
ἄρχαί

AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL
THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

ARTIGO | ARTICLE

WHAT IS GORGIAS' 'NOT BEING'? A brief journey through the Treatise, the Apology of Palamedes and the Encomium of Helen

Erminia Di Iulio ⁱ

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8561-4594>
erminia.di.iulio@uniroma2.it

ⁱ Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata" – Roma – Italy.

DI IULIO, EM (2021). WHAT IS GORGIAS' 'NOT BEING'? A brief journey through the Treatise, the Apology of Palamedes and the Encomium of Helen. *Archai* 31, e-03126.

Abstract: Assuming that a nihilist reading of Gorgias' thought is to be ruled out, the issue of 'not being' remains one of the thorniest in

his philosophy; indeed, it is fair to conclude that Gorgias is deeply concerned with ‘not being’. But what, after all, is Gorgias’ ‘not being’? This paper aims to answer this crucial question, by taking into consideration Gorgias’ main texts (i.e. the *Treatise*, the *Apology of Palamedes* and the *Encomium of Helen*). Each of them provides a serious – although not always explicit – account of ‘not being’. Overall, the aim is to show that Gorgias’ account of ‘not being’ is not concerned with ‘non-existence’ at all. It is deeply concerned, however, with falsehood and language. The paper will, therefore, be structured as follows: in part 1, the *Treatise* and specifically the the first section of the *Particular Proof* will be addressed and its ‘linguistic’ conception of ‘not-being’ fully exploited; in part 2, the *Apology of Palamedes* will be taken into account, in order to enucleate its ‘not-being-as-falsehood’ argument; the results from part 1 and part 2 will allow us, in part 3, to provide an analysis of the *Encomium of Helen* which points at its underlying conception of ‘not-being’.

Keywords: Gorgias, not-being, falsehood, philosophy of language, epistemology.

Introduction

As is nowadays widely recognized, the nihilist reading of Gorgias’ thought is to be rejected, since it is clearly off-target. However, much is still to be done in order to provide a unified account of Gorgias’ ‘not being’. Indeed, this paper is aimed precisely at answering the following question: ‘ultimately, what is Gorgias not being?’.

Contrary to what might be expected, I will pursue my goal by taking into account not only the *Peri tou me ontos*, but also the *Apology of Palamedes* and the *Encomium of Helen*.¹ This is due to the conviction

¹ Needless to say, I am not purporting to provide an exhaustive reading of these texts: I will be focusing solely on those aspects which are relevant for the present

that although the *Peri tou me ontos* is surely the most explicit (and thought-provoking) of Gorgias' discussions on this matter, it is not his last word, i.e. it is not the only text where the 'not being issue' is addressed. In fact, 'not being' plays a crucial (if not 'the main') role in the *Apology of Palamedes* which revolves around Odysseus establishing 'not being' as it were or – from the epistemic point of view – 'falsehood' as if it were 'true'.

And what about the *Encomium of Helen*? At first glance, it seems that, as fascinating as it is, this text has nothing to do with 'not being' (and therefore that it has nothing to say about it), although one could stress that the whole story of Helen is a myth, and therefore that Gorgias is providing a speech which purports to denote a non-existing entity. However, even rejecting this reading and assuming that it is clear that the *Encomium of Helen* is not concerned with 'non-existence', it is clear that it is strongly concerned with both knowledge and falsehood. This is sufficient – or so I judge – for taking it into consideration as well.

In view of this, I will begin by focusing on the first section of the *Particular Proof* arguing that its main point is that 'not being' is to be understood as a linguistic product which undermines the truth-evaluability of language. Secondly, the *Apology of Palamedes* will be taken into account, in order to explain how and to what extent the 'epistemic' notion of 'not being' that is here fully addressed both confirms and dismisses the picture drawn in the *Particular Proof*. Such an analysis of both the *Particular Proof* and the *Apology of Palamedes* should allow us to shed new light on the conception of 'not being' that arises from the *Encomium of Helen*, to which the third section is devoted. Finally, the main conclusions will be briefly recalled.

discussion. In doing so, though it pains me to do so, I will be forced to leave many other significant issues aside.

1. The *Particular Proof*: on ‘not being’ from the linguistic point of view

If one is looking for some intriguing (if not paradoxical) discussion on ‘not-being’, the first thesis of Gorgias’ *Peri tou me ontos* (hereinafter the *Treatise*) is the philosophical piece to read.

One of the most debated and controversial textual sections is the *Particular Proof* – with its sharp and ambiguous incipit: ‘nothing is’.² More precisely, according to the author of MXG, by means of the first thesis, Gorgias aims to show that οὐκ ἔστιν οὔτε εἶναι οὔτε μὴ εἶναι.³

Since my aim in this paper is to address only the first section of the *Particular Proof*, it might be convenient firstly to set out the full text here:⁴

Εἰ μὲν γὰρ τὸ μὴ εἶναι ἔστι μὴ εἶναι, οὐδὲν ἂν ἦττον τὸ μὴ ὄν τοῦ ὄντος εἶη. Τό τε γὰρ μὴ ὄν ἔστι μὴ ὄν, καὶ τὸ ὄν ὄν, ὥστε οὐδὲν μᾶλλον εἶναι ἢ οὐκ εἶναι τὰ πράγματα.

Actually, if not being is not being, what-is-not would be nothing less than what-is. Indeed, what-is-not is

² According to the author of MXG, Gorgias claims: ‘Οὐκ εἶναί φησιν οὐδέν· εἰ δ’ ἔστιν, ἄγνωστον εἶναι· εἰ δὲ καὶ ἔστι καὶ γνωστόν, ἀλλ’ οὐ δηλωτὸν ἄλλοις’; along the same lines, Sextus Empiricus: ‘ἐν γὰρ τῷ ἐπιγραφομένῳ Περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος ἢ Περὶ φύσεως τρία κατὰ τὸ ἐξῆς κεφάλαια κατασκευάζει, ἐν μὲν καὶ πρῶτον ὅτι οὐδὲν ἔστιν, δεύτερον ὅτι εἰ καὶ ἔστιν, ἀκατάληπτον ἀνθρώπῳ, τρίτον ὅτι εἰ καὶ καταληπτόν, ἀλλὰ τοῖ γε ἀνέξοιστον καὶ ἀνεμῆνευτον τῷ πέλας’.

