

Alētheia in Gorgias of Leontini. An Excerpt from the History of Truth

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1. Introduction

This article attempts to spell out the concept of *alētheia* in the thought of Gorgias of Leontini. While the Greek word is usually translated as ‘truth’, it is evident that Gorgias must have a different idea in mind than what we refer to as truth today. In the two extant speeches, the *Encomion of Helen* and the *Apology of Palamedes*,¹ *alētheia* is used several times, but hardly ever in clearly epistemological contexts. Instead, the word seems to refer to speech, and more specifically to the way a person speaks. Only once do we hear that someone can “know” the truth (Pal. 24). In the infamous speech *On Non-Being*, on the other hand, despite its ontological and epistemological content, questions of truth play no real role. In the version presented by Sextus Empiricus the word *alētheia* does

¹ For the *Helen* (referred to as ‘Enc.’) and the *Palamedes* (‘Pal.’), section numbers are indicated. All other fragments and testimonies are cited according to Diels/Kranz 1952 and referred to as ‘DK’. For textual issues, see Buchheim (2012: XXXVII–XXXIX). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

not appear at all, even though Sextus declares that this speech eliminates “the criterion of truth” (*to tēs alētheias kritērion* – DK 82 B 3 [87]). For Gorgias, there are no true beliefs or true claims, nor is there any ‘truth of the matter’. But how then is Gorgias’ concept of *alētheia* to be explained? What did he have in mind when he used that word?

The starting point must be that *alētheia* is consistently used with reference to speech or speaking. First and foremost, it refers to a quality of speech (*logos*), and one might have the impression that, for Gorgias, it is *how* someone speaks that determines if their words are ‘true’. The most conspicuous occurrence of *alētheia* that seems to confirm this suspicion can be found in the opening of the *Encomium of Helen*. To begin with, this passage should be recalled (Enc. 1):

Κόσμος πόλει μὲν εὐανδρία, σώματι δὲ κάλλος, ψυχῇ δὲ σοφία, πράγματι δὲ ἀρετή, λόγῳ δὲ ἀλήθεια· τὰ δ’ ἐναντία τούτων ἄκοσμία.

Order (*kosmos*) of a city is excellence of its men, of a body beauty, of a soul wisdom, of an action virtue, of a speech (*logos*) truth (*alētheia*); the opposites of these are an unseemliness (*akosmia*).

While *alētheia* is standardly rendered as ‘truth’, the word *kosmos*, which would indicate the underlying idea of truth, is usually translated in such a way that its *aesthetic* connotation is emphasized. Along these lines it has been rendered as “embellishment” (Van Hook 1913: 122) or “adornment” (Dillon/Gergel 2003: 76). This rendition is also supported by German translations that render *kosmos* as “Zier” (Buchheim 2012: 3) or “Schmuck” (Schirren/Zinsmaier 2003: 79). According to this understanding, Gorgianic *alētheia* is merely “cosmetic”, to borrow an expression from Wardy (1996: 29f.).²

This interpretation has been questioned only to a degree. Where it occurs, scholars have tried to preserve the social or ethical dimension of *kosmos*, which would imply that *alētheia* has a social or ethical connotation too. A case in point would seem to be Kennedy, who translates *kosmos* as “what is becoming” (1972: 50). MacDowell’s translation of *kosmos* as “grace” (2005: 21) also apparently captures both an aesthetic and an ethical dimension. According to this version, ‘true speech’ is not only superficially beautiful but shows a certain inner value. However, scholars do not rank this ethical meaning very highly. Halliwell, who supports MacDowell, takes *kosmos* to refer to “the most beautiful condition” of speech, to “a state both internally ordered and externally attractive” (2011: 267).³ But since Halliwell considers Gorgias’ *logoi* as deceptive by their very nature, he is reluctant to take their ‘truth’ too seriously.⁴ Similarly, Pratt takes “order” as the secondary

² Some scholars even deny that the opening of the *Helen* is of any importance at all: see Cole (1991: 76).

³ Stefania Giombini’s Italian translation, which renders *alētheia* as ‘perfezione’ (2012: 77), supports this reading.

⁴ Only briefly does Halliwell point to an interpretation resembling the one I will offer here: “The start of the work [sc. the *Helen*] might be thought to connect truth with evaluative or normative correctness, i.e. praising

sense of *kosmos*, while explicitly keeping “adornment” as its primary sense (2015: 177 f.). To the extent that the interpretation of *kosmos* affects that of *alētheia* one thus has the impression that a number of scholars tend to deny that Gorgianic truth is merely cosmetic. Nevertheless, there seems to be no clear answer to the question of what this concept specifically implies.

In what follows I will attempt to show that Gorgias entertains a substantial conception of *alētheia* that is by no means restricted to superficial, skin-deep beauty. That the ‘truth’ of speech has to be *assessed* on aesthetic grounds does not mean that this is all there is to say about it. On the contrary, Gorgias has a highly normative idea of *alētheia* as the critical standard of speech. On his view, *alētheia* is essentially *ethical*; i.e. speech is ‘true’ when it exemplifies virtue. In this regard, *alētheia* is the decisive model of discursive practice and thus occupies the same place as later concepts of ‘truth’. Even if we are skeptical that such a ‘sophistic’ notion of *alētheia* can be defended as a viable standard – or even hesitate to translate it as ‘truth’ – it is still worth spelling out, since it will provide some insight into the origins of the philosophical concept of truth in ancient Greece. In fact, if we do *not* understand how *alētheia* could be conceived of in the 5th Century BC, we might miss an essential piece of the worldview from which western philosophy emerged.

