

Chapter 16

Gorgias

1. His career

Gorgias of Leontini (in Sicily) was a near contemporary of Protagoras, being probably a few years younger. All sources agree that he lived to a great age — perhaps to 108 (82 A 1:6; A2, A 7, A 10-13, A 18). He spent his last years in Thessaly; and if we can believe Athenaeos, he lived long enough to read Plato's *Gorgias* — or have it read to him (A 15a). Let us say, then, that his life-span was from 485 BCE till after 380 (approximately).ⁱ

In that case he was about five years younger than Protagoras, and at least a few years younger than Empedokles, who taught him oratory, and some philosophy (A 2-3, A 10).ⁱⁱ Gorgias' brother Herodikos was a famous physician; and Gorgias claimed to have persuaded some of his patients to endure surgical treatment (A 22, *Gorgias* 456b).ⁱⁱⁱ He was himself a professional orator, and a teacher of rhetoric. He made many grandiloquent claims, but he did not promise to teach virtue or wisdom. There was already a group of professional rhetoricians in Sicily in his time, and he did not, like Protagoras, invent a profession. But he was the most famous of the Sicilian group and the most successful (A 21, A 25).^{iv}

In 427 BCE he was appointed to head the embassy of Leontini to Athens (A 4). His speech on that occasion made a sensation; and it laid the foundation of a great reputation for him in

mainland Greece. His style was florid; and he soon had many imitators. But his success was intellectual as well as rhetorical (A 1:3, A 4).

He had an inordinately good opinion of himself; having become rich by his oratory and his teaching (his fees were very high — A 2, A 4:2) he set up a gold statue of himself at Delphi (A 7) — where he also enjoyed one of his rhetorical triumphs (A 1:4). He would challenge the audience to ask him any question for an extempore response (A 1:3; A 1a);^v it is not surprising that he provoked envious attacks by detractors (A 24, A 33, B 8a). But he was very good-tempered; and he could be appreciative of his critics. He is supposed to have admired Plato's *Gorgias* (A 15a).

Gorgias never married,^{vi} or paid for “public benefits” in any city. Yet in spite of his great financial success, he left only a moderate fortune at the end of his long life (A 18).^{vii} His sister's grandson erected a statue in his honor at Olympia — the inscription for this has been found (A 8).

He had many students, especially in the rich upper class of Thessaly (A 18). Of these, the only one who is important to us is the Meno of Plato's dialogue. Plato paints him as a quite respectable citizen; but from Xenophon's *Anabasis* we learn that he was an unscrupulous traitor after the battle of Cunaxa; and he came to a deservedly miserable end. Proxenos of Boeotia, who was Xenophon's friend on that campaign, and a man of perfect integrity, was also a student with Gorgias.^{viii}

The greatest student of Gorgias was Isocrates (A 16, A 12, A 17), who later set up a school of rhetorical and literary studies in conscious rivalry with Plato's more mathematical and scientific Academy. Perikles and Thucydides both admired Gorgias, and learned something of their rhetorical style from him (A 1:3; A 35; 84 A 9). The tragic poet Agathon imitated him — as we can see from his speech in Plato's *Symposium* (C 1).

Rather more of Gorgias' work has come down to us than is the case with the other Sophists. But some of it is not philosophically very interesting; and it is by no means an adequate sample of

his many writings. He wrote one of the first textbooks of rhetoric; but Aristotle complains that he did not give rules (A 3; B12-14). He taught by practical exercises. He spoke often of seizing the opportune moment; but, of course, he could not say how to do it — at least not generally, or in writing.^{ix}

We have fragments of some of his display speeches; and some long excerpts from speeches that were exercise-models for his students (B 7-11a, B 5a-6; A 1:4-5). Almost the only essay of his, that attracted any philosophical notice (as it was certainly intended to do) was a thesis “On Being” (more precisely on its non-existence) of which we have two summaries. It is not clear how seriously this essay was intended. But although we shall see that it cannot be meant quite literally, there is some other evidence in the fragments which shows that it expresses a belief about which Gorgias was very much in earnest. (Gorgias certainly wanted to show by display that philosophy need not be taken seriously; but we should remember how important Plato considered his bad influence to be. If only for this reason he deserves the serious attention of philosophers.)

2. “Nothing Is”

It is obvious, on its face, that the one philosophical essay by Gorgias that we know of, has an ironic dimension. It is a parody of Eleatic procedure, in which the great orator demonstrates that there is no Parmenidean Being. In the first place, Nothing is; secondly, if something is, it is humanly incomprehensible; thirdly, if it were comprehensible, then it would not be communicable to one’s neighbor.