³ According to Sextus, Gorgias would be arguing for ‘nothing is’, by assuming that ‘if (something) is, either it is what-is or it is what-is-not or it is what-is-not and what-is at the same time’ (εἰ γὰρ ἔστι, ἦτοι τὸ ὄν ἔστιν ἢ τὸ μὴ ὄν, ἢ καὶ τὸ ὄν ἔστι καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν) in order to show that neither is possible. Indeed, it is reasonable to conclude that this tripartite division is Sextus’ arrangement of the text, in accordance with the skeptical logic framework; cf. Ioli (2013, 182-183).

⁴ All translations are my own.

what-is-not and what-is is what-is, so that things no more are than they are not.⁵

As is well-known, the *Treatise* is one of the most difficult texts in ancient philosophy and even its philosophical import has long been questioned. In recent decades a strong rehabilitative process regarding Gorgias' thought has made it possible to stop considering him simply as an orator unconcerned with any serious philosophical issues, thus allowing scholarship to reevaluate his texts – at least partially.

A major step towards the correct evaluation of the first thesis of the *Treatise* (and of its philosophical import) is represented by the 'logical-linguistic reading', according to which the *Particular Proof* would *not* be devoted to undermining the ontological consistency of the Eleatic 'Being' and 'Not Being'; on the contrary, it would be concerned with the ontological status of everyday things as it arises from our *speaking of them*.

The reading provided by George Kerferd (1955, 16) is paradigmatic:

Gorgias was not concerned to deny the existence of Being or Not-Being at all. What he was concerned with was the status of the phenomena, which are quite plainly the subject of the discourse in the second and third divisions of the treatise where he argues that if anything is it cannot be known, if it can be known it cannot be communicated to others human beings. What he is saying is that the verb "to be" cannot be used of phenomena either positively or negatively without contradiction resulting. The question confronting us is this: is it possible to say of something that it is not?

The basic idea is that Gorgias is not dismissing the Eleatic 'Being' *qua the basic or fundamental entity*; he is actually questioning the

⁵ Taking a different approach, Sextus' version claims that 'certainly what-is-not is not. Indeed, if what-is-not is, it will be and will be not at the same time' (καὶ δὴ τὸ μὲν μὴ ὄν οὐκ ἔστιν. Εἰ γὰρ τὸ μὴ ὄν ἔστιν, ἔσται τε ἅμα καὶ οὐκ ἔσται).

Eleatic logical-linguistic presumptions, by drawing attention to their intrinsic, although unrecognized, inconsistency.

Assuming a linguistic point of view is in fact crucial, insofar as, while in the nihilist view reality is taken as fundamentally problematic, in the logical-linguistic view, on the contrary, the focus is not on reality, but on *how reality is displayed in language*: the problem is therefore placed on the logical-linguistic level. Accordingly, Gorgias would thus deserve credit for having pointed out that the Eleatic verb ‘to be’ actually leads to the impossibility of speaking coherently of reality.

Even though it leads, overall, to various and different conclusions, this is by far the dominant view. As Jaap Mansfeld (1988, 256) put it: ‘one thing is sufficiently clear: the “particular proof” turns on the equivocalness of the expression “to be”. (...) Gorgias, as we would put it, does not distinguish between the existential, or referential, sense of “to be” (...), and the predicative sense, viz. that of the copula, or of identity’.⁶ According to Mario Untersteiner (1966, 221), Gorgias aims to show that reality is doomed to arise contradictorily in language, due to the intrinsic ambiguity of language itself. Giuseppe Mazzara (1982, 43) identifies the main issue of the first thesis with the problem of falsehood as it will later be addressed by Plato in the *Sophist*. In Giovanni Casertano’s view, the *Treatise* is rejecting the Eleatic identity between ‘being’ and ‘thinking’, showing

6 In this respect, with the notable exception of George Kerferd, who individuates the core of the argument in the (im)possibility of predication, without insisting particularly on the existential value, scholars provide a unified account. The first to draw attention to the confused use of the verb ‘to be’ was Guido Calogero (1977, 194): ‘l’argomentazione propria di Gorgia fa dunque perno, secondo la chiara esposizione dell’Anonimo, sull’ambiguità del concetto dell’essere, per un verso predicativo e per un verso esistenziale’. This reading is further advanced by Patricia Curd (2006, 188) who claims that: ‘there are, then, two possibilities. First, Gorgias might be maliciously running together two senses of “to be” (...). This would support the view that his intention is destructive, humorous, or “sophistical” in the platonic sense. On the other hand, he might be intentionally exploiting an ambiguity inherent but latent in the Eleatic use of “to be”, in order to make a serious point about the import of Parmenides’ argument. I suggest that the latter alternative is correct’. More recently, both Mauro Bonazzi (2010, 43) and Roberta Ioli (2010, 30-31) put a huge emphasis on the ‘equivocality’ of the Eleatic verb ‘to be’.

that the relation between reality and language is not, so to speak, symmetrical, insofar as it is always language that establishes and leads that relation⁷. According to Roberta Ioli (2013, 29) the *Treatise* investigates the problematic relation between language, thought and reality by means of a polemic discussion with the Eleatic philosophy.