A premise of my reading will be that Gorgias’ doctrine of speech, and thereby also the concept of *alētheia*, belongs to a practice of education or, more precisely, ethical formation. His understanding of *logos*, figuring most significantly in the *Encomium of Helen*, has often been described as ‘rhetoric’ but it is in fact an endeavor of *paideia* or, as Hegel would have put it, *Bildung*.⁵ The term *alētheia* has to be understood against this background: since Gorgias’ speech practice puts the *logos* into the service of ethical excellence (*aretē*), speech will find its ideal form where it supports such excellence in the best possible way. For Gorgias, this ideal form of speech has the quality of *alētheia*. Due to the educational purpose of his discursive practice, speech is ‘true’ if it brings virtue to bear.

First, I will briefly discuss this general perspective (2). I will then try to unfold Gorgias’ concept of truth step by step, beginning with his picture of *logos*. According to Gorgias, speech does not represent the world external to language, but establishes a dimension of meaning in its own right. From this perspective the basic mode of speech is ‘demonstrative’, i.e. it is meaningful in a performative way, by means of ‘showing’. Above all, it can show what virtue looks like and thereby be put to the service of ethical formation (3). This account of *logos* paves the way for an explanation of Gorgias’ understanding of truth: *alētheia* serves as a standard that does not apply to speech as representation but to the demonstrative dimension of discourse. Speech is not ‘true’ by correspondencing to facts but by embodying virtue – which does *not* mean that plain facts can be ignored or

and blaming the right things, though Gorgias does not formulate the point as an explicit principle.” (2011: 283, n. 39) Halliwell does not consider the possibility that Gorgias presupposed a concept of truth different from those familiar today. By contrast, I will argue that Gorgias *does not have to* connect truth to normative correctness because he takes the word *alētheia* as *implying* ethical rightness.

⁵ See the treatment of the sophists in Hegel (1833/1986: 406–427).

distorted because the virtuous man would not do this. The logic of this peculiar idea of truth can be elaborated with reference to the law of praising and blaming appropriately, mentioned in the opening passage of the *Helen* (4). On this basis, then, other uses of *alētheia* in Gorgias' extant speeches can be accounted for as well. As I will try to show, the role that truth plays in the *Helen* and the *Palamedes* confirms the ethical interpretation of *alētheia* (5). To conclude, I will briefly comment on how Gorgianic truth relates to more modern concepts of truth (6).

2. Gorgias beyond 'sophistic rhetoric'

Any attempt to reconstruct the meaning of *alētheia* in Gorgias is confronted with at least two obstacles, which are more closely connected than one would expect. The first obstacle is the widespread belief that the concept of truth must be a universal and cannot have a history in any substantial sense. Along these lines, Bernard Williams (2002: 61) writes: "The concept of truth itself – that is to say, the quite basic role that truth plays in relation to language, meaning, and belief – is not culturally various, but always and everywhere the same. We could not understand cultural variation itself without taking that role for granted." In this view, ideas on how to find out *what is true* can change but *what truth is* cannot. Although other studies of the history of *alētheia* – most notably Cole's article on 'Archaic Truth' (1983), which Williams builds on – are more cautious, they still point in the same direction.⁶

But if we follow Williams and accept the claim that we 'could not understand cultural variation' if we allow the concept of truth to have a history, any such history would be excluded *a priori*. The idea that the concept of truth might change over time can indeed be somewhat confusing,⁷ as it seems to affect the very criterion of rational critique. However, if we conceive of truth as ahistorical or timeless we run the risk of presupposing something eternal and unconditioned that enters the human world through direct insight. At any rate, we thereby elide contextual elements of both the concept of truth and intellectual history. More specifically, we cannot understand the transition from 'sophistic' to philosophical thinking if we exclude any possibility of a substantial conception of truth at an earlier stage, which is *further developed* later on.

The second obstacle derives from the poor reputation of the thinkers we have come to call 'the sophists'. Evidently, Plato's judgment that the sophists are not worthy of philo-

⁶ Cole maintains, with reference to Homer's use of the word, that *alētheia* is, "by origin at any rate, sober, methodical, rational truth" (Cole 1983: 27). Many scholars who touch on the issue rely on this account, e.g., Halliwell (2011: 53, n. 34).

