The Efficacy of True Speech
Gorgias Between Rorty and Foucault

Mauro Serra
Università degli Studi di Salerno, Italia

Abstract   According to a widespread interpretation, in Gorgias' philosophy of language there is no room for truth at all. The only aim of logos for him would be effective persuasion and speech would be constrained by nothing but persuasiveness itself. Referring to Encomium of Helen, I try to point out, however, that in Gorgias there is an attempt to investigate the complex relationship between truth and efficacy in the functioning of language. I also suggest that, seen from this perspective, Gorgias' conception of truth shows significant points of contact with Rorty's and, above all, Foucault's thinking.

Keywords   Truth. Efficacy. Belief. Rorty. Foucault.

Summary   1 Introduction. – 2 A Behavioural Interpretation?. – 3 Archaic Background. – 4 Going Back to the Text. – 5 An Unorthodox Perspective. – 6 In the Wake of the Moderns: Gorgias Between Rorty and Foucault.

1 Introduction

It is widely held that, in Gorgias' thought and in particular in his *Encomium*, there is no room for truth at all. In a way that does not differ from the testament of Plato himself in the *Gorgias* and in a well-known passage of the *Phaedrus* (273a-b), the Sicilian sophist could be thus considered (together with Protagoras) the leading figure of a vast group of intellectuals, the sophists, who, without constituting a school, can nevertheless be at least partially united since "das [*doxa*] haben sie auf den Thron der Wahrheit gesetzt" (Bröcker 1958, 438). The lack of interest in truth mentioned by Plato would correspond to the predominant role attributed instead to the persuasion. The only aim of *logos*, in this perspective, would be effective persuasion; speech would be constrained by nothing but persuasiveness itself. In the following paper I will try to point out that this line of interpretation of Gorgias' thought is decidedly wrong. In contrast to what is usually claimed, in Gorgias there is, in fact, an attempt to investigate the complex relationship between truth and efficacy in the functioning of language. It is a question that is still relevant in the current debate, as I will try to suggest in the last part of the paper. In particular, I will refer briefly to the thought of Rorty and Foucault, as both authors, albeit in different way, place this relationship in a political framework.

Before starting, however, a methodological point. I will not take into account all the surviving Gorgianic texts or attempt to offer a holistic interpretation of his thought about truth.[1] Although I am convinced that such an interpretation is possible, I will postpone it to another occasion.[2] For the moment I will limit myself to a close (al-

---

[1] For examples of this holistic perspective, see McComiskey 1997 and Bermudez 2017, and, with a thoroughly epistemological perspective, Di Iulio (forthcoming), which is the best example in my opinion.

[2] I add here a short answer to a question raised by one of my referees who writes: «it is very difficult to establish a general thesis on Gorgias theory of *logos* and persuasion, without examining the epistemological and linguistic theses of Gorgias Treatise *On Not-Being or On Nature* […]. For it could be that the cases of the truth vocabulary discussed by the author in the *Encomium of Helen* do not have the theorical profound implications that could be expected from a more technical treatment such as the epistemological issues explained in the Treatise *On Not-Being or Nature*». On the one hand, it is a fair objection that I could only have answered by writing a much longer essay than was possible. On the other, to put it in a nutshell, I think there is a complementary relationship between *On Not-Being or On Nature* and Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen*, with the former aiming to show that an ontological foundation of truth is not possible and the latter aiming to show the political, and intersubjective, I would say anachronistically, nature of the concept of truth. From this perspective, I think that my interpretation basically agrees with the seminal work of Barbara Cassin 1995 but with a difference that seems decisive to me. Whereas Cassin emphasises the 'poietic' and creative action of the *logos* and does not have a precise place for truth in her interpretation of Gorgias' thought, in my own reading the concept of truth is placed in a tragic and ago-

beit necessarily partial) reading of *Encomium of Helen*, since, in my opinion, it can be considered to be the sophist's manifesto of his ideas about speech.[3]

2 A Behavioural Interpretation?

My first step will be a brief consideration of Mourelatos' interpretation (1987). Although it was a widely held idea, the thesis that truth and efficacy are starkly opposed in Gorgias' thought finds its most philosophically sophisticated and challenging form in Mourelatos' paper. Moreover, the difficulties this interpretation faces offer a good example of the general problems of this kind of reading, particularly in reference to *Encomium of Helen*. According to Mourelatos, it is possible to distinguish in Gorgias' philosophy of language two different but complementary parts. In the treatise *On Not-Being or On Nature*, we find the *pars destruens*. In its third section, in fact, Gorgias puts forward several arguments for the claim that one cannot communicate one's knowledge to another. According to the first argument, since speech and objects belong to different ontological categories, it is impossible for an element of one category to be known through an element of the other. Another argument is based instead on perceptual differences: it is impossible that two different subjects have the same perceptual experience or mental image of a given object. Another version of the argument is referred to the same subject, who cannot have the same experience through different senses or at different times. The logical consequence of all these arguments, and the final conclusion of the *Treatise*, is that communication is impossible. The aim of *On Not-Being or On Nature*'s arguments is, according to Mourelatos, an attack on specific conceptions of linguistic meaning. The argument from category is directed against the assumption that the meaning of all words is constituted by their reference; the puzzle of perceptual sameness, instead, would have as its target a mentalist interpretation of linguistic meaning, i.e. a conception according to which