A notable exception is the reading advanced by Patricia Curd (2006) who claims that, while it is clear that the *Synthetic Argument* aims to show that 'whatever is turns out to have contradictory predicates' (2006, 196), the *Particular Proof* would actually be taking into account 'being' and 'not being' *qua* basic entities.⁸ Gorgias' aim would then be to include 'not being' in the catalogue of entities. In fact:

Parmenides had argued that if it is true that «X is F» then X is wholly, completely and unchangingly F. Gorgias could here respond that «what-is-not» names what is wholly, completely and unchangingly what-is-not. It is, then, what not-being 'is'. Because it is the nature of what-is-not, it is just as much a thing that is real as Parmenides' *to eon* (what-is), because it has (or is) an essence or nature, (Curd 2006, 189).

This reading (that we might, perhaps, define as 'metaphysical') relies upon the omission of the last sentence of the *Particular Proof*, i.e.

⁷la distinzione tra il livello della realtà e il livello del discorso sulla realtà non esprime un rapporto per così dire "paritetico", né tanto meno una corrispondenza pacificamente data, dal momento che essa avviene e non può non avvenire, esclusivamente su uno solo dei livelli: è sempre infatti solo il nostro linguaggio che stabilisce il rapporto tra linguaggio e realtà, differenziandoli e connettendoli', G. Casertano, *Da Parmenide di Elea al Parmenide di Platone, Eleatica 2011*, ed. by Gambetti F., Giombini S. (Academia Verlag: Sankt Augustin, 2015), 56-57. Further, the fact that it is not reality but our knowledge of it that is problematic is also assumed by the 'phenomenological reading' (such as Kerferd's and Untersteiner's) which takes experiences, not reality, as intrinsically ambiguous.

⁸ 'the suggestion, by some recent scholars (notably Mansfeld and Palmer), that Gorgias is attacking the basic entities of the early Greek philosophers rather than what we might think of as the ordinary content of everyday experience is I think correct (...)', Curd (2006, 186).

‘ὥστε οὐδὲν μᾶλλον εἶναι ἢ οὐκ εἶναι τὰ πράγματα’; that is, the omission of the reference to ‘τὰ πράγματα’.

Following the common view, I cannot see any serious reason for following Curd and Mansfeld (1988, 258) along this path and omitting this sentence. In spite of this, it seems to me that Patricia Curd highlighted a truly remarkable point in claiming: ‘Gorgias could here respond that “what-is-not” *names* what is wholly, completely and unchangingly what-is-not’, thus implying that *it is language that brings ‘what-is-not’ to life*. Briefly, it is due to the *act of naming* that ‘not being’ comes to be. Let me be very clear on this: I completely agree with Curd maintaining that Gorgias’ argument leads one to admit that even ‘not being’, in some sense, *is*; however, I wish to stress the linguistic (or meta-linguistic) character of the argument. Let me spell this out.

The argument’s starting point is an ‘innocent’ judgment of identity: ‘τὸ μὴ εἶναι ἔστι μὴ εἶναι’ (not being is not being). From this, Gorgias can easily draw his conclusions: since ‘not being’ *is* ‘not being’, it is something; therefore, ‘not being’ *is* as much as ‘being’ *is*, so that ‘being’ and ‘not being’ cannot ultimately be distinguished. As I mentioned, according to the dominant view, Gorgias’ merit would lie in the fact that he is pointing at the ‘semantic confusion’ behind the Eleatic verb ‘to be’, conflating existential and predicative meanings.

I would say that, leaving Parmenides aside for a moment,⁹ the first argument clearly shows that once we take ‘not being’ as the subject of any linguistic sentence – in this case, as the subject of a judgment of identity – we are forced to ascribe (or we have already ascribed) ‘being’ to it. In other words, if ‘what-is-not’ can be *talked about* – even just by saying that it is self-identical – ‘what-is-not’ is (first step); if ‘what-is-not’ is, then it is just as much as ‘what-is’ and therefore it exists (second step). In light of this, if both ‘what-is’ and ‘what-is-not’ are (and exist), existential propositions are not truth-

⁹ In saying so, I am not suggesting that Parmenides’ philosophy is not relevant here; I am just highlighting that the philosophical import of Gorgias’ argument goes beyond it.

evaluable and since, further, any proposition whatsoever actually is, or presumes, an existential one, the conclusion is, more radically, that no proposition is in fact truth-evaluable.

Overall, the first section relies on the conflating of both 'being' and 'existing' and of the 'ontological' and 'linguistic' levels. That is, as Curd implicitly suggested, it is by naming 'what-is-not', that I make it come to be. This being so, Gorgias argues, it is no more legitimate to say of things that they are than to claim that they are not: indeed, in language both of them – both 'being' and 'not being', both 'Athens' and 'Pegasus' – are, in the sense that I can perfectly say that 'Pegasus exists' just as much as I can perfectly say that 'Athens exists'.

In view of this, regarding our main concern, i.e. 'not being', it might be said that – whether he is pointing at Parmenides or not – Gorgias' main claim (at least, in the *Particular Proof*) is that 'not-being' is an unpleasant yet necessary, i.e. unavoidable, *product of language*. This is a common-yet-still-puzzling-place in philosophy, after all. In fact, we can easily claim that the history of philosophy is full of attempts to meet Gorgias' challenge, in that it is full of attempts to account for a 'non-ontologically committing' conception of 'not being', such that I can speak perfectly well of 'Pegasus' without being forced to admit Pegasus itself into my catalogue of entities.¹⁰

¹⁰ Indeed, and presumably not casually, that of 'not being' as 'unavoidable fact of language' is the starting-point of Plato's *Sophist*. In 237b-239a, Plato explicitly addresses the puzzling notion of 'not being' or, more precisely, of τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν, firstly recognizing that it cannot be avoided. Indeed, in whatever reading, this passage assumes 'not being' as something that cannot be denied, for even by denying it, we end up to affirm it. For an elegant and detailed discussion of this passage, see the recent contribution by Francesco Aronadio (2018).