⁷ Past attempts of interpreting *alētheia* as something radically unheard of show how easily the case can be overstated. The most obvious example is Heidegger who renders *alētheia* as 'unconcealment' (*Unverborgenheit* – see, e.g., Heidegger 1997). Although Detienne rejects this interpretation strongly (1967: 26–28), he could be suspected to be another example of overinterpretation when he turns early *alētheia* into a matter of magicoreligious speech and mantic knowledge.

sophical esteem continues to have an effect. Many scholars still presuppose, albeit often implicitly, that these figures do not belong to philosophy proper. Although the sophistic movement is now generally included in the history of philosophy,⁸ it is not yet treated on equal footing with non-sophistic presocratic thinking, i.e. as philosophy at an early stage. The main reason for this is the assumption that ‘sophists’ are generally indifferent to truth. However, there are good reasons to modify the traditional narrative: Kerferd (1981) in particular has argued that the emergence of philosophical methodology can hardly be understood without taking the sophists into account. Furthermore, the existence of ‘sophistic rhetoric’ has been questioned in the last decades, one important resource for this critique being the revisions of the history of rhetoric proposed by Cole (1991) and Schiappa (1999). This is why in the following I will avoid relying on preconceived notions of sophistic rhetoric and discuss Gorgias’ understanding of truth as it emerges from his extant texts. From this perspective it will become clear that this 5th Century thinker builds on an elaborated concept of *alētheia* that should not be neglected. We do not know, of course, how intensively truth was discussed in the time of the sophistic movement; but in the light of Gorgias’ writings the assumption that sophists were indifferent to truth seems implausible.⁹ For Gorgias, at least, truth was highly valued – only that we should not expect that pre-Platonic thinkers understood the concept in the way we do today.

Gorgias at first sight seems to be a sophist *par excellence*, and even sympathetic readers often exclude him from philosophy proper.¹⁰ Here, Plato’s representation of Gorgias as the master of *rhētorikē technē*, which provides the earliest extant use of the term (*Grg.* 448d; see Schiappa (1999: 14–23) and recently Luzzatto 2020), has been particularly influential. Yet, on closer inspection, things look slightly more complicated. This is indicated by Plato himself who, in the *Apology*, indicates that Gorgias was said to “educate humans” (*paideuein anthrōpous* – *Ap.* 19e). In recent years, the Hegelian view that Gorgias is engaged in an educational practice directed at *aretē* has regained some currency.¹¹ For present purposes, we need an account of how the educational aims of Gorgias’ teachings can be reconciled with his famous doctrine of *logos*. This will provide a basis for our reconstruction of Gorgianic ‘truth’.

The account of *logos* in the *Helen* is certainly the most remarkable extant treatment of the topic from the 5th Century BC. To be sure, how this speech as a whole should be

⁸ For a brief outline of the history of modern interpretations of the sophistic movement see Kerferd (1981: 6–12); for a more recent account see Leeten 2017.

⁹ Kraus (2012: 35) even writes: “It may seem ironic that probably in no other period was there more written about truth than in the age of the Sophists.”

¹⁰ The belief that there is a sharp separation between philosophy and ‘sophistic rhetoric’ guides readings of Gorgias to this day (Segal 1962; Kennedy 1980: 29–31; Wardy 1996: 6–51; Pfau 2000). Even scholars sympathetic to Gorgias do not question whether he is engaged in rhetoric (Poulakos 1983; Consigny 1992, 2001; McComiskey 1997, 2002). By taking sides with ‘the sophists’ instead of ‘the philosophers’, many such ‘neosophistic’ interpretations reproduce the dichotomy of philosophy and sophistry.

¹¹ See Pratt (2015) or Buchheim (2012: XXVI–XXXI).

interpreted is highly contested.¹² Without going into this question, however, it cannot go unnoticed that the concept of *logos* it implies ascribes enormous power to speech. This is why the traditional view of Gorgianic ‘rhetoric’ cannot be denied a degree of plausibility. Gorgias takes *logos* to have the capacity to influence a person’s actions with irresistible force. The famous passage that introduces the topic of *logos* makes this status explicit (Enc. 8): “Speech is a mighty lord (*dynastēs megas*); by the smallest and most inconspicuous body (*sōma*) it accomplishes the most divine works (*theiotata erga*).” Due to such descriptions, Gorgias’ doctrine has traditionally been read as a persuasive technique that functions through aesthetic tactics. Interpretations have repeatedly suspected Gorgias of being engaged in a ‘psychology of *logos*’, which is, as Segal (1962: 112) claimed, “deliberately opposed to ‘truth’.”

However, it is misleading to read such passages as if Gorgias was trifling with his own rhetorical powers. This comes to the fore when the concept of *technē* is examined. In Gorgias, the idea of *technē* does not have a high status. On the contrary, he appears to find *technē*, particularly in connection to *logos*, contemptible.¹³ The term appears for the first time in section 10 of the *Helen*, exactly at the point where Gorgias passes from the “divine works” of *logos* to its dark side (Enc. 10): For “magic and sorcery two *technai* have been found,” he writes, and these can deceive the soul. The passage where Gorgias says that speeches “artfully written” can at times be more convincing than speeches “truthfully spoken” (Enc. 13) has to be read along these lines: artful writing undermines true speech, and in Gorgias’s view this is a serious problem, because it undermines the very quality constituting the *kosmos* of speech, its most beautiful condition. A speech ought to have the quality of *alētheia*. Any merely ‘technical’ use of *logos*, without regard to *alētheia*, is a clear case of *akosmia*.¹⁴

Thus the word *technē* almost certainly sounded pejorative to Gorgias. This word, which in earlier periods referred to the capacities of a person, had at that time begun to refer to a non-personal system of rules (Kube 1969). But for Gorgias and some of his contemporaries¹⁵ this notion had something disreputable about it, a fact that would be easily explicable if *paideia* was at stake. Through *technē* a person can develop a capacity without having earned it. Earlier, in Pindar, the word *technē* contrasted with *phya*: artificial skills are suspicious whereas inborn excellence sets the standard. Prometheus is punished by the gods because he did not respect this distinction. Although Gorgias, as we

¹² Schiappa writes (1999: 114): “Despite the great interest the text has generated, there is remarkably little agreement even over the most rudimentary interpretative issues concerning the text [...]” In fact, many commentators explain the *Helen* by distilling a hidden meaning from what they regard as allegory, paradox or other artful play (see Poulakos 1983; Consigny 1992; Porter 1993).