> the hearing of a word 'W' brings to the mind of each speaker of a certain language the same mental image or thought and that conversely when either that same mental image or thought or the cor-

---

nistic framework since I believe that in Gorgias' thought we find one of the most intriguing attempts in the Western tradition to highlight the inevitable violence of the *logos*.

3 For a recent contrary opinion, see Luzzatto 2020, who, however, refers only to the central part of the text (parr. 8-14). One of the main problems of an interpretation of the *Encomium*, as will be seen, is precisely the relationship between the central part and the remaining part of the text.

responding sense impression should occur to the speaker, the perception can be conveyed to others through use of the word 'W'. (Mourelatos 1987, 151)

This would not be, however, Gorgias' final word. In *Encomium of Helen*, we find in fact the *pars construens* of his theory. In the central part of the text, Gorgias puts forward a behavioural conception of meaning. On this conception, the function of speech does not consist in communicating anything at all, but in arousing stimulus and responses so that speech can be perfectly defined in terms of its persuasiveness without any whatsoever reference to its truth value. Actually, at first sight, *Encomium of Helen* seems to offer substantive evidence for a behavioural picture. In *Hel.* 8, Gorgias defines *logos* as *mega dynastês* and makes claims about its power to accomplish the most divine deeds; in *Hel.* 9, where Gorgias is speaking about poetry, *logoi* are said to be able to substitute actual experiences and elicit the same behavioural (i.e. emotional) effects as such experiences. Finally, in *Hel.* 14, we find the widely known analogy between *logoi* and *pharmaka*, through which *logos'* action on the human soul is compared to the material action of medicine or drugs that "draw out different humours from the body" (*allous chymous ek tou sômatos exagei*). Notwithstanding that, however, Mourelatos' interpretation faces three major difficulties. The first is methodological. His interpretation is, in fact, based only on the central part of the *Encomium of Helen* (*Hel.* 8-14) that was extrapolated as being an autonomous text. Although I agree that we find authentic Gorgianic ideas expressed in this part of the text, I think that they need to be understood in the context of the whole text if we want to avoid drawing at misleading conclusions. Moreover, the analysis of the central part is not without its difficulties. One of these has already been raised, in a slightly different manner, by Bermudez (2017) and Di Iulio (forthcoming). In both *Hel.* 11 and 13, Gorgias seems to speak against the identification of truth and persuasion or efficacy. In par. 11 he plainly admits the possibility of false speeches, implying

> the existence of a norm that determines the falsehood of speeches independently of their persuasive success, a norm that seems to be closely related to a distinction between opinion and knowledge. (Bermudez 2017, 7)

In par. 13, however, he claims that persuasion (together with pleasure) is the effect of a *logos* "written according to the technique, but not said according to truth", signifying that one can be persuaded by speeches which are not communicating truth. Persuasion (and pleasure) can therefore occur even where there is no room for truth. There is then another difficulty, which seems to me really decisive in re-

jecting Mourelatos' interpretation. In the examples of *Hel.* 13 where the efficacy of persuasion is mostly underlined, we find a series of activities and contexts that revolve around rational argumentation. Indeed, we could say that all the contexts involving rationality that might spring to the mind of a fifth century Greek are recalled here. What is most important, however, is the fact that in these cases Gorgias' explanation of the efficacy of *logos* – i.e. of its persuasiveness – is centred on the pivotal role of the *doxa*. *Doxa* is a word that is notoriously difficult to translate,[4] but, whatever the meaning one wants to give it, it implies a reference to a psychological or mental process. Its use seems therefore decidedly at odds with behaviourism, a doctrine that is strongly committed to the truth of the following claim:

> Behavior can be described and explained without making ultimate reference to mental events or to internal psychological processes. The sources of behavior are external (in the environment), not internal (in the mind, in the head). (Graham 2019, par. 1)