2. The Apology of Palamedes: on ‘not being’ from the epistemic point of view

The picture drawn in the *Treatise* is both confirmed and dismissed in the *Apology of Palamedes* (hereinafter, *Palamedes*). Let me spell this out.

Here, Odysseus accuses Palamedes of betraying Greece, so Palamedes has to prove his innocence. In making the false accusation, Odysseus establishes ‘not being’ as it were. Indeed, not only does Odysseus easily speak of ‘what-is-not’, but also Palamedes (even though he emphasizes the difficulty in speaking about what he did not do), in order to escape the accusation, is forced to provide a defense which hypothetically assumes that the betrayal did actually occur – even though it did not. In the end, both Odysseus and Palamedes *do* speak of ‘what-is-not’.¹¹ This being so, the conception of ‘not-being’ as ‘the result of a linguistic act’ or, briefly, as *linguistic content* is endorsed in the *Palamedes*. In fact, just as in the first section of the *Particular Proof* the result is the impossibility of establishing and identifying the ontological status of things, so in the *Palamedes* the jurors – who should establish whether Palamedes is innocent or not – cannot distinguish the onto-epistemic status of Palamedes’ and Odysseus’ speeches: ‘not-being’ and ‘being’, ‘truth’ and ‘falsehood’, are, linguistically, the same.¹²

¹¹ Along these lines, and even more radically, Giombini (2012, 210) explains: ‘Da notare che, mentre Palamede accusa Odisseo di parlare secondo una doxa in negativo, di fatto l’eroe procede allo stesso modo quando, a causa della mancanza di prove, chiede ai giudici di credere anche a lui solo in virtù della sua doxa’.

¹² This is hugely emphasized by Mazzara (1982, 45): ‘di fronte ai Giudici le parole di Palamede valgono quanto quelle di Ulisse’. In greater detail, Mazzara explains that ‘quello che nell’Opera filosofica si trova a livello di schema di confutazione teorica, nel Palamede si ritrova a livello di applicazione concreta’, (1982, 43; emphasis in the original). Mazzara (1982, 47-48) draws an explicit connection between the three theoretical positions in the *Palamedes* (i.e. that of the accuser, that of the accused and that of the juries) and the three meanings that can be attributed to the main proposition of the *Particular Proof*, i.e. ‘if not being is not being’: ‘1) nel caso dei Giudici essa è pienamente e soltanto copulativa e, in quanto è frutto di un atteggiamento di equidistanza tanto dall’accusa quanto dalla difesa,

This is not the whole story, though. Contrary to the *Particular Proof*, the *Palamedes* adds something very significant.

In *Pal.* 5, Palamedes exclaims: ‘οὐδὲ οἶδ’ ὅπως ἄν εἰδείη τις ὄν τὸ μὴ γινόμενον!’. This brief sentence is most interesting. It might be translated as follows: ‘nor do I see how someone could see *that it is* something that did not happen’.¹³ However, bearing in mind the veridical sense of the Greek verb ‘to be’,¹⁴ we might take it as saying something along these lines: ‘I cannot see how someone could see as *true* something that did not happen’. In any case, the main point is that Palamedes is claiming that ‘what-did-not-happen’ (τὸ μὴ γινόμενον) cannot be known (ὅπως ἄν εἰδείη τις) as obtaining (ὄν), i.e. it cannot be taken as the object of knowledge, where ‘knowing’ is taken as ‘seeing’ or as its result. As such, ‘what did not happen’, i.e. ‘what-is-not’ is therefore linked to ‘falsehood’. Hence, while in the *Particular Proof* ‘not being’ is understood as what undermines the truth-evaluability of any proposition whatsoever, here in the *Palamedes*, ‘what-is-not’ is taken as ‘what cannot be seen as true’, i.e. as ‘falsehood’. My aim in what follows is to spell this out.

In *Pal.* 23, Palamedes points to the fact that neither he himself nor Odysseus have been able to provide eye-witnesses of what is supposed to have happened, emphasizing that while it is impossible for him to provide eye-witnesses of what did not happen, it would have been easy for Odysseus to provide eye-witnesses – even false ones! – of what he claims it happened:

le possibilità che si risolva in una esistenziale affermativa (“il non essere è”) oppure in una esistenziale negativa (“il non essere non è”) sono pari; 2) nel caso di Ulisse essa è “intenzionata” a trasformarsi (...) in una proposizione esistenziale affermativa (“il non essere è”); 3) nel caso di Palamede, infine, essa è “intenzionata” a trasformarsi in una proposizione esistenziale negativa (“il non essere non è”).

¹³ I choose to translate ‘οἶδα’ with ‘seeing’ instead of ‘knowing’, which would probably be more correct, in order to emphasize the visual or perceptive account of knowledge the verb ‘οἶδα’ seems to nod toward.

¹⁴ The topic of the ‘veridical sense of Greek verb to be’ is a common place in the literature. I will therefore confine myself to mentioning Charles Khan (1966).

Φήσεις ἴσως ἴσον εἶναι τὸ σέ γε τῶν γενομένων, ὡς σὺ φήεις, μὴ παρέχεσθαι μάρτυρας, τῶν δὲ μὴ γενομένων ἐμέ. Τὸ δὲ οὐκ ἴσον ἐστὶ· τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἀγέννητά πως ἀδύνατα μαρτυρηθῆναι, περὶ δὲ τῶν γενομένων οὐ μόνον οὐκ ἀδύνατον, ἀλλὰ καὶ ράϊδιον, οὐδὲ μόνον ράϊδιον, ἀλλὰ σοὶ μὲν οὐκ ἦν οἶόν <τε> μόνον μάρτυρας ἀλλὰ καὶ ψευδομάρτυρας εὐρεῖν, ἐμοὶ δὲ οὐδέτερον εὐρεῖν τούτων δυνατόν.