¹³ This has only rarely been noticed. For an exception see Ford (2001: 95f.).

¹⁴ The suspicion that Gorgias is opposed to any *technē logōn* is further supported by a connection of “preparations of art” (*technēs paraskeuais*) with “misdoings” (*hamartēma*) in Enc. 19. Furthermore, there are two samples in the *Palamedes*, where Gorgias uses the expression *kakotechnia*, “bad art” (Pal. 3), and poses “artful” (*technēenta*) next to *deinon* and *porimon* (Pal. 25), which are ambiguous in meaning.

¹⁵ This emerges in the writings of the *Corpus Hippocraticum* from the 5th Century: see, e.g., *de Arte* I 1: “Some established an art (*technē*) to denigrate the arts (*tas technas aischroepēin*).”

will see, does not restrict virtue to native nobility, this idea continues to have an influence. The expression *anthrōpinē promēthia* that Gorgias uses when he distinguishes human doings from divine powers (Enc. 6) points in the same direction (McComiskey 1997: 11 f.). For Gorgias, as for his contemporaries Prodicus and Socrates, true value must be hard to attain. A process of education has to take real efforts of self-transformation. Excellence cannot be achieved by simply following an external system of rules.

Against this background, the power of speech that Gorgias emphasises so much can be seen in a new light. Although Gorgias ascribes different kinds of action to *logos* ('stop fear', 'assuage pain', 'produce joy', 'reinforce emotion' – Enc. 8), he clearly has in mind one basic function, namely the working of *logos* on the *soul*. This is what countless commentators took as evidence that Gorgias is pursuing an art of persuasion. This view has been rightly challenged in recent research.¹⁶ After what has been said, we should assume that the working of *logos* on the soul has to be taken as a kind of *paideia*. Gorgias wanted to put the power of *logos* in the service of education, being well aware that speech can be misused for unscrupulous purposes. In this case, his doctrine of *logos* was meant to be an educational 'work on oneself'. It aimed not simply at persuasion but at the ethical transformation of the soul.

3. Gorgias' culture of speech

Gorgias' doctrine of *logos* belongs to an educational endeavour, to a discursive practice of ethical formation. It will be, as one commentator will later call it, a *meletē logōn* (DK 82 A 7), designed to produce virtue. Pratt (2015: 177) emphasizes that the opening clause of the *Helen* – "the *kosmos* of a city is excellence of its men (*euandria*)" – fits perfectly into an educational scenario. The passage, where Gorgias places the "capacity of acquired wisdom" (*sophias epiktētou dynamis*) next to the "noble origin" (*eugeneia*, Enc. 4) could be read in this light too. Gorgias' practice of speech was a *logōn paideia*, as Isocrates will call his discursive practice one generation later.

The educational character of Gorgias' conception can be clarified with regard to the function of *logos*. Usually it is assumed that Gorgias understands speech as 'epideictic', and many commentators accordingly take the *Helen* as a piece of *epideixis*.¹⁷ Of course, this can be questioned: Schiappa offers a number of arguments as to why such labelling is at least misleading (1999: 116–120). Above all, there was not yet a *genus dicendi* of epide-

¹⁶ Along these lines, it has been claimed that Gorgias was not interested in persuasion but rather in "dissuasion" (Porter 1993), that he should be regarded as a pioneer of informal logic (Spatharas 2001) and that he makes his listeners aware of the dangers of rhetoric (Pratt 2015). With reference to Gorgias, Gagarin claims (2001: 290): "For the most part the Sophists treated persuasion as ineffective or harmful, and they distanced themselves and their *logoi* from it."

¹⁷ See e.g., Segal (1962: 100) or Giombini (2012), for ancient evidence DK 82 B 6 and Arist. *Rh.* 1414b.

ictic speech in the 5th Century BC.¹⁸ However, there is of course a reason why it seems justified to call the function of speech in Gorgias ‘epideictic’. The Greek word *deiknymi*, ‘showing’, is indeed apt to describe the basic mode of signification Gorgias has in mind, if it is *not* taken in a *disciplinary* sense. For him, a *logos* signifies by way of ‘showing’; it is essentially demonstrative. In his view, all speech is meaningful because it brings something to light, not because it represents something. And for Gorgias, such demonstrative or ‘epideictic’ speaking is a part of an educational culture in which *alētheia* plays a central role.