What is not, does not exist. If Being exists, it must be everlasting, or it has come to be, or both. But if it is everlasting, it is boundless and is nowhere, since it cannot be contained; and it cannot have come to be, for then it must have come either from [eternal] being or from nothing, which are both impossible. It cannot both be eternal, and have come to be, since these options are contradictories. It is neither one nor many: not one because it must have size, and be divisible; not

many, because the many would be made up of ones. (Clearly Gorgias has read Zeno's book attentively.)

It is not both Being and Not-being because the combination is impossible. They would both be the same, and hence they would not be alternatives. Hence there is nothing.

If there were something, however, it would be unknown and not humanly comprehensible. For if the things in the mind are not beings, then what is cannot be in the mind. If the things thought of are white, then white is thought of; if they are non-existent then non-existence is thought of. This means that existence as such cannot be thought of, for we can think of many things that do not exist. What we see or hear is an object of sight or hearing (not of thought). But also we accept much as real that we do not see or hear (but only think of). And if we accept thinkability as the criterion of being, then we ought to accept the reality of whatever we can imagine (such as a flying man, or a chariot on the water). So reality is not the object of thought, and cannot be comprehended.

Finally, even if something is real and comprehensible, it is incommunicable. For if the things that exist are things seen and heard, then seeing and hearing do not communicate with one another. Our means of communication with others is speech; and speech is sound that is heard. It is not identical with any other perception. Therefore we cannot *say* what truly is. Speech does not communicate perceptibles; it is learned by perception, and constituted out of perceptibles. But all perceptions belong to their own sense-organs, and not to others. So speech cannot communicate anything perceptible, apart from itself. So if anything truly is, and is comprehended, it remains incommunicable (82 B 3).^x

The first part of this argument simply turns Zeno on his head. If it is humorously sophistical (as I think it is), then so are Zeno's arguments. Gorgias helps philosophy forward only by pointing to the need for various verbal distinctions. No one took it very seriously, and Gorgias himself did not mean it very seriously. The need for a sharp distinction between eternal Being and temporal

Becoming, and for an analysis of coming-to-be in which the role of “not-being” was made clear, had been recognized for a long time.

The situation with the second and third parts is quite different. The relation of what exists for thought to what exists for the senses was a focal problem for Plato; and the question of what “thinkables” are “real” (and what it means to say that they are “real”) became the most urgent and important of all philosophical problems for him. For Gorgias himself the fact that what is “thinkable” is a much broader category than what is “actual” was the opportunity that made his profession possible (and rewarding). No one can be persuaded to believe in flying men or seagoing chariots. But much is *plausible* that is not actually true (or not known to be true); and this is the sphere of rhetorical persuasion (A 26 — *Phaedrus* 267ab).

The range of the “plausible” (and its utility) can be seen in the two model speech-outlines that have come down to us. In the “Encomium on Helen” Gorgias argues that Helen is not to blame for the disasters that came about through her love for Paris: she acted “either through Fate and the will of the Gods and the decrees of Necessity, or because she was seized by force, or won over by persuasion.” Only in the last case is a defence needed; and “her defence remains easy. Speech is a great power, which achieves the most divine works, by means of the smallest and least visible form; for it can put a stop to fear, remove grief, create joy and increase pity.” It is a kind of “wizardry and magic.”^{xi} “If everyone had recollection of the past, knowledge of the present, and foreknowledge of the future, the power of speech would not be so great. But as it is . . . deception is easy. . . . Thus, persuasion by speech is equivalent to abduction by force.” There is more in this vein, and a similar defence of poor Helen in case she was “persuaded by love.” That would have been the work of a God, and she was helpless in his hands (B 11).

The technique here is the creation of a continuum of causes, suggesting that they are all equal. There is an evident contrast between this speech, and the critical examination (by Protagoras and Perikles) of the different senses of “responsibility,” in their discussion of the bystander killed by the javelin. (No doubt, Protagoras used this same kind of difference-blurring argument, when the

occasion required it. The contrast between them is that there is no sign of Gorgias being interested in clarification for its own sake. He was not a world-improver.)

The “Defence of Palamedes” is a brilliant example of legal argument aimed at the production of “reasonable doubt.” Odysseus has accused Palamedes of treachery. Palamedes argues that he has not met with the enemy, that he was in no position to help them, that he had no motive; he insists that the burden of proof is on the other side, that his past record speaks for him, that the jury should suspend judgement, that a mistaken verdict would be an everlasting disgrace for them. Anyone who *learned* this speech by heart would have a repertory of ploys to consider; and he would know something about good law (B 11a).