You will probably claim that the fact that you did not provide eye-witnesses of what, according to you, did happen is the same as myself not providing eye-witnesses of what did not happen. However, it is not the same thing: indeed, it is absolutely not possible to eye-witness something that did not happen. On the contrary, regarding what actually happened, not only is it not impossible, but also easy and not only easy! In fact, not only would be it possible for you to find eye-witnesses, but also false eye-witnesses. Whereas, for me, it is impossible to find either of them.¹⁵

The first striking point is that in neither of these passages does Palamedes affirm that he cannot formulate a speech, thus arguing that it is not possible to speak of ‘what-is-not’. That is, perhaps *contra* Parmenides,¹⁶ propositions which fail to denote are clearly not ruled out as impossible. Rather, Palamedes claims that ‘what-is-not’ cannot be known¹⁷ and, therefore, cannot be spoken of truly.¹⁸ In other words, a strong distinction between ‘speaking’ and ‘speaking truly’ is drawn. In this regard, Palamedes (and therefore Gorgias) is surely

¹⁵ Indeed, Palamedes cannot provide witnesses to what he did not do (he did not betray), but he can, and in fact does, provide witnesses to everything he did for Greece, cf. Pal, 15.

¹⁶ I say ‘perhaps’ because whether Parmenides did actually embrace such a position is highly controversial.

¹⁷ Where ‘knowing’ is taken as ‘seeing’ or ‘observing’ as the insistence on ‘οἶδα’ and ‘εἶδον’ clearly shows.

¹⁸ Where ‘speaking truly’ is taken as ‘reporting something which has been witnessed’ and therefore as ‘testifying’ or ‘attesting’.

faithful to Parmenides' teaching, according to which, roughly, 'm knows p, entails p'.¹⁹

Briefly, from a philosophical point of view, 'not being' as 'what-cannot-be-spoken-of-truly' is either 'falsehood' (if we are Russellian)²⁰ or something which is not truth-evaluable, i.e. a proposition which is neither true nor false, inasmuch as it is simply absurd (if we favor Strawson's solution).²¹ While this latter might be, in some sense, the case of the *Particular Proof* where, as we have seen, the truth-evaluability of propositions is rejected, it is not, however, the case of the *Palamedes*, in that Odysseus' 'not-being' is explicitly said to coincide with the false accusation: in this text 'not-being' as 'what-cannot-be-spoken-of-truly' is nothing but 'falsehood'. Further, both 'not-being' and 'falsehood' belong to language: indeed, we might say that the former is the result of the latter, so that, according to the *Palamedes*, propositions which fail to denote, as I have already said, are not impossible or meaningless, but always false.

The link between 'falsehood' and 'not-being' turns out to be fundamental in the second half of the *Palamedes*, where Palamedes tries to show neither that the fact did not occur nor that he is speaking truly; rather, he focuses on showing that Odysseus is *speaking falsely*, insofar as *he speaks without possessing, or being grounded in knowledge*. This is made clear in *Pal.* 24, where Palamedes claims:

ὄτι μὲν οὖν οὐκ οἴσθα ἃ κατηγορεῖς, φανερόν· τὸ δὴ
λοιπὸν <οὐκ> εἰδότα σε δοξάζειν. Εἶτα, ὃ πάντων
ἀνθρώπων τολμηρότατε, δόξει πιστεύσας,
ἀπιστοτάτῳ πράγματι, τὴν ἀλήθειαν οὐκ εἰδώς,

¹⁹ As is widely recognized, this is the reading of the Poem provided by Charles Kahn (1969, 711): 'Parmenides is making the obvious, but not entirely trivial claim that whatever we know, whatever can be known is – and must be – determinately so, that it must be actually the case in reality or in the world. If we restate Parmenides' claim in the modern, formal mode, it might run "m knows that p" entails "p". This claim would generally be regarded as non-controversial. It calls for no argument, and in fact Parmenides offers none'.

²⁰ Cf. Russell (1905).

²¹ Cf. Strawson (1950).

τολμᾶις ἄνδρα περὶ θανάτου διώκειν; ὧι τί τοιοῦτον ἔργον εἰργασμένωι σύνοισθα; ἀλλὰ μὴν τό γε δοξάσαι κοινὸν ἅπασι περὶ πάντων, καὶ οὐδὲν ἐν τούτῳ σὺ τῶν ἄλλων σοφώτερος. ἀλλ’ οὔτε τοῖς δοξάζουσι δεῖ πιστεύειν ἀλλὰ τοῖς εἰδόσιν, οὔτε τὴν δόξαν τῆς ἀληθείας πιστοτέραν νομίζειν, ἀλλὰ τάναντία τὴν ἀλήθειαν τῆς δόξης.

It is evident that you do not possess knowledge about what you are accusing me of. What is left is that even not knowing what is the case, you have an opinion. You, the bravest man, relying upon opinion which is the less reliable thing, not knowing what is the case – do you dare accuse a man of a crime which is punished with death? But this man, what do you know he did do? Indeed, possessing opinions on everything is common to everyone, such that you are no wiser than the others. But it is necessary not to trust those who possess opinions, but those who possess knowledge, nor to evaluate opinion as more reliable than truth, but on the contrary, truth as more reliable than opinion.

This is, in fact, a crucial passage. Odysseus is said to have made an accusation on the basis of *opinion* which is further said occurring in the absence of knowledge, as is made explicit by both the expressions ‘τὴν ἀλήθειαν οὐκ εἰδώς’ and ‘τὸ δὴ λουπὸν <οὐκ> εἰδότα σε δοξάζειν’. Finally, opinion is defined ‘ἀπιστοτάτον πράγμα’, i.e. the less faithful thing, even though it is recognized as being common to all.

The main point here is that a link is clearly established between ‘opinion’, ‘falsehood’ and ‘not being’: the betrayal-that-did-not-occur (‘not being’) is the result of a false accusation (‘false speech-act’) which has its basis in opinion (‘absence of knowledge’ – where ‘knowledge’ is taken as ‘εἰδέναι τὴν ἀλήθειαν’, i.e. as ‘*seeing* the truth’).