To get a grip on the basic function of speech in Gorgias we have to take a glance at his epistemological outlook, which is the subject of *On Non-Being*. Without delving into this notoriously difficult speech – and without going into the question of what portions of the two reports can be taken as authentic – it can be said that a central message the speech must have conveyed was that human beings have no access to the nature of being. While Parmenides seems to make the case for an ontological truth that is strictly distinguished from the “opinions of the mortals” (DK 28 B 1 [37]), Gorgias defends the view that human beings have no insight into Parmenidean being and are cut off from ontology.¹⁹ Unlike gods, humans are essentially limited to opinion, to *doxa*, to things that come to be and cease to be. One consequence is immediately obvious: if we have no access to it, then speech *cannot represent being*. Gorgias is reported to have been explicit on this point in *On Non-Being*: if ‘being’ existed and we were able to know it – and both is *not* the case – then it could not be communicated (DK 82 B 3, 6). If we take this stance seriously then discourse, by its very nature, can never represent what is actually the case.

It is tempting to conclude that Gorgias thereby considers *logos* to be severely deficient. Along these lines, Kerferd (1981: 81 f.) argues that the “radical gulf between *logos* and the things to which it refers” expressed in *On Non-Being* makes all speech “incurably deceptive.” However, such a fundamental deficiency of *logos* could hardly be reconciled with its seemingly unlimited power.²⁰ An interpretation that avoids this discrepancy would have to be preferred. As Mourelatos has shown, such an interpretation emerges when speech is ascribed a different *function*. Gorgias is reported to have claimed that we never speak “a colour or a thing” but only “a speech” (*logos*, DK 82 B 3, 6 [21f.]). He thus appears to make a “categorical” distinction between *logos* and the actual world (Mourelatos 1987: 137 f.). If this is right, then Gorgianic speech is simply *not made for* rendering things as they actually are. But that discourse does not achieve what it is not made to achieve does not make it defective – at least not more defective than a brick that serves poorly as a pillow.

¹⁸ Pratt (2015: 171) argues that the idea of *epideixis* was already developing in the 5th Century BC, although a disciplinary account was not yet available. In his reading of the *Helen*, he suggests that Gorgias wants to “expose the shallowness of *epideixis* as mere technical display” and to this end “lures his audience – above all the aspiring speaker – into what appears (at first) to be a display of just this kind.”

¹⁹ For the relation to Parmenides, cf. Newiger (1973: 19–21 and 29–37).

²⁰ For this discussion see Colagero (1932/1977), Mourelatos (1987: 135 f.) or Porter (1993: 270 f.).

Hence, we have to assume that the *logos* in Gorgias, in whatever way it functions, must be *non-representational*.²¹

On these grounds, the widespread belief that Gorgias regards *logoi* as fundamentally deceptive has to be questioned: of course speeches *can* deceive on occasions, where there is no longer any natural connection between words and things, as Walsh argues (1984: 84 f.). But the belief that speeches are deceptive *by nature* results from a confused idea of what speeches can do. When Gorgias claims that we do not ‘speak perceptibles’ but ‘speeches’, this could be regarded as an attempt to abrogate precisely this confusion: to fully comprehend the nature of speech, one has to keep in mind that its function cannot be to convey being. Speaking does not mean to reproduce something external to speech. Instead, it creates a world in its own right. It opens up a new and autonomous dimension, a social space constituted by meaningful human practice. The function of *logos* has to be interpreted against this background.

This is underscored by a passage in the *Helen*: in the midst of the discussion of *logos*, Gorgias says: if “everyone” had knowledge of “everything” in the past, the present and the future – i.e. if we had access to being, as Parmenides supposes – then “the same *logos* would not be in the same way” (Enc. 11). But we do *not* have such divine wisdom. And this is why, as Gorgias continues, “in most affairs” “most people” adopt *doxa* as the “adviser” (*symbolon*) of their souls. That discourse is significant for us derives from the fact that humans are finite creatures, limited to the world of *doxa*, of which speech itself is a part. The *logos* is what it is because humans, lacking any insight into being, are inevitably *guided* by *logoi*. This “adviser” can, of course, at times be misleading. But this is not due to the fact that it lacks ontological content; it is due to the fact that the basic function of speech has been misrecognised.

If the function of speech is not to represent being, how does it work? Obviously, the significance of speech cannot result from its ‘content’; it is not meaningful by virtue of the fact that it points to something external to speech. Hence its significance must emerge from the appearance of speech itself, its *doxa*, from *how* the speaker speaks. The significance lies in the performative *act* of speaking, and the basic mode of speech is demonstrative. A closer look at the quality of the Gorgianic *logos* supports this view. In the *Helen*, *logoi* obviously have sensuous qualities. Speech is, as Gorgias puts it, a “body” (*sōma* – Enc. 8); it is part of the physical world. Gorgias reportedly said that speech is composed “of what is perceptible” (*tōn aisthētōn*, DK 82 B 3 [85]), that the *logos* is not “transmitter of the external” (*tou ektos parastatikos*) but, conversely, the external is “enunciator of the *logos*” (*tou logou mēnytikon*). This implies that speech appeals to the *senses*.²² More specif-

²¹ Those who rule out this possibility, like Wardy (1996: 22–24), or who mistake the non-representational character of Gorgianic *logos* for a deficiency, like Kerferd, will have great difficulties in giving a coherent account of Gorgias’ concept of *logos*. When Kerferd, for instance, claims that there is a “radical gulf” between speech and the world in Gorgias, he goes on to argue that an acceptable *logos* will nevertheless “get at” the truth (1981: 81 f.). Porter is surely right in criticizing this view as highly implausible (1993: 271, n. 11).

