–9, and *Nemean* 7.20–4 with Rosenmeyer 1955: 228–33. On the poetic tradition more generally, see de Romilly 1973 and 1975: 1–22, who also notes that this conception of poetry as something magical and illusionary (see e.g., B11§9/D24§9) might reflect an influence from Empedocles (whose disciple Gorgias may have been: A3, 10/ P4–5 and Kerferd 1985).

<sup>48</sup> Kerferd 1981: 81; Rosenmeyer 1955: 232.

charm the soul by rousing feelings of pleasure, joy, or pain.<sup>49</sup> And the triggering of an emotional response is also a way to know oneself better and building a relationship with reality, which, according to Gorgias, is always “other” with respect to us—a way of making sense of ourselves and the things around us. Paradoxically, it is therefore more just to deceive and wiser to be deceived than the contrary.<sup>50</sup> Deception, in other words, is to be fostered because it allows us to build a relationship with the reality of things and the reality of our very own being.

In conclusion, it might be observed that Gorgias, not unlike Protagoras, implements a subtle strategy by appropriating traditional poetic lore, as poetry is nothing but “a speech (*logos*) that possesses meter” (B11/D24, 9). What matters, then, is *logos* and the ability to make suitable use of it. After all, as in the case of *On Not-Being*, the real object of the encomium is not Helen but *logos*: so much was at stake in Gorgias’ challenge to the poet who mistreated and misrepresented the heroine (*Helen* 2).<sup>51</sup> This justifies the subsuming of poetry under the broader genre of rhetoric, the art of *logos* which is the object of Gorgias’ teaching: like Protagoras, Gorgias plays with tradition in order to appropriate it.<sup>52</sup> The lore safeguarded by the poet has now been integrated into the wisdom of the Sophists.

### **Correcting Speeches, Exploring Reality**

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<sup>49</sup> Segal 1962: 124.

<sup>50</sup> See also Verdenius 1981: 117–18.

<sup>51</sup> Segal 1962: 102; Poulakos 1983.

<sup>52</sup> In Gorgias’ case, appropriation also entails an attempt to adapt the poetic style to the kind of prose declamations typical of his oeuvre: see A29/D21b and de Romilly 1975: 8–11; Schiappa 1999: 98–102.

As should be clear by now, an interest in *logos* is central to the Sophists' thinking. In the previous section, we examined how the Sophists used their technical skills and ideas in relation to—and in competition with—the traditional knowledge embodied by poetry. We can now move on to analyze how this interest in *logos* relates to rhetoric, which developed as an independent form of knowledge in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE.

The extent of the Sophists' contribution to rhetoric has been at the center of a lively debate in scholarship. The traditional view argues that rhetoric was first developed in Sicily by two almost unknown figures, Tisias and Corax. From Sicily, rhetoric would then have reached Athens thanks to Gorgias (who famously visited Athens as an ambassador in 427 BCE, A4/P13b); in turn, Gorgias would have influenced other Sophists such as Antiphon (assuming, of course, that the rhetor and the Sophist of this name are one and the same person) and Thrasymachus.<sup>53</sup> In this context, it is also important to remark that several Sophists were credited with the authorship of textbooks (the so-called *logôn technai*).<sup>54</sup> Some modern scholars, however, have noted that the surviving testimonies seem to suggest that the development of rhetoric as an independent literary genre occurred later.<sup>55</sup> It is difficult to take a side in the debate, given that the sources at our disposal do not allow us to determine clearly the extent to which the Sophists may have developed theoretical or technical problems (for example, the classification of different rhetorical genres, such as the deliberative, epideictic, and judicial) or

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<sup>53</sup> Among the modern champions of this view, see Kennedy 1963 and, more recently, Pernot 2006.

<sup>54</sup> See Protagoras: D1; Gorgias: D5–6; Thrasymachus: D1–3; Polus: fr. 3 Radermacher (= Plato *Gorgias* 462b).

<sup>55</sup> See esp. Cole 1991: 71–112; Schiappa 1999; Ford 2002; Gagarin 2007.

stylistics (for instance, the distinction between high and low style). What is certain is that, although the Sophists were not the “official” founders of rhetoric, they showed an interest in *logos* and what is related to it, bringing to the fore a series of questions that later became the focus of the discipline.

Contrary to the Platonic prejudice that Sophists and rhetors employed deceptive means of persuasion, we find cogent and rigorous argumentation in many early rhetorical texts.<sup>56</sup> To be sure, there were Sophists like Thrasymachus who were famous for the ability to play with the audience’s feelings,<sup>57</sup> and we already remarked that Gorgias in his *Helen* attributed a sort of magical power to words. But if we consider Gorgias and Antiphon, the two Sophists from whom full speeches survive, several types of argument may be found: arguments from probability (or likelihood: *eikos*),<sup>58</sup> antinomy, induction from exemplary cases, *reductio ad absurdum*, and the so-called *apagôgê* (where the speaker explains all possibilities in order then to criticize each of

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<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Lloyd 1979: 79–86. In the case of Gorgias, consider the parallel with medical texts, such as the Hippocratic *On Winds*; cf. Ford 2002: 176–87.