Gorgias was a great impromptu speaker. His offer to “answer any question” on the spot, rested on his confidence that, in any situation, he could produce something “plausible” enough to satisfy the questioner as a fair answer.^{xii} He was very skillful at recognizing and seizing the “opportunity” (*kairos*) of the moment.^{xiii} The Pythagoreans thought of *kairos* as the “opportunity” for a good action. The way that Gorgias transformed it into the recognition of what to say at a given moment in order to gain control of one’s audience, helps us to understand why Plato thought that ordinary citizens live in a Cave of Shadows, and have no way of telling what is “real” even in the ordinary temporal-spatial sense; and his deliberate inversion of the Pythagorean truth explains why Plato presents the conventionally virtuous Gorgias as the spiritual father of the Kalliklean gospel of the “will to power.”

The third section of the essay “On Non-Being” is the most important for the understanding of Gorgias himself, and his work in the world. He does not mean it literally, of course; for at the literal level, the argument that communication of (and about) our experience is impossible contradicts itself by communicating its message quite clearly. With respect to ordinary factual communication Gorgias was a most commonsensical person; and as a professional rhetorician, his view of the potentialities of language is optimistic in the extreme: “Speech is a great power, which achieves the most divine works” (B 11:8). But someone who wants to use speech for all it is worth must

recognize what it can and cannot do. The experience of the world, that belongs most personally to us, the *meaning* of our own lives for us, cannot be transmitted from one person to her neighbor in a reliably objective way. Here too, the lesson of Gorgias' argument was one that Plato appreciated to the full. Plato agreed with Sokrates that "Virtue is knowledge"; but it is not the kind of knowledge that can be transmitted securely from one mind and life to another.

Language cannot communicate "virtue" or the concrete "truth" of experience. But it is, nevertheless, a magical power, a kind of wizardry. You cannot reliably convey to someone what *you* feel; but if you have the power of words you can make her feel what you want her to feel. It is on this truth that the "Defence of Helen" rests; and there is a fragment quoted by Plutarch which states Gorgias' position paradoxically as a theory of "honesty": "Tragedy, by means of myths and emotions creates a deception, in which the deceiver is more honest than the non-deceiver, and the deceived is wiser than the non-deceived. The deceiver is more honest, because he has performed what he promised, and the deceived wiser, because the unperceived is more easily grasped through the pleasure of words" (B 23).^{xiv} In general, Gorgias is a clever, rather than a deep thinker; but here he has achieved a profundity that would have pleased Protagoras as much as it troubled Plato.

Gorgias himself did not use "the pleasure of words" for educational purposes. He agreed with several fundamental positions of Protagoras; but he did not consider himself to be a Sophist, because he did not teach "virtue."^{xv} Rhetoric was like wrestling; and this could lead to some useful precepts in the textbook, such as "One must destroy the seriousness of one's opponents with laughter, and their laughter with seriousness" (B 12, *Rhetoric* 1419 b 3). Also it was true that everyone was teaching "virtue" all the time; and Gorgias could explain to a student "what virtue is" if that was necessary. What might need pointing out more, however, was that social excellence is strictly relative to social position and situation. So virtue comes in many forms. The "virtue" of a woman is quite different from that of a man; and women all ought to know what is not perhaps definitely enforced in their minds by experience: that a good reputation is more important than a pretty face. The virtue of a slave is different again, and so on. But for this reason it is absurd to set up as a specialist in the advanced teaching of "virtue" (B 18, B 19, A 21).^{xvi} Rhetorical skills can be

employed by anyone for any purpose; so it is quite wrong to blame the teacher for anything done by a student of rhetoric that is conventionally judged to be “unjust” (*Gorgias* 457a).^{xvii}

Gorgias quite probably did seriously assert that “Being is unclear if it does not get to seeming, and seeming is weak if it does not get to being” (B 26). For even if one sets up to be a verbal magician of seeming, one must “perform what one has promised.” He may even have said that “those who neglect philosophy to spend time on the studies all round it, are like the suitors who desired Penelope but slept with the maids” (B 29). For one thing, it could have been rhetorically expedient to say this at some point; but Gorgias may also have meant it sceptically and ironically.^{xviii}

By studying the supposed “Science of Being” one can come to appreciate our real situation in the world of opinion; and then one can understand the right use of all the ordinary sciences of life. This is more important than learning all the things that Hippias and his like were offering to teach.^{xix} Gorgias does *have* a philosophy that is worthy of study; and he does take the task of being someone *real* seriously.