Moreover, Gorgias' use of the word seems to be significantly complex and not casual, since "at least three possible meanings of *doxa* and its cognates may be distinguished in the work" (Futter 2011, 4). Let us we take for example what he says in *Hel.* 11, preparing the ground for subsequent examples of persuasive speech: "most people on most subjects furnish themselves with *doxa* as advisor (*symboulos*) to the soul. But belief, being slippery and unsteady, surrounds those who rely on it with slippery and unsteady successes". According to the most natural reading of this passage, *doxa* can be understood as a faculty of judgement whose role is to give advice for action to the soul, which in turn can be roughly compared to what is for us moderns the 'mind'. It is quite evident that we are in a decidedly non-behaviourist landscape. Nor are things better if we take into account the first of the three examples of *Hel.* 13, where Gorgias says that: "the discourses of the natural scientists […] setting aside one belief and building up another in its stead make incredible and obscure things apparent to the eyes of belief". As Roberto Velardi conclusively pointed out several years ago, a striking comparison with Herodotus' description of the ancient debate around the explanation of Nile's floods allows

---

4   It is generally translated as 'opinion' or as 'belief'. Recently, however, Moss and Schwab (2019, 1-32) have persuasively argued that *doxa* is not the word corresponding to what we moderns mean by 'belief'. This would rather apply to *hypolepsis*. Since, however, "the common element in *doxa*, knowledge, and practical wisdom that makes them all count as *hypolepseis* is conviction or taking to be true" (Moss, Schwab 2019, 23), I think that in the context of my argument about Gorgias I can continue to use 'belief', which I prefer to 'opinion' due to the derogatory meaning it generally assumes.

us to give to the word *doxa* in this context the meaning of 'scientific theory' (Velardi 2001, 16, 52-3).[5] In this case too, therefore, it is really difficult to understand how a behavioural framework could account for what Gorgias is saying.[6]

3 Archaic Background

Although, in my opinion, Gorgias' thought can usefully be compared with modern philosophical reflection, I think that we could better understand what is at stake in his *Encomium of Helen*, starting from framing it in the socio-cultural context to which it belongs. In this perspective is always useful to make reference to the classical work of Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece* (1996). According to Detienne's reconstruction, of which here I give a very concise summary, in the Greek archaic age, three types of discourses – poetic praise, prophecy, and judgment – were set apart from the quotidian not only because of their common divine origin, but also because of their power over the human world, as words that 'realise' things, in the sense of making them real. This is the province of 'efficacious' speech, where it is not possible to draw a dividing line between truth and efficacy. However, the truth of these magico-religious words was not without its ambiguity: both the words of the Muses and mantic speech could mislead humans, for whom the masters of truth could become 'masters of deception'. In any case, and most importantly, the ability to distinguish between reality and deception is expressly connected with divinity. In attempting to reconstruct the historical evolution of the idea of truth in Greece, Detienne shows how this ambiguous relationship between truth and deception was gradually replaced by the requirement of non-contradiction. He outlines the process of the secularisation of magico-religious speech and the development of its dialogic form, which took place in the classical period in connection with the transformation of the socio-political organisation and the progressive development of democracy. It is in this changing context that a fundamental question emerges, as Detienne himself says in a later work, where he returns to the "masters of truth":

What place do the sophist and the philosopher occupy in the line-

---

age of the "Masters of Truth"? How does their speech differ from the efficacious speech that conveys reality of the diviner, the poet and the king of justice? How does the transition occur between one type of thought, marked by ambiguity and the particular logic that goes with it, to another kind of thought in which argumentation, the principle of non-contradiction, and dialogue, with its distinctions between the sense and the reference of propositions, all seem to herald the advent of a new intellectual regime? (Detienne 2007, 62)

To this question Detienne offers an answer that adopts a classification whose essential features were established by Plato, distinguishing completely the paths of the sophist and the philosopher. On the one hand, for sophists and orators for whom truth has no place, discourse is an instrument but not a way to know reality: *logos* is powerful but not a signifier pointing to a signified (Detienne 1996, 118). On the other hand, however, are the members of philosophical and religious sects (first of all, Pythagoreans), who "adopted procedure and modes of thought that directly prolonged earlier religious thought" (Detienne 1996, 120) and claimed the possession of a Truth not to be bartered and only to be handed down from master to disciple. And those we are used to calling philosophers are the heirs of this tradition since, even if

> between Epimenides of Crete and Parmenides of Elea, between the ecstatic magus and the philosopher of Being, the gap seems unbridgeable, a network of affinities links them on a whole series of points centred around *Alêtheia*. (Detienne 1996, 130)[7]

It is quite evident that, apart from modern jargon, Detienne's interpretation of sophists, and Gorgias in particular,[8] is basically the same as that advanced by Mourelatos. There is, however, an important difference: clarifying the background from which Gorgias' thought would be developed, it allows us to glimpse a different interpretative path. What if Gorgias had tried to outline a conceptual frame-

---

[7]   As Pierre Vidal Naquet observed in his foreword to Detienne's work: "In some sense, Detienne's aim is to write a prehistory of Parmenides' poem" (Vidal Naquet 1996, 9).