Indeed, if we look back at *Pal.* 5, we will note that this link between ‘falsehood’ and ‘opinion’ is already mentioned, even though not so explicitly:

οὐδὲ οἶδ' ὅπως ἂν εἰδείη τος ὄν τὸ μὴ γινόμενον. Εἰ δὲ οἰόμενος οὕτω ταῦτα ἔχειν ἐποιεῖτο τὴν κατηγορίαν, οὐκ ἀληθῆ λέγειν διὰ δισσωδῶν ὑμῖν ἐπιδείξω τρόπων.

Nor do I see how someone could see that it is something that did not happen. If he made the accusation believing that it is the case, I will show you, with a twofold argument, that he is not speaking truly.²²

Here, following the same line of reasoning developed in *Pal.* 24, Palamedes claims that it is not possible to know or to see 'what-is-not', for 'what-is-not' can only be 'believed to be' or 'supposed to be' and, this being the case, Odysseus is simply not speaking truly. That is, 'οὐκ ἀληθῆ λέγειν' is explicitly said to depend on 'οἰόμενος'.

To sum up, the *Palamedes* both confirms and dismisses the *Treatise's* picture. On the one hand, 'not being' is perfectly sayable; further, the jurors cannot ascertain the truth-evaluability of Palamedes' and Odysseus' speeches: just as in the first section of the *Particular Proof* it is said that, since 'not being' can be spoken of, it is no more possible to say of things that they are than it is possible to say that they are not, so, in the *Palamedes*, the jurors cannot say of the betrayal that it did actually occur more than they can say that it did not. On the other hand, however, it does not seem possible to conclude that Odysseus' and Palamedes' propositions really are not truth-evaluable: on the contrary, it is clear that Odysseus (insofar as he does *not* know what is the case) is speaking falsely and therefore that Palamedes (who *knows* what is the case) is speaking the truth.

²² This is rightly emphasized by Untersteiner (1996, 205) who explains: 'solo di ciò che è accaduto si dà chiara conoscenza e quindi la verità; di ciò che non è accaduto si può fare solo una supposizione, atto quest'ultimo (...) che non merita fiducia alcuna di fronte alla formulazione della verità'.

3. The *Encomium of Helen*: on ‘not being’ from the epistemic point view (again)

In the introduction I claimed that the remarks from both the *Particular Proof* and the *Palamedes* would allow us to grasp the conception of ‘not being’ underlying the *Encomium of Helen* (hereinafter, *Helen*). To be very clear, regarding ‘not being’ in the *Helen*, two readings are possible.

On the first, we might acknowledge that the story of Helen is, after all, a myth – so that Helen is a fictional character and the *Helen* a fictional discourse.²³ On the second view, neither is the woman Helen a fictional character, nor is the *Helen* a fictional discourse.²⁴ If this latter is the case, however, it seems clear that the text does not have much to say about ‘not being’. In fact, while the *Palamedes* revolves around the false accusation made by Odysseus – which establishes ‘not being’ as it were –, the *Helen* examines the reasons why Helen went to Troy, in order to show that, in any event, she is not to be blamed, but, on the contrary, should be seen as a victim. As such, Gorgias’ speech, we might say, is a denoting one, for it denotes, or refers to, a real, historical event. In view of this, it could be argued,

²³ Regarding ‘fictional discourse’, a huge variety of approaches is possible. For the sake of clarity, we might distinguish here between two main groups. In the first group there are those who take propositions referring to fictional entities simply as propositions which fail to denote; such propositions will be, typically, either false or neither false nor true (as I have already mentioned). In the second group, there are those who reckon that propositions which attempt to refer, but fail to do so, are quite different from propositions which are about, say, Santa Claus: the basic difference is that in this latter case I know that Santa Claus does not exist and I mean precisely to mention that ‘non-existing-Santa-Claus’. As such, one might argue further that propositions consciously referring to fictional entities do possess truth-value, thus implying that they can also be true. As is well-known, the difference between propositions which fail to denote and propositions which denote fictional character has been strongly remarked on by Keith S. Donnellan (1974). In recent years this approach has gained more and more interest, since it seems that it can better account for what is a common practice, after all. Tim Crane (2013) is nowadays one of its most enthusiast defenders.

²⁴ Note that these two readings are not mutually exclusive: it might be that the *Helen* is to be read with both these views in mind.

that, contrary to what I hinted at, there is no room for either 'not being' or 'falsehood'.

Nevertheless, recalling the *Palamedes*, we have seen that 'not being' is more precisely taken as 'that which cannot be known' inasmuch as 'it cannot be observed or eye-witnessed'. Incidentally, this is precisely the case of the *Helen* as well: no one saw what actually happened when Helen decided, or was forced to, go to Troy. That is, even though, contrary to the *Palamedes*, the event *did* occur, neither Gorgias nor his pupils (far less his readers) *know* – or can know – what actually happened. In other words, in this respect, whether the fact actually obtains or not is not so relevant: in both cases, the main point is that 'knowledge' as 'seeing the truth' is unattainable.

In *Pal.* 5 and 24, as we have seen, a connection is drawn between 'lack of knowledge' and 'falsehood': speeches arising from doxastic cognitive states are automatically false. In fact, Gorgias' argumentation is an either/or-matter, i.e. either truth or falsehood, *tertium non datur*: it is the very fact that I am speaking without possessing knowledge that makes my speech false. That is to say, Gorgias does not seem to consider an in-between, so that opinion (i.e. absence of knowledge) is always identified with falsehood.