<sup>57</sup> D13; see Macé 2008.

<sup>58</sup> One variation of this argument is what we might call the “counter-probability” argument: see e.g., Antiphon, *Tetralogies* 1.2.2.3 and 2.2.6. A classic example is the case of a fight between a weak man and a strong one: in order to defend himself, the former argues that, being weak, it is unlikely that he wished to pick a fight with someone stronger. In turn, the latter replies by turning this reasoning on its head: it is unlikely that he was the one to start the fight because, being the stronger, he would immediately have been blamed for it. In other words, something is claimed to be unlikely precisely because it is likely: see Aristotle *Rhetoric*, 2.24.12 (this argument was apparently “invented” by Corax).

them; this appears to be Gorgias' favorite strategy).<sup>59</sup> We can see considerable effort expended in developing many different types of argument—this is one object of the Sophists' teaching, which found concrete applications in model speeches handed down for students to memorize.<sup>60</sup> The appeal to feelings is certainly present, but rational analysis is equally important. By appealing to reason as well as emotion, the Sophists developed means of carrying out investigations and discussions in contexts where the truth is not self-evident. Their frequent resort to arguments from probability or induction from exemplary cases does not reflect their opposition to factual argumentation, as later authors such as Plato and Aristotle presented it, but the simple reality that truth is in many cases unclear.<sup>61</sup>

This explains once again the importance of “correctness,” as in the following testimony on Protagoras:

When a competitor in the pentathlon unintentionally struck Epitimus of Pharsalus with a javelin and killed him, he [i.e., Pericles] spent a whole day with Protagoras examining the difficulty whether, according to the most correct reasoning (*kata ton orthotaton logon*), it

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<sup>59</sup> The most complete analysis is provided by Spatharas 2001; see also Rodriguez 2019. On Antiphon, see the analysis by Gagarin 2007 (who quite rightly reacts to Solmsen 1931, according to whom all of Antiphon's orations were marked by the adoption of irrational argumentative schemes, such as the use of oaths and ordeals, which were typical of the archaic age). For an overview, see also Tinsdale 2010.

<sup>60</sup> Examples of such texts are Antiphon's *Tetralogies* and also Gorgias' *Helen* and *Palamedes*. The prologue of Plato's *Phaedrus* is a good example of this practice: see Natali 1986; Ford 2002: 90–1.

<sup>61</sup> See, for instance, Plato *Phaedrus* 267a, and Schiappa 1999: 50–1.

was the javelin, or the man who threw it, or the umpires, that should be considered responsible for this unfortunate event (A10/D30).

This testimony is a fine example of the Sophists' way of reasoning, and it is not a coincidence that Antiphon, in the second *Tetralogy*, discussed the same issue.<sup>62</sup> The facts are indisputable: a man has unintentionally killed another man. However, much remains to be said with regard to the issues of moral responsibility, legal guilt, and judgment of the whole incident. The same fact may be viewed from many different perspectives: for the physician, the javelin is the cause of the man's death; for the judge, the javelin thrower is responsible; for the person who has organized the competition, it is the judge. This contrast gives the Sophist some room for action and argument: he will attempt to lend meaning and order to the event. The notion of correctness is the criterion which enables him to confront the validity and shortcomings of each of the different points of view.

From the testimony it is not clear what Protagoras' final verdict was (and Antiphon's *Tetralogy* likewise does not end with a judgment).<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the comparison with other Protagorean testimonies suggests that arriving at a single answer was not the real point. The

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<sup>62</sup> See also Antiphon's fr. 87B44, IV 10 (= D38), where the criterion of "correct reasoning" is used to establish what brings about pain and what brings about pleasure. Another interesting occurrence of the criterion of correctness is to be found in the *Encomium of Helen*, where Gorgias sets out "to say correctly (*orthôs*) what is necessary" in order to preserve Helen's honor (B11, 2 / D24).

<sup>63</sup> This is how Plutarch introduces the testimony: "The first thing he did was to make public, in order to make men laugh, the way in which his father [Pericles] spent his time at home and the discussions he had with the Sophists" (*Pericles* 36.4, absent in LM).



anecdote seems rather a confirmation of Protagoras' claim that "concerning every question one can argue equally well in one direction or the other" (A20/D27; see also B6a/D26).<sup>64</sup> Apparently weaker or counterintuitive views can be defended too, as is also implied by Protagoras' (in)famous claim "to make the weaker argument the stronger one" (A21/D28).<sup>65</sup> Given that there is some truth and validity in all points of view, the problem is not so much to extract the only possible solution as to find the one most suited to the situation, while foregoing any claim to come up with a single valid answer.<sup>66</sup> The best speech is not the one that is true but that is best suited to the situation at hand and most capable of outdoing others from a formal and logical perspective.<sup>67</sup> The importance of correctness, therefore, plays a decisive role in Protagoras' thought at various and mutually related levels, both conceptual and linguistic: correct reasoning, which expresses the best possible solution, must find a counterpart in formal correctness, which makes one's speech persuasive and hence allows one to gain the upper hand in each particular situation.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> See Lee, this volume.