[8]   See Detienne 1996, 118: "In this type of speech there was no distance between words and things. For Gorgias, who drew his ultimate conclusions from this notion, discourse *did not reveal the things it touched upon* and had nothing to communicate. In fact, *it was impossible for discourse to constitute communication with others*. It was "a great lord with a tiny, invisible body" curiously resembling the infant Hermes of the Homeric Hymn, the child with a magic wand (given to him by Apollo to control the flocks) who becomes *an instrument of persuasion or 'psychagogia'*" (emphasis added).

work capable of accounting for the archaic identification between truth and efficacy in a radically different socio-political context due to the birth of democracy?[9]

4 Going Back to the Text

To try to find an answer to the concluding question of the previous paragraph, I will start by analysing the *Encomium*'s passages where we find the Greek word for 'truth'. Gorgias uses this word three times, first in the opening of the text. Here he emphatically says:

> The perfect order (*kosmos*) proper to a city-state is excellence of its men; to a body, beauty; to a soul, wisdom; to an action, excellence; and to a discourse, truth (*logôi alêtheia*) – and the opposites of these are disorder. And the praiseworthy man and woman and discourse and deed and city-state and action one must honour with praise, while one must assign blame to the unworthy – for it is equal error and ignorance to blame the praiseworthy and to praise the blameworthy. (*Hel.* 1)

Leaving to one side numerous questions regarding the translation,[10] two points should be underlined. On the one hand, it is a very general statement that highlights a strong relationship between speech and truth, on the other, this relationship is brought back within an archaic framework, in which the aim of speeches is traditionally identified through the conceptual categories of 'praise' and 'blame'. In this way, the normative value of the statement, i.e. speeches should communicate truth, can be reformulated through the opposition praise *vs* blame so that "to blame the praiseworthy and to praise the blameworthy" is equivalent to speaking falsely.

The second occurrence of the word 'truth' is found in the second paragraph, which can be considered the natural consequence and the application of the general framework to the case of Helen. Here is the text:

> It being required of the same man both to speak straight and to

---

9 Regardless of Gorgias' political orientation, which is difficult to establish, it should be remembered that "during the middle decades of the fifth century, the time when Gorgias was presumably beginning to develop his talents and reputation, the cities he dwelled in and travelled to were democratically governed" (Robinson 2007, 115). The cities Robinson refers to are Leontini, Acragas, and Syracuse.

10 The most important is about the proper meaning of the word '*kosmos*'. Elsewhere I have tried to show that Gorgias' use of the word is an intertextual quotation alluding to the Homeric expression *kata kosmon* (Serra 2012).

refute [crooked speech, one should refute] those blaming Helen, a woman concerning whom the testimony of those who are called poets has become univocal and unanimous – likewise the repute of her name, which has become a byword for calamities. And by bestowing some argument (*logismon*) on the speech, I myself wish to absolve this ill-reputed woman from responsibility, and to demonstrate that those who blame her are speaking falsely – and, having shown the truth, to put an end to ignorance. (*Hel*. 2)

In line with what was said in *Hel*. 1, the correctness of the speech referring to Helen consists in refuting those who traditionally blamed her in such a way as to restore the right relationship between 'praise' and 'praiseworthy'. What is most important, however, is that in this way the relationship between truth and *logos* is not about speech in general but about Gorgias' speech. Gorgias can thus frame this relationship in a clearly methodological claim. According to this claim, which coincides with the task of Gorgias' speech, 'to show the truth', 'to demonstrate that those who blame her are speaking falsely', and 'to put an end to ignorance' are different ways of referring to the same action, which can in turn be achieved by bestowing some argument (*logismos*) on the speech.

Let us now move to the third and final occurrence of the word, which is found in the central part of the text connected with the second of the three examples of *logos* used by Gorgias to illustrate its irresistible persuasive power. Here, Gorgias speaks of the speeches pronounced in an agonistic context (forensic or political) that are persuasive: "written according to the technique, but not said according to truth" (*Hel*. 13). Regardless of the value attributed to participial clause (causal or hypothetic), it is evident that in this case there is no relationship between *logos* and truth and, above all, that there is, however, a clear-cut distinction between truth and persuasion. Since one can be delighted and persuaded by speeches that are not communicating truth, persuasion can occur even when there is no room for truth (and this is what often happens).

We are now in a position to draw some partial conclusions. At first sight, Detienne's and Mourelatos's interpretation would seem to be confirmed. In introducing a stark distinction between truth and persuasion (or efficacy), Gorgias would be breaking away from the previous archaic tradition and would be laying the foundations for the birth of a new discipline, rhetoric, interested only in persuasion and not in truth. This interpretation, however, as we have already seen, is based on a serious methodological mistake, since both Mourelatos and Detienne, albeit in different way, take into account only the central part of the text, arbitrarily deciding not to consider the remaining parts at all, particularly the opening sections that contain two important occurrences of the term 'truth'. Taking into account

all the text, the picture becomes much more problematic. In a certain sense we are in fact apparently forced to choose which the authentically Gorgianic position is between two different possibilities: is the sophist claiming the truthfulness of his speech in opposition to the examples of the central part? Or is it rather in the long description of the *logos*' persuasive power that we find his ideas about the functioning of speech expressed? Both options are variously attested to in the secondary literature, but I don't have the space here for a detailed analysis of them, which would require another paper. I limit myself to observing that, to the best of my knowledge, I have not found any (convincing) attempt to show that the two parts of *Encomium* are not really in opposition but are instead complementary. This is the aim of the second part of my paper.