3. Kallikles

Plato structures the discussion in his *Gorgias* as a three-act play. First we have Sokrates talking to the famous older “wise man” Gorgias, ironically, but quite respectfully; then the task of respondent passes to the younger disciple Pölos, who is not treated with respect, and clearly does not deserve it; and finally Kallikles comes in, hardly able to believe what he has heard Sokrates maintaining about the uselessness of rhetoric. Rather more than half of the dialogue is devoted to his dispute with Sokrates — in which neither moves the other by one inch.

Kallikles is a young Athenian of good family, with political ambitions in the democracy. Since there is no other case of a fictional or disguised character who is actually *named* in Plato’s dialogues — and Plato is very full and precise about Kallikles — we should assume that there probably was such a person.^{xx} Plato names two friends of his, and seems to regard him as the

representative of a party of misologists. Kallikles despises “Sophists” (so he does not regard Gorgias as one of them); and his group is agreed that studying philosophy is dangerous, because it may corrupt their natural guiding instincts (*Gorgias* 487a). But since this impressive character has made no other mark in our surviving records of Athens, it is reasonable to assume also that his intellectual force and brilliance has its origin in Plato’s mind, and not in what Plato knew about the historical personage.^{xxi} Plato uses this known devotee of Gorgias’ art of “rhetoric” to display for us the inner meaning of the Cave-dweller’s life (controlled by the word-wizards who can manipulate the shadows).

Already in the discussion with Polos, Sokrates has argued that the masters of rhetoric can perhaps do what they will, but they do not get what they really want, because they do not know what human happiness is. Rhetoric must do for the soul what Gorgias has already claimed it can do for bodily health (*Gorgias* 457b).^{xxii} But now, Kallikles claims that the tyrannical power that rhetoric gives is what is good by nature; and Sokrates has only trapped Gorgias and Polos into contradiction, because they were willing to speak in accordance with convention.

It is quite true that Gorgias regards human society as a conventional structure; and he claims that the master of rhetoric can do whatever he likes within the constraints of that structure. The skillful speaker is not obligated to respect the “truth”; and it is not at all evident what the concrete “truth of life” is. Plato has penetrated to the heart of Gorgias’ position; and he uses Kallikles to ask what the wizardry of words is *really for*.

According to Kallikles, the only law of nature is the “law of the stronger”; and rhetoric is the truly human mode of strength. The conventional structure of society is designed by the weak for the protection of the weak. Society uses language to convince even the most gifted young men of the correctness of the Protagorean respect for democratic equality. But anyone with enough brains and courage will see that he ought to rule his fellow-citizens, and do it in his own interest.^{xxiii}

The idea that a good ruler must rule himself first, strikes Kallikles as absurd. The man of strength does not check and control his desires, but lets them grow as great as possible. Gorgias himself seems to have been like this about money, and social display. But about political virtue generally, he was quite conventional. Kallikles thinks all moderation and self-control is produced by weakness and false shame. The sense of *aidōs* (“reverence”), which marks the distinction between humans and the other animals according to Protagoras, is simply cowardice. Might is right, and we ought to express our will for power as fully as we can.^{xxiv}

This is not Gorgias’ own view. But Gorgias has not thought hard enough about what his mastery of language is for. There are signs of PanHellenic sympathy and of what we might call “national patriotism” in his speeches (A 1:4). But probably this was only because it was conventionally appropriate to the occasion (cf. A 1:5; B 6). Speaking at Athens, however, he did say that “trophies won against Greeks demand lamentations” (B 5b) — which was a sentiment that Plato echoed in the *Republic* (469e-470c). On the whole, Gorgias is a philosopher of language, and not (like Protagoras) of society. That is why Plato recognizes him as the true mouthpiece of the Cave. But he may have recognized the brotherhood of the Hellenes as the “common good” even of the Cave.^{xxv}

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- i. Even the connection (A 7) with Jason of Pherae (ruler approx. 380-370 BCE) by which his “last years” are dated is a bit loose.
 - ii. Compare *Meno*, 76c and 82 B 5 (Theophrastos). (I have suggested in Chapter 10 that the claim, ascribed to Aristotle, that Empedokles founded rhetoric, was actually made by Gorgias, and that Aristotle attributed it to him in a dialogue.)
 - iii. He helped other doctors in this way too, which is a sign that he moved in medical circles, and indirect evidence of the probable influence of Empedokles on his mind.
 - iv. A 21 (*Meno*, 95c) tells us that Gorgias laughed at wisdom-teachers; A 25 (*Phaedros*, 267 A) identifies the Sicilian rhetoricians.
 - v. See also Plato, *Apology*, 19e-21a and *Gorgias*, 447a.
 - vi. There is a story that for all his rhetoric, Gorgias could not keep the peace between his wife and her maid (B 80). But since he was unmarried (A 18) the story is certainly false. It only shows how old the joke is — it probably came from a Comedy. No doubt there was joking about the money Gorgias “saved” by not marrying too — because he threw money about so ostentatiously.