<sup>65</sup> Consider Antiphon's parallel, defending the thesis that the boy who was killed and not the javelin thrower is responsible: "For a litigant defending a 'weak' position in court, it would seem a vital strategy to point out that *prima facie* assumptions about responsibility need not be the *correct* assumption, and to demolish the case of their opponent by means of a subtle but 'consistent' account that reframes the facts" (Rademacher 2013: 103).

<sup>66</sup> Gagarin 2008: 30.

<sup>67</sup> See also Brancacci 2002: 183–90.

<sup>68</sup> Classen 1976: 222–5; Kerferd 1981: 73.

The focus on argumentative strategies makes it possible to rectify a common scholarly view, that the Sophists' teaching was a simple transmission of practical advice designed to ensure victory in an argument—as though achieving successful persuasion and winning contests were the only things that mattered. If we consider the surviving texts by the Sophists, we soon realize that it was not only a matter of persuading the listener. The concrete need to win discussions and debates does not preclude a more profound reflection on the human world and the importance of *logos*, understood as the capacity to reason and to express oneself.

Likewise, it would be too simplistic to think that the aim of declamations such as the *Encomium of Helen* or the *Defense of Palamedes* was simply to convince the audience of the innocence of two mythological figures by developing sound arguments. Let us take, for instance, the aforementioned case of the *Encomium of Helen*, which Gorgias composed allegedly to defend the memory of Homer's celebrated heroine, guilty of fleeing with Paris and causing the Trojan War. To absolve Helen, Gorgias lists the four possible reasons for her ending up in Paris' arms, and shows that none make her responsible: the responsibility would lie with the gods, or with Paris' force, or with the power of words, or with an impersonal force such as desire.<sup>69</sup> Now, the attempt to cover all possibilities—this text is based on the method of *apagôgê*—clearly goes beyond the obligation to persuade someone of Helen's innocence. Sure, this *logos* offers a brilliant model of a defense speech. But it is more than that. For in order to better understand the

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<sup>69</sup> Otherwise, he could have exploited an alternative version of the myth, according to which Helen never went to Troy (this is the version followed by the poet Stesichorus, among others: see Plato *Phaedrus*, 243a–b; see too Herodotus 2.113–20 and Euripides' *Helen*). The argument that Helen was innocent, despite the fact that she went to Troy, instead betrays a desire to provoke the audience with a thesis that at first sight seems utterly implausible.

phenomenon of communication, Gorgias investigates human physiology, emotional dynamics, and the power of mechanisms of persuasion.<sup>70</sup> Besides, he also raises interesting problems with regard to responsibility (as Protagoras and Antiphon did). Through his arguments, Gorgias raised thorny problems that call for a more in-depth reflection on the concept (and existence) of responsibility. Indeed, while in this text Gorgias states his intention of persuading the public, his intention to elicit intellectual pleasure by exploring the intricacies of our condition—like Helen, we are also subject to the power of *logoi*—is just as important.<sup>71</sup> There is pleasure derived from Gorgias’ display of intelligence, from his capacity to provoke and to investigate the potential of language and human thought, and from his bold attempt to revisit—and at times to criticize—traditional knowledge.<sup>72</sup>

From Protagoras onwards, sophistic *logoi* were developed as a tool to examine a question in its complexity and ambiguity. When properly employed, such methods and argumentative strategies could be of use for winning arguments; yet they were just as significantly a means of discussing problematic cases, investigating different types of arguments, entertaining the public, and showcasing one’s skills.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, they helped to examine values and ideas, and explore human experience in general (anticipating Aristotle’s investigation in the *Rhetoric*).<sup>74</sup> To be sure,

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<sup>70</sup> Segal 1962; Ford 2002: 172–87; Long 2015: 97–103.

<sup>71</sup> See B11, 13 / D24, 13 (“a speech written with artistry . . . delights and persuades”) and Plutarch’s comment in the above-quoted fr. D35 on tragedy (“the pleasure of words”) with Verdenius 1981: 118.

<sup>72</sup> Gagarin 2001: 285–6

<sup>73</sup> Gagarin 2001: 289.

<sup>74</sup> See Solmsen 1975.

the Sophists were not concerned with developing an exhaustive philosophical system. Yet this does not mean that the problems raised by their reflections on *logos* and its centrality are unimportant. It is in precisely this capacity—to make crucial problems the focus of the debate, bringing out many previously undetected tensions—that the interest of the Sophists lies, in fifth-century Greece no less than today.