5   An Unorthodox Perspective

Although the relationship between truth and persuasion is probably the *Encomium*'s main theme, to properly understand what is at stake in this text we would need an overall interpretation that takes into account several other elements, such as the role of *doxa*, the correct meaning of *logismos*, the identification between persuasion and compulsion and so on. Not being able to develop such an interpretation here, I will proceed in a somewhat unorthodox way. I will introduce a Platonic passage which seems to me to provide the best interpretation of what Gorgias is saying. Starting from this passage, I will then try to outline the specificity of the Gorgianic position as far as it concerns the relationship between truth and persuasion. I am aware of the fact that this way of proceeding is both unorthodox and risky – above all because the Platonic passage, taken from the last part of *Theaetetus*, is itself the subject of considerable disagreement between scholars. Notwithstanding that, I think that is a fruitful path to be explored. Let us turn now to this passage of *Theaetetus*. We are at the end of the second part of the dialogue where Socrates is aiming to show that knowledge is not identical with true belief. In order to reach such a conclusion, he introduces the case of a jury as a counter-example.

> Socrates: Well, then, this at least calls for slight investigation; for you have a whole profession which declares that true opinion is not knowledge.
> Theaetetus: How so? What profession is it?
> Socrates: The profession of those who are greatest in wisdom, who are called orators and lawyers (*rhêtoras kai dikanikous*); for they persuade men by the art which they possess (*peithousin têi technêi*), not teaching them (*ou didaskontes*), but making

them have whatever opinion they like (*alla doxasein poiountes*). Or do you think there are any teachers so clever as to be able, in the short time allowed by the water-clock, [201b] satisfactorily to teach the judges the truth about what happened (*tôn genomenôn tên alêtheian*) to people who have been robbed of their money or have suffered other acts of violence, when there were no eyewitnesses?

Theaetetus: I certainly do not think so; but I think they can persuade them.

Socrates: And persuading them (*to peisai*) is making them have an opinion (*doxasai poiêsai*), is it not?

Theaetetus: Of course.

Socrates: Then when judges are justly persuaded (*dikaiôs peisthôsin*) about matters which one can know only by having seen them (*idonti monon estin eidenai*) and in no other way, in such a case, judging of them from hearsay (*ex akoêi krinontes*), having acquired a true opinion of them (*alêthê doxan*), [201c] they have judged without knowledge (*aneu epistêmês*), though they are rightly persuaded (*ortha peisthentes*), if the judgement they have passed is correct (*eiper eu edikasan*), have they not?

(Plato, *Theaetetus*, 201a5-c2, transl. Fowler)

According to a close literal reading of the passage, these are the main steps of Socrates' argument:

1. only an eyewitness (*idonti*) can possess knowledge;
2. this knowledge amounts to the truth about what happened (*tôn genomenôn tên alêtheian*);
3. there is a straight connection between *doxa* and persuasion so that 'to persuade' (*to peisai*) is identical 'to producing conviction' (*doxasai poiêsai*) in the person who is being persuaded;
4. *doxa* resulting from persuasion can be true or false so that, if the judgement the jurors have passed is correct, they have acquired a true belief (*alêthê doxan*);
5. true belief, however, is not identical with knowledge (*aneu epistêmês*). Two points seem to me to be really decisive to clarify Gorgias' thought.

On the one hand, the stark connection between *doxa* and persuasion, i.e. the fact that whenever we have *doxa* our epistemological status is unavoidably concerned with persuasion, does not necessarily imply that there is no room for truth at all, since *doxa* can be both true and false. In other words, we, as Socrates does, can provide a picture in which *doxa* and truth are not mutually exclusive. On the other hand, however, there is a cognitive condition, knowledge, that is not only superior to *doxa*, but whose acquisition does not depend on speech (*logos*). The picture that emerges from the intertwining of the