²² See Buchheim (2012: XI–XV) or Worman (1997: 177–180).

ically, *logoi* manifest themselves in audible and visible forms. Speech has musical and poetic qualities in appealing to the ear.²³ And it appeals to the eye: it has erotic qualities. The practice of speech then proceeds as a composition of sounds and pictorial forms. The expression ‘to form a *logos*’ (*logon plattein*) that Gorgias uses in Enc. 11 characterizes this practice quite suitably: a speech is, as it were, a linguistic sculpture, in which the force of music or poetry and the power of pictures are combined.

On this basis, the fundamental mode of signification in Gorgias can be described as follows: it is not *what* is said (‘representation’) that makes a speech significant but *how* it is composed and the whole sensuous appearance that goes along with it. Its meaning emerges from what it shows, from the way the speaker speaks. Of course, such a *logos* cannot be separated from the speaker’s personal appearance, his body, his voice. It belongs to the ‘expressive behavior’ of a person.²⁴ As we will see, this implies that the manifestation of a commendable *ēthos* cannot be achieved through the speaker’s individual performance alone: ‘true speech’ in the required sense cannot simply be feigned, since it requires the speaker to be virtuous. *Logos* and *ēthos* are intertwined. ‘True speech’ is part of a visible pattern of behavior; it can only emerge where morality is provided, and *aretē* is itself a public phenomenon.²⁵ This perspective paves the way for explaining Gorgias’ understanding of *alētheia*.

4. The logic of Gorgianic *alētheia*

From the time of Sextus Empiricus who claims that Gorgias neutralizes the “criterion of truth” (DK 82 B 3 [87]) it has been protested that Gorgias does not offer any *criteria* for what is right or wrong. In a certain regard, this is true, and must be true: if the meaning of speech resides in the very process of speaking, if there is no ‘representation’ implied, then the question of whether or not a speech is ‘right’ has to be settled by reference to speech itself. Speech is right if the speaker speaks in the required way; and we have to learn to *perceive* whether or not he speaks in the right way. Yet it has already become apparent that Gorgias *has* an idea of what it means for a speech to be right. And there is reason to believe that this idea is articulated in the word *alētheia*.

²³ This musical power has been linked to the “magical psychology of language” (Walsh 1984: 81). How closely music is linked to *education*, however, has been shown by Anderson 1966, which Walsh refers to.

²⁴ Gorgias’s Palamedes says at one point of his apology: “I will call my past life as a trustworthy witness that I speak the truth.” (Pal. 15) This ‘rhetorical *ēthos*’ is not yet part of a *technē* in Gorgias. It is simply an implication of the demonstrative mode of signification.

²⁵ Vessela Valiavitcharska (2006) argues that the *alētheia* of speech has to be interpreted with reference to the *orthotēs* of speech, as a form of “correct speech”. This interpretation, in many ways instructive and convincing, seems to underestimate the importance of the social embeddedness of speech. In my view, it is certainly right that Gorgias feels obliged to an *ethical* ideal of speech, but *alētheia* does not emerge where the condition of *orthotēs* is fulfilled; rather, both qualities emerge where a multitude of highly contextual conditions are fulfilled.

If Gorgias too construes *alētheia* as the crucial criterion of speech, as we do today, then this criterion applies to the demonstrative dimension of speech, i.e. to the expressive behavior of the speaker. Gorgias never refers to a factual truth or a ‘truth about things’. It is the particular form of the *logon plattein* in which *alētheia* can become manifest. When speech is primarily demonstrative, ‘truth’ too has to be shown. In fact, this seems to describe how Gorgias understands the term. In the *Helen*, he explicitly says that his speech will “show the truth” (*deixai talethes* – Enc. 2), and apparently this does not express an intention to factual accuracy. It does not mean that factual accuracy is of no importance either; because a speech that distorts the facts will hardly be expressive of moral beauty, it will rather be improper and, thereby, an *akosmia*. Gorgias’ idea must have been that all we need to know will become manifest in the outward appearance of speech. For speech to be ‘true’, however, it will not suffice to simply ‘state the facts’. Rather, for *alētheia* a much *higher* standard is demanded. True speech does not reveal a subject matter beyond *logos* but the highest and most beautiful form of *logos* itself, its *kosmos*.