Besides, the connection between 'falsehood' (or, better, 'false speeches') and 'opinion' is made explicit again in a famous passage from the *Helen*. In *Hel.* 11, Gorgias explains:

ὅσοι δὲ ὅσους περὶ ὅσων καὶ ἔπεισαν καὶ πείθουσι δὲ
 ψευδῆ λόγον πλάσαντες. Εἰ μὲν γὰρ πάντες περὶ
 πάντων εἶχον τῶν <τε> παροιχομένων μνήμην τῶν τε
 παρόντων <ἐννοίαν> τῶν τε μελλόντων πρόνοιαν, οὐκ
 ἂν ὁμοίως ὁμοίος ὦν ὁ λόγος ἢ<πά>τα· νῦν δὲ οὔτε
 μνησθῆναι τὸ παροιχόμενον οὔτε σκέψασθαι τὸ
 παρὸν οὔτε μαντεύσασθαι τὸ μέλλον εὐπόρως ἔχει·
 ὥστε περὶ τῶν πλείστων οἱ πλείστοι τὴν δόξαν
 σύμβουλον τῆι ψυχῇ παρέχονται. ἡ δὲ δόξα σφαλερὰ
 καὶ ἀβέβαιος οὔσα σφαλεραῖς καὶ ἀβεβαίαις εὐτυχίαις
 περιβάλλει τοὺς αὐτῆι χρωμένους.

How many people, producing a false speech, have persuaded and do persuade how many people on how many things. For if everyone, regarding anything,

possessed memory of the past, <insight> into the present and foreknowledge of the future, language, even being the same, would not deceive that way. However, it is easy neither remembering the past, nor investigating the present, nor foreseeing the future. Such that, most men, regarding most things, offer opinion to the soul as its guide. But opinion, being slippery and weak, in a fate slippery and weak destroys those who rely upon it.²⁵

Here, Gorgias explicitly links ‘opinion’ to ‘falsehood’, ‘persuasion’ and ‘deception’. This is the line of reasoning: since humans lack knowledge, i.e. they do not know what is in fact the case, – so that opinion turns out to be the common cognitive state – they end up as easy prey of both persuasion and deception, by means of false speeches.²⁶

All in all, while knowledge is understood as ‘seeing the truth’ and therefore as ‘direct’ or ‘perceptual’, opinion is taken as *its opposite*, i.e. as that cognitive state occurring in the absence of knowledge and therefore in the absence of direct contact with reality.²⁷ This further means that while the object of knowledge is ‘what can be seen or observed’, ‘what cannot be seen or observed’ is the object of opinion.

This reading is confirmed by another passage from the *Helen*, at paragraph 13, where Gorgias explains:

²⁵ This passage is in fact crucial, although I cannot fully address it here. I will confine myself to those remarks that are actually relevant for the present discussion.

²⁶ This is emphasized by Roberta Ioli (2018, 142-143), who remarks that: ‘In Hel.11 è il logos pseudos a ingannare ma, ancora una volta, non tanto a causa della propria intrinseca falsità, quanto per la debolezza epistemica dell’uomo che non ha “memoria del passato, conoscenza del presente e preveggenza del futuro” (la triplice facoltà propria di dei e indovini). Se così fosse, se cioè l’uomo fosse saggio e preveggennte come un indovino, “il discorso pur essendo lo stesso non ingannerebbe allo stesso modo”. Ma l’uomo è fragile e il suo regno è quello della doxa’. This had been highlighted also by Giombini (2012, 118): ‘Gorgia non si sottrae al tentativo di risalire alla ragione per cui siamo tutti esposti alle lusinghe del logos falso: questo è possibile perché la nostra conoscenza è imperfetta’.

²⁷ This is acknowledged by Juan P. Bermudez (2017, 9) who highlights: ‘knowledge seems to imply direct experience, whereas opinion turns out to be a speech that plays the role of knowledge when direct experience is not available’.

ὄτι δ' ἡ πειθῶ προσιούσα τῷ λόγῳ καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἐτυπώσατο ὅπως ἐβούλετο, χρὴ μαθεῖν πρῶτον μὲν τοὺς τῶν μετεωρολόγων λόγους, οἵτινες δόξαν ἀντὶ δόξης τὴν μὲν ἀφελόμενοι τὴν δ' ἐνεργασάμενοι τὰ ἄπιστα καὶ ἄδηλα φαίνεσθαι τοῖς τῆς δόξης ὄμμασιν ἐποίησαν·

Since persuasion, combined with speech, moulds the soul as it wishes, it is necessary, at first, to acknowledge the speeches of astronomers who, substituting opinion for opinion, thrashing one and establishing another, make appear to the eyes of opinion what is unreliable and not evident.

Opinion is therefore directed toward ἄ-δηλα, i.e. 'what is not evident', which in turn is said to be ἄ-πιστα, i.e. 'unreliable', in the sense of 'not *worthy* of being believed'.²⁸ At this point, it might be noted that the whole speech on the reasons why *Helen* went to Troy is precisely a speech on ἄ-δηλα, i.e. a speech referring to an event or a fact which is not suitable for being seen or observed.²⁹

To sum up, in the *Palamedes*, particularly in paragraphs 5 and 24, 'not being' is defined as 'what cannot be known' and 'what cannot be spoken of truly', so that it coincides with 'falsehood'. Moreover, 'what cannot be known' is something that 'cannot be observed'. In the *Palamedes*, the reason why the event denoted – or, better, purported to be denoted – by the accusation cannot be observed is that it did not even occur; in the *Helen*, the reason why the event successfully denoted by Gorgias' speech cannot be observed is that it took place in a remote past, so that, even though it actually once occurred, it, in some sense, has ceased to exist – at least, *from the*

²⁸ Giombini (2012, 121; 135-136), following MacDowell, remarks that ἄ-δηλα might be referring to the ultimate causes of things or phenomena. For present purposes, establishing what is the object denoted by ἄ-δηλα is not fundamental, because the main point is precisely the connection between "what-is-not-evident" (whatever it is) and "opinion".