two points seems to me to fit perfectly with what Gorgias is saying in his *Encomium of Helen*. I don't think there is any need to insist on the connection between *doxa* and persuasion since it is an all too evident fact (in particular in reference to *Hel*. 13). What is, however, most important is that for Gorgias too *doxa* is a second best that men are forced to rely on, because they are unable to acquire knowledge. In *Hel*. 11, he claims, in fact, that given men's difficulty in remembering the past, investigating the present and foreseeing the future, "most people on most subjects furnish themselves with *doxa* as advisor (*symboulos*) to the soul". They are obliged to rely on the *doxa* as a guide even if it is unsure and unstable and it is not by chance that the uncertain and unstable nature of the *doxa* determines the uncertainty and instability of the fate of those who rely on it, as Gorgias strongly underlines. It is important to notice that, even if Gorgias states that acquiring memory of the past, insight into the present and prediction of the future is difficult but not impossible, in reality the formulation used seems to suggest that *doxa*, even with its fragility, is the only faculty available to men. True, in this context Gorgias doesn't use the word 'knowledge' and does not insist on the fact that knowledge is independent from speech. The formulation adopted, however, takes up the expression through which, in the archaic poetical tradition, the holistic knowledge ascribed to the Muses and dispensed by them to inspired poets and prophets is understood. And this knowledge, as is widely known, has a direct and autoptic nature, depending on the Muses' ability to see everything. According to this framework, then, in Gorgias too there are two kinds of intellectual cognition, the weaker of which cannot but make use of speeches, and is therefore necessarily connected to *doxa* and persuasion. In this case too, however, there is room for truth, since the fact that persuasion has occurred will be expressed in a truth-judgement that in turn could be truth or false. In this perspective it is entirely reasonable to say that *logos* aims at truth both in general, as Gorgias does in *Hel*. 1, and in reference to his particular speech about Helen (*Hel.* 2). The aforementioned distinction between two different kinds of intellectual cognition, however, determines two equally inevitable consequences whose misunderstanding has, in my opinion, compromised the understanding of Gorgias' thought. On the one hand, while it is reasonable to say that *logos* aims at truth, we must not forget that *logoi* can provide us only with truth but not with certainty. On the other hand, the lack of certainty allows us to say in equally reasonable way that every truth amounts to a belief and that they are actually two sides of the same coin. To reformulate the Gorgianic insight slightly, we could then say that truth has a dialectical character and that any belief remains true until it is refuted. According to my interpretation, then, what we find in *Encomium of Helen* is a generalisation of a conceptual framework, which seems particularly relevant

in the case of a jury, but which Gorgias thinks to be useful in characterising in a very general way the action of *logos*. In this framework, efficacy is identified with persuasion, which in turn depends on *logos*' capacity to take into account a series of data or a previous belief to arrive at the formulation of a judgment that has a character of plausibility greater than the refuted one. Not coincidentally, Gorgias uses two very 'technical' terms to define this kind of action applying them first of all to his own speech: *logismos* and *eikos*. With first, still rare term in the last quarter of the fifth century B.C., he indicates the logical-argumentative procedure through which *logos* gives shape to a belief, which, as in the first example of *Hel.* 13, can be a real scientific theory. The second,[11] however, is used to highlight how the awareness of the difficulty (or better, the impossibility) of reaching a definitive truth, does not necessarily imply the adoption of a radically sceptical position and, at the same time, safeguards us from the risk of unconditional trust (in turn no less dangerous) in others' beliefs. Although my interpretation of Gorgias' line of reasoning is necessarily schematic, there is at least one possible objection to this reconstruction that I need to take into account. In *Hel.* 11 Gorgias seems to establish a very strong connection between persuasion, deception and *doxa* since persuasion is said to be the effect of false speeches and deception, in turn, characterises *logos*' powerful action due to the fact that men who do not possess knowledge are forced to rely on belief that is insecure and unstable. One natural interpretation of this account would be therefore of this kind: *logos* has no relationship with truth, but rather produces persuasion whose action is understandable in terms of doxastic deception, i.e. of *doxai* that are inevitably false. In the context of Gorgias' overall argument, however, this strong – I would even say emphatic – connection seems to me to perform an entirely different task. Gorgias' aim is, in fact, not to argue that there is a necessary relationship between falsity and persuasion but, on the contrary, that there is not a straight connection between persuasion and truth so that a truthful speech is necessarily persuasive. This move, reiterated in *Hel.* 13, has a twofold consequence. On the one hand, it marks a clear distance from Parmenidean thought, where it is said that the first road of in-

---

[11] On the correct meaning of the term *eikos,* see Di Piazza, Piazza, Serra (2018, 232): "Traditionally the term *eikos* has been translated into English as 'likelihood' or 'probability', and corresponding words in other modern European languages. [...] Actually, the semantical area of the Greek term was wider and more theoretically interesting. Indeed, the core-meaning of this semantical area is the adequateness of the *kind* of reality which *eikos* refers to. It is for this reason that in several contexts the term '*eikos*' has the meaning of 'normal', or 'natural', in the sense of being in line with the expectations or the habits. Since *eikos* has this narrow relationship with expectations and habits, it has a strong *doxastic* component, i.e. it is rooted in *doxai* (opinions)".

quiry "is the path of persuasion, for it accompanies truth" (DK 28 B2). On the other hand, however, it leads the way to the recognition that speech is not a transparent medium through which a non-linguistic truth can pass unaltered. In other words, recognising the possibility of false speeches is Gorgias' move to claim that truth is not only a linguistic affair but also a technical one, the result of a disputable human 'construction'.