A second look at the opening passage of the *Helen* will prove clarifying at this point: It provides an understanding of *alētheia* according to which ‘truth’ does not reside in *what* is said, in the ‘content’ of speech, but becomes perceivable in speech itself. For Gorgias, speech is meaningful by being expressive, and this is why speech is ‘true’, in his view, when it is expressive of something in a particular way. But as indicated above, it would be wrong to interpret such ‘demonstrative rightness’ as merely an aesthetic quality. For Gorgias, *alētheia* is the distinguishing mark of excellent speech, but in his educational culture of *logos*, excellence is, at the end of the day, *ethical virtue* or *aretē*. In fact, Gorgias himself appears to establish this connection in the opening passage of the *Helen*. Right after the first sentence, which says that *alētheia* is the *kosmos* of speech, he goes on (Enc. 1):

ἄνδρα δὲ καὶ γυναιῖκα καὶ λόγον καὶ ἔργον καὶ πόλιν καὶ πρᾶγμα χρὴ τὸ μὲν ἄξιον ἐπαίνου ἐπαίνῳ τιμᾶν, τῷ δὲ ἀναξίῳ μῶμον ἐπιθεῖναι.

Man and woman, speech and deed, city and action, if worthy of praise (*axion epainou*), should be honoured with praise (*epainō timan*), but to the unworthy (*anaxiō*) one should attach blame (*mōmon epitheinai*).

In this second sentence of the *Helen* there is clearly a normative standard of speech, a requirement of how speech *ought* to be, of what it means for a speech to be ‘right’. This standard is: one has to praise what is praiseworthy and to blame what is blameworthy. At the end of his speech, Gorgias will call this requirement a ‘law’ (*nomos* – Enc. 21). It can be argued that this is in fact Gorgias’ explanation of *alētheia*.

The law that a *logos* has to praise the praiseworthy and to blame the blameworthy can be traced back to Pindar (Buchheim 2012: XXIII). In Pindar’s 8th *Nemean Ode*, the poet says (or sings) that there have always been “nasty” or “hateful presentations” as well as “flattering tales”; only he, the poet himself, does not want to be of this “disposition”

(*ēthos*) but rather to be someone who travels “on straightforward paths” and thus hopes to “be esteemed by his fellow-citizens, by praising what is praiseworthy (*aineōn ainēta*) and bringing blame to sacrilege (*momphan d’epispeirōn alitrois*)” (N. 8.32–39). Thus the normative requirements on speech, expressed at the beginning of the *Helen*, amount to a reiteration of Pindar’s poetic ideal. This can be taken as further evidence that Gorgias was engaged in a practice of *paideia*. It not only seems natural that praising and blaming has to do with education. Furthermore, Pindar explicitly regards his logic as educational. In the same ode, he explains his principle of praising and blaming as one that will make virtue or excellence flourish: virtue (*areta*) “grows like a tree” among “wise and just men” (N. 8.40 f.).²⁶ If we take *sophoi*, “wise men”, as a synonym for “poets”, we may say that ‘just praise and blame’ is the core of Pindar’s educational culture.²⁷ The first duty of the speaker is to promote what is good and to reject what is bad. If he meets this standard, his speech will *support virtue*, i.e. it will be educationally or ethically effective.

The connection to Pindar clarifies why the criterion of *alētheia* can be explained by the principle to praise what is praiseworthy and to blame what is blameworthy: speech is true when it shows the right kind of appraisal – not by ‘saying’ what is good or bad but by exemplifying behavior that is expressive of ethical excellence. Such speech will disclose what is morally good and show the ‘truth’. Right praise and blame, then, turns out to be the essential speech act. By its internal order, its *kosmos*, it can make an exemplary *ēthos* shine in its beauty, thereby making it attractive. In this way, it does not simply show what is right or wrong on a given occasion, by a single verbal ‘gesture’ of approval or disapproval. Rather, it sustainably brings to bear virtue, i.e. it solidifies and amplifies it, and contributes to the development of social order. The objectivity of such *alētheia* resides in its enduring guidance on what is good and right. It is objective in its own way, by providing a lasting ethical orientation.

Praising and blaming then, as Gorgias would have it, is no easy thing to do: it will not suffice to say *that* an action is considered right or wrong, nor that the person to be educated has done something blameworthy and name what would be more appropriate. Since speech, as Gorgias has it, signifies by its very appearance, ‘true speech’, in his view, has to be a living example of what is right. Making ‘true statements’ will not be sufficient. Virtue only arises from virtue or, more precisely, virtuous actions arise from virtuous speech.²⁸ This is why the speaker who knows how to speak the truth, i.e. how to praise and blame appropriately, has to be virtuous himself. Only then can he exemplify virtue. Pindar indicates that he regards himself to be of such an *ēthos*. Similarly, Gorgias, in his funeral eulogy, of which we have a few fragments, mentions the “most divine and most general law (*theiotatos kai koinotatos nomos*)” to “say (*legein*) and to keep silent about (*sigan*) and to do (*poiein*) that what is demanded when it is demanded” (DK 82 B

²⁶ The wording in Pindar is (N. 8.40–42): “αὔξεται δ’ ἀρετά, γλωραῖς ἐέρσαις ὡς ὅτε δένδρεον ἄσσει, ἐν σοφοῖς ἀνδρῶν ἀερθεῖσ’ ἐν δικαίοις τε πρὸς ὑγρὸν αἰθέρα.”

²⁷ In Enc. 20, justice (*dikaion*) is explicitly mentioned as a criterion that applies to praise and blame.

²⁸ Speech (*logos*) is the “beginning (*archē*) of human action” (Pal. 6).