²⁹ This is rightly emphasized by Mauro Serra (2012, 129), who claims: 'la vicenda a cui esso [Gorgias' speech] fa riferimento è, per definizione, da collocare nella sfera dell'aphanes poiché appartiene a un passato a cui non è possibile accedere direttamente'.

knowing-subject's point of view. As I suggested previously, from the epistemic point of view, whether the event did occur or not, is not so relevant; what is epistemically relevant is whether the event is suitable for being known, i.e. observed, or not.

All in all, on whatever reading, 'not being' in the *Helen* is the *Helen* itself: either we take the *Helen* as denoting a fictional character, i.e. a non-existing entity or we take the *Helen* as denoting a fact which is not suitable for being observed – if the latter is the case, however, any speech that purport to refer to it ends up being false, inasmuch as it does not arise from knowledge.

Conclusions

My aim in this paper has been (briefly) answering the following question: 'what is Gorgias' not being?', by taking into account his major texts, in order to provide (as far as possible) a unified account of 'not being'.

In light of what has been said so far, we might say that the answer is, at least, twofold, depending on the point of view. Indeed, all the texts agree on the conception of 'not being' as an undesirable yet unavoidable fact of language: roughly, propositions which fail to denote are not ruled out as impossible or meaningless. So far, so good. However, this basic fact is variously and differently evaluated by Gorgias.

On the one hand, in both the *Particular Proof* and, partially, the *Palamedes*, this assumption leads to the impossibility of distinguishing the onto-epistemic status of propositional content: in the *Particular Proof*, it is stated that it is not possible to say of things that they are any more than it is possible to say that they are not; in the *Palamedes*, it is suggested – by means of the aporetic conclusion – that it is not actually possible to distinguish between denoting and non-denoting propositions. All in all, both texts agree on the linguistic nature of 'not being'.

On the other hand, the *Palamedes* also puts much emphasis on the fact that, even though 'not being' is suitable for being spoken of, it is not, however, suitable for being spoken of *truly* – due to the fact that it is not suitable for being known or, better, observed.

As unexpected as it is, the conception of 'not being' arising in the *Helen* seems to be traced back to that same picture. That is, the *Helen* also revolves around something which cannot be known or observed, so that any speech referring to it has its source in a doxastic cognitive state, i.e. a cognitive state which lacks knowledge and, therefore, which is false.

In view of this, it seems that we are left with a strong inconsistency between the *Particular Proof* and the epideictic speeches. Such an inconsistency, I would say, cannot be ignored or solved, insofar as it reflects the more fundamental gap obtaining, according to Gorgias, between 'language' and 'knowledge'.³⁰

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ARONADIO, F. (2018). L'articolazione argomentativa di Plat. *Soph.* 237b7-239a11 e la natura del *medamos on*. *Elenchos* 39, 1 p. 57-98.
- BERMUDEZ, J. P. (2017). Truth and Falsehood for Non-representationalist: Gorgias on the normativity of language. *Journal of ancient philosophy* 11, 2, p. 1-21.
- BONAZZI, M. (2010). *I Sofisti*. Roma, Carocci.
- CALOGERO, G. (1977). *Studi sull'Eleatismo*. Firenze, La Nuova Italia.
- CASERTANO, G. (2015). *Da Parmenide di Elea al Parmenide di Platone*, In: GAMBETTI, F.; GIOMBINI, S. (eds) *Eleatica 2011*, Academia Verlag: Sankt Augustin.

³⁰ In saying so, I acknowledge that I might be leaving many questions unanswered. However, since my aim in this paper has been to address the very specific issue of 'not being', I cannot widen the discussion here.

CRANE, T. (2013) *The objects of thought*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

CURD, P. (2006). Gorgias and the Eleatics. In: SASSI, M. M. (ed.). *La costruzione del discorso filosofico nell'età dei Presocratici*. Pisa, Edizioni della Normale, p. 183-198.

DONNELLAN, K. S. (1974). Speaking of nothing. *The Philosophical Review* 83, 1, p. 3-31.

GIOMBINI, S. (2012), *Gorgia epidittico. Commento filosofico all'Encomio di Elena, all'Apologia di Palamede, all'Epitaffio*. Aguaplano, Passignano sul Trasimeno.

KAHN, C. (1966) The Greek verb "to be" and the concept of being. *Foundations of Language* 2, 3, p. 245-268.

KAHN, C (1969). The thesis of Parmenides. *The Review of Metaphysics* 22, 4, p. 700-724.

KERFERD, G. B (1955). Gorgias on nature or which is not. *Phronesis* 1, 1 p. 3-25.

IOLI, R. (2010). *Gorgia di Leontini. Su ciò che non è*. Hidelshheim, Olms.

IOLI, R. (2013). *Gorgia. Testimonianze e Frammenti* Roma, Carroci.

IOLI, R. (2018). *Il felice inganno. Poesia finzione e verità nel mondo antico*. Milano, Mimesis.

MANSFELD, J. (1988). De Melisso Xenophane Gorgia: Pyrrhonizing Aristotelianism. *Rheinisches Museum CXXI*, p. 239-276.

MAZZARA, G. (1982) *Gorgia. Ontologo e metafisico* Palermo, ILA Palma.

RUSSELL, B. (1905) On denoting. *Mind*, New Series 14, 56, p. 479-493.

SERRA, M. (2012) Elogio del disaccordo: per una filosofia politica del linguaggio. *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio* 6, 3, p. 121-132.

STRAWSON, P. F. (1950). On Referring. *Mind*, New Series 59, 235, p. 320-344.

UNTERSTEINER, M., (1996) *I Sofisti*. Milano, Bruno Mondadori.

Submitted in 01/05/2021 and accepted for publication 01/08/2021



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Do you wish to submit a paper to *Archai Journal*? Please, access <http://www.scielo.br/archai> and learn our *Submission Guidelines*.