6 In the Wake of the Moderns: Gorgias Between Rorty and Foucault

After a long time during which the philosophical dimensions of Gorgias' thought were systematically underestimated, I don't think there is anyone willing to subscribe to this opinion today. According to this change of perspective, it becomes quite reasonable to ask what aspects of modern philosophical reflection Gorgias' thought can be related to. In this last paragraph, I will just mention a possible direction, introducing, however, first of all a general methodological remark. Although I also think that asking such a question may prove useful, I am convinced at same time that to pretend to frame Gorgias' thought too rigidly in modern interpretative categories could be misleading.[12] With this *caveat*, here is my proposal, starting with the epistemological framework of Gorgias' reflection on *logos*. This framework seems to me to be characterised roughly by the intertwining of two elements. On the one hand, there is a clear anti-foundationalist vein, according to which knowledge mirroring an objective reality is considered impossible for humans. This claim, however, does not commit Gorgias to affirm the non-existence of facts. After all, it is a fact that Helen went to Troy, as Gorgias himself says in *Hel.* 5. Nor, on the other hand, does it justify an accusation of inconsistency against him. Gorgias' aim seems to be, in fact, to show that the facts too (understood in a minimal sense) become objects of provisional knowledge only through *logos*' interpretative action. On the other hand, according to the role attributed to this interpretative action, truth identifies with (provisional) justification that in turn should be conceived as the process of advancing argument or evidence in support of our knowledge claims. It is not a matter of a relation between a subject and a non-human reality. Rather, justification should be conceived as a matter of a relation between propositions so that what justifies a given proposition is another proposition. In modern jargon, we could attribute therefore to Gorgias an anti-foundational-

---

[12] Having said that, Di Iulio's critical survey of possible traces of modern positions in Gorgias' *Encomium of Helen* is really invaluable (Di Iulio, forthcoming, chap. 4).

ist and coherentist position, according to which he "may be regarded as a distant forerunner both of the linguistic turn and of the hermeneutic one" (Trabattoni 2016, 54).[13] As others scholars (e.g. Bermudez 2017) have already argued, it is a theorical position that seems to show noticeable similarities with Rorty's view.[14] There is, however, in my opinion a remarkable and decisive difference. Claiming that truth and justification are socially relative and that there is no foundational benchmark for knowledge and truth, Rorty argues that there is nothing like truth. Truth is an empty word because there is nothing to say about truth. This deflationist account of truth explains, in turn, why Rorty failed to embrace rhetorical theory in any substantive way, cleaving philosophy off the democratic project (Danisch 2013). As Richard Bernstein has written, it is often difficult to avoid thinking that ultimately Rorty's political theory, his defence of liberalism, does not seem to offer much more than an "*apologia* for the *status quo*" (Bernstein 1991, 233).[15] I don't think that Gorgias could subscribe to such a position. Notwithstanding its insightful observations, *Encomium of Helen* is not an epistemological treatise nor a philosophy of language work, at least in modern terms. As I have argued elsewhere (Serra, forthcoming), it has a political meaning, putting forward a conception of knowledge as the product of agonistic and conflictual relations, modelled on the legal case concerning Helen, but extended to a general description of *logos*' action and, above all, of deliberative activity. On the one hand, *Encomium*'s epistemological framework is connected to the somewhat paradoxical thesis according to which persuasion is a form of compulsion. On the other, the activity of the soul's internal deliberation to which Gorgias refers in *Hel.* 11 is modelled on what happened in ancient Greek democratic assemblies.[16] This fact has an important consequence for the

---

13   Actually, Trabattoni's statement refers to Plato. I don't have the space here to show to what extent and why Gorgias and Plato, in my opinion, share this definition.

14   According to Bermudez, a study of Gorgias' views could provide insights into how a deflationary account of truth could respond to the accusation of reducing normativity to power. He, however, does not adequately take into account the political nature of Gorgias' thought.

15   See, for example, this statement by Rorty: "It may seem foolish to speak of 'play' as I have done, in the midst of a political struggle that will decide whether civilization has a future, whether our descendants will have any chance to play. But philosophy should try *to express our political hopes rather than to ground our political practices*. On the view I am suggesting, nothing grounds our practices, nothing legitimises them, nothing shows them to be in touch with the way things really are" (quoted in Bernstein 1991, 240, emphasis added).