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- vii. The evidence about fees paid to the Sophists is surveyed by G.B. Kerferd (1981, 26-28). It is not very reliable, having been inflated first by the recipients, and then again by reporters. But Gorgias definitely went in for “conspicuous consumption.”
- viii. Xenophon, *Anabasis*, II, 6, 21 ff; A 5 and *Anabasis*, II, 6, 17 ff.
- ix. *Kairos* was a concept that he inherited from Pythagoras — or at least from the Pythagoreans — see Chapter 12, p. 000 [243, between notes 50 and 51].)
- x. I have followed Sextus; but compare [Aristotle] *On Melissos, Xenophanes and Gorgias*, 979d 11 - 980b 21. One late source claims that the essay was written at the time of the founding of Thourioi (444-1 BCE) — see B 2 (or A 10) (Olympiodoros). It seems clear that *Melissos* is the target of the parody. But many points in my summary interpretation are debatable.
- xi. This is the key to the right interpretation of the report that Gorgias “was with Empedokles when he practised wizardry “ (82 A 3 = 31 A 1:58, Diogenes Laertios).
- xii. With respect to “plausibility” Gorgias followed the tradition already established by his Sicilian predecessors, Corax and Teisias (compare Plato, *Phaedros* 266d and Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 14602a 18-20).
- xiii. For the Pythagorean doctrine of *kairos* (which may go back to the Master himself) see Chapter 12, p. 000 [243, from note 50 to note 51] above. For *kairos* in Gorgias see B 13 and A 1a.

- xiv. How much of this is a literal quotation is uncertain. But I have cited it all, because the reference to “the unperceived” makes me confident that the explanation comes from Gorgias himself, even if it is not given in his own words. (Like Protagoras, Gorgias was a competent literary critic — compare B 24, B 25.)
- xv. His great-nephew Eumolpos said in the funerary inscription that “No one found better than Gorgias the art of training mortal souls for the contest in virtue” (82 A 8). But this very carefully avoids the claim that “virtue” itself can be taught.
- xvi. Our sources are Aristotle, *Politics*, 1260a 27); and Plato, *Meno*, 71e, 95c. Compare also *Gorgias*, 459c-460a.
- xvii. We can infer that Gorgias had no wish to take sides about the “just constitution”; but “Kallikles” is someone for whom Plato holds him responsible all the same.
- xviii. Plato, *Gorgias*, 484cd shows the irony of this remark. The other saying found in this “doubtful” source seems to me to be clearly genuine: “Orators are like frogs: frogs cry aloud in the water, orators do it to the water-clock”.
- xix. Hippias offered to teach a wide range of particular skills and sciences; and he had many imitators. Protagoras pretends to be contemptuous of his multifarious learning (see 80 A 5, Plato *Protagoras* 318de); and no doubt Gorgias did the same when the occasion arose.

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- xx. The Pythagorean sage Timaeos may be a fiction. But all of the Athenian contemporaries of “Sokrates” referred to in Plato’s dialogues seem to have been as real as he was.
- xxi. If the Anonymous Writer cited by Iamblichos was really a Sophist of Sokrates’ generation this may be an unjust verdict, because he appears to be responding to the arguments of “Kallikles” and his party. But it is rather more likely (in my view) that the *Anonymus* is a later participant in the discussion to which the *Gorgias* makes such a noteworthy contribution. (Among the contemporaries of Sokrates, Antiphon is by far the most probable candidate because he was an Athenian.)
- xxii. For the argument with Pølos see *Gorgias*, 466b-480a.
- xxiii. Meno’s definition of “virtue in general” (at 73c: “the capacity to govern men”) is probably valid for Gorgias himself (cf. B 6) — certainly Plato thought it was.
- xxiv. Aristophanes saw that the logic of this position dictated that children should defy their parents as soon as they were physically able to do so. The Unjust Logos gives this advice (*Clouds* 1330-40) and it is quite proper for the *Birds* (755-9, 1345-8).
- xxv. Isocrates was a PanHellenist. So perhaps the Hellenic sympathies of his teacher Gorgias were quite genuine.