16   *Hel.* 11: "most people on most subjects furnish themselves with *doxa* as advisor (*symboulos*) to the soul. But opinion, being slippery and unsteady, surrounds those who rely on it with slippery and unsteady successes". In the second half of the fifth century, *symboulos* was an almost technical word used to refer to an orator who was giving advice to the *dêmos* in an assembly. According to Cammack (2020), assembly delibera-

conceptual framework in which we have to insert the action of *logos.* Speakers and audience are not identical, as they are in conversation, but distinct, in that a few are speakers, while the majority are listeners; orators, in turn, are not cooperative but agonistic, aiming to prove their own case and demolish their adversary's. In this perspective, truth, despite being provisional, keeps its conceptual strength intact as a political weapon in the relentless struggle characterising democracy. In the form of a final suggestion, I could say then that Gorgias would rather have subscribed to the following claim repeatedly quoted with approval by Foucault (2013, 84):[17]

> As far back as we go in the behaviour of our species, the 'true utterance' is a force to which few forces resist [...] Very early on, the Truth appeared to men as one of the most effective verbal weapons, one of the most prolific seeds of power, one of the most solid foundations for their institutions (my emphasis).

In this way, we glimpse a different interpretative path through which to frame Gorgias' thought. It seems to me to be worthy of exploration, but, as is so often said, this is the topic for another paper.

Bibliography

Bermudez, J. (2017). "Truth and Falsehood for Non-Representationalists: Gorgias on the Normativity of Language". *Journal of Ancient Philosophy*, 2, 1-21. https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.1981–9471.v11i2p1–21.

Bernstein, R.J. (1991). *The New Constellation. The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Bröcker, W. (1958). "Gorgias contra Parmenides". *Hermes*, 86, 425-40.

Cammack, D. (2020). "Deliberation in Ancient Greek Assemblies". *Classical Philology*, 115, 486-522. https://doi.org/10.1086/709197.

Cassin, B. (1995). *L'effet sophistique*. Paris: Gallimard.

Danisch, R. (2013). "The Absence of Rhetorical Theory in Richard Rorty's Linguistic Pragmatism". *Philosophy&Rhetoric*, 46(2), 156-81. https://doi.org/10.5325/philrhet.46.2.0156.

Detienne, M. (1996). *The Masters of Truth*. New York: Zone Books.

Detienne , M. (2007). *The Greeks* and Us. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Di Iulio, E. (forthcoming). *Gorgias's Thought: An epistemological Reading*. New York, Routledge.

---

tion was almost always represented in ancient sources as guided deliberation in which speaking and deliberating were performed by advisers and decision-makers respectively. The *dêmos* – which is to say the audience – deliberated (*bouleuô*), while those who spoke before it advised (*symbouleuô*).

17   The statement is that of his mentor Georges Dumezil.

Di Piazza, S.; Piazza, F.; Serra, M. (2018). "The Need for More Rhetoric in the Public Sphere. A Challenging Thesis about Post-Truth", *Versus*, 127(2), 225-42.

Foucault, M. (2013). *Lectures on the Will to Know*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Futter, D. (2011). "Gorgias and the Psychology of Persuasion". *Akroterion*, 56, 3-20. `https://doi.org/10.7445/56-0-1`.

Graham, G. (2019). s.v. "Behaviorism". Zalta, E.N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition). `https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/behaviorism`.

Luzzatto, M.T. (2020). "Did Gorgias Coin *Rhetorike*? A Rereading of Plato's *Gorgias*". *Lexis*, 38(1), 183-223. `http://doi.org/10.30687/Lexis/2210-8823/2020/01/007`.

McComiskey, B. (1997). "Gorgias and the Art of Rhetoric: Toward a Holistic Reading of the Extant Gorgianic Fragments". *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 27(4), 5-24. `https://doi.org/10.1080/02773949709391103`.

Moss, J.; Schwab, W. (2019). "The Birth of Belief". *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 57(1), 1-32. `https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.2019.0000`.

Mourelatos, A.P.D. (1987). "Gorgias on the Function of Language". *Philosophical Topics*, 15, 135-70. `https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics19871527`.

Robinson, E.W. (2007). "The Sophists and Democracy Beyond Athens". *Rhetorica*, 25(1), 109-22. `https://doi.org/10.1525/rh.2007.25.1.109`.

Trabattoni, F. (2016). *Essays on Plato's Epistemology*. Leuven: Leuven University Press. `https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1b9x1mp`.

Serra, M. (2012). "Narrare ed argomentare: percorsi della verità nella Grecia antica". *Testi e Linguaggi*, 6, 253-68.

Serra, M. (forthcoming). "The Violence of *Logos*. A Political Reading of Gorgias's *Helen*". Ewegen, S.; Zoller, C.; Reid, H. (eds), *Proceedings of Gorgias/Gorgias Conference* (Syracuse, 22-25 November 2021). Syracuse: Parnassos Press.

Velardi, R. (2001). *Retorica filosofia letteratura. Saggi di storia della retorica greca su Gorgia, Platone ed Anassimene di Lampsaco*. Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale.

Vidal Naquet, P. (1996). "Foreword". Detienne 1996, 7-13.