6 [2]).²⁹ Here, Pindar's principle becomes part of a general description of ethical virtue. One ought to *speak* in the right way, and one ought to *act* in the right way, both qualities being of a piece. Ethical virtue implies acting and speaking in the right way, *logos* and *ergon* are not separated (see also Enc. 1). Right speaking consists in the strengthening of virtue, in supporting good action with the means of speech, which is just another way of saying that it is praising and blaming appropriately.

The principle of just praise and blame, then, is in fact part and parcel of Gorgias' concept of *alētheia* or 'truth'. The two themes explain each other and it is no coincidence that they both enter the picture at the beginning of the *Helen*. According to this reading, Gorgias recalls at the outset the most important duty of a speaker: a speech achieves its most beautiful condition or 'perfect form' (*kosmos*) when it is expressive of the right kind of *ēthos* – which is to say that it has the quality of *alētheia* if it praises and blames appropriately. This principle is Gorgias' criterion of *alētheia* and functions as the highest standard in his discursive practice.

5. Uses of *alētheia* in Gorgias

Right praise and blame does not only say what is right or wrong. It rather promotes virtue by embodying virtue. As I hope to have shown, Gorgias' concept of *alētheia* can be explained on this basis. 'True speech', in Gorgias' understanding, is a way of speaking that shows what virtue is like, exemplifies it, thereby making it attractive. It is itself a kind of virtuous behavior. Against this background, the individual uses of *alētheia* can be accounted for.

The Greek word and its cognates appear several times in the two extant speeches, the *Helen* and the *Apology of Palamedes*.³⁰ In the majority of cases, Gorgias uses the noun, while the adjectival or adverbial forms (*alēthēs*, *alēthē*) are less frequent. As mentioned before, the concept is nearly always used with reference to speech or speaking. Interestingly, however, Gorgias also mentions "the truth of the deeds" (*hē alētheia tōn ergōn* – Pal. 35) and, if we trust editions prior to Diels/Kranz, the "truth of the law" (*hē alētheia tou nomou* – Enc. 16). In the following, I will try to show that the account of the meaning of *alētheia* given above will accommodate all these uses.

Generally, we have to assume that both extant speeches claim to be 'true speeches' in the sense described. Gorgias' announcement in the *Helen* that he will "show the truth" (*deixai talethes* – Enc. 2) expresses the intention to manifest and make efficacious an exemplary attitude. The central issue of the *Encomion* would be to demonstrate the appropriate behavior towards Helen: an alternative to the attitude of excessive rejec-

²⁹ The mentioning of *sigan* ('keep silent') might be puzzling at first. However, it can also be explained along the same lines, since in Pindar *sigan* is another way of expressing reproach (see Walsh 1984: 42 f.).

³⁰ The most relevant uses are: Enc. 1, 2, 13, 16 and Pal. 4, 15, 24, 26, 28, 29, 33, 35.

tion that seems to have been commonplace at the time. When he wants to “refute” or “disgrace” (*elengxia*) those who accuse Helen (Enc. 2), the connotation of “bringing shame” is clearly in play. The purpose of the speech is to remind the listener that an excessively ruthless attitude towards Helen is not appropriate, that it is an *akosmia*.

This idea of truth is underlined by another usage where true speech contrasts with manipulative speech based on *technē*. Gorgias describes how an audience can be affected by a speech “composed with *technē*, not spoken with *alētheia*” (Enc. 13). Oddly enough, this passage has traditionally been taken as evidence that Gorgias *himself* is pursuing an art of manipulation (e.g. Segal 1962: 112). In fact, however, it is clear from a closer look that he is here essentially warning against the dangers of any disguised speech not committed to the standard of truth. The usage is entirely consistent with the concept of truth to which Gorgias is committed: speech can be true only when it reveals a virtuous nature openly and undisguisedly.

These findings can be confirmed by another usage in the *Helen*, where Gorgias speaks of “the truth of the law” (Enc. 16). The passage poses serious textual problems, and the wording has been questioned more than once. Diels, for example, rejects *alētheia* and prefers *syntheia* instead (DK 82 B 11 [16]).³¹ However, given the understanding of *alētheia* proposed here, the word can be preserved: just like the ‘truth of speech’ describes a quality that makes speech expressive of virtue, ‘truth of the law’ describes a quality that makes law expressive of virtue. When Gorgias writes “forceful (*ischyra*) is the truth of the law (*hē alētheia tou nomou*), established by fear (*phobos*) and caused by sight (*opsis*),” he refers to a way that just laws can be brought to bear in a forceful manner.³² That this is accomplished by fear, not by praise and blame, as it is in the case of speech, does not change the fact that the basic quality here is the expression of virtue or justice. This is underscored by the reference to that which is “morally beautiful by virtue of the law” and “good by virtue of the right” in the same sentence. Keeping in mind that Gorgias had previously pointed to a formation of character through the work of *opsis* (Enc. 15), the whole passage can be read as revolving around moral education.

From this point of view, the *Apology of Palamedes* has a very similar topic: when Palamedes evokes the notion of *alētheia*, it is because he wants to make his moral integrity apparent once more. The purpose is indicated at the beginning of the speech. Palamedes does *not* want to defend himself against being executed – this would be futile, as his case is prearranged – but against disgrace: the “danger concerns honour and dishonour” (Pal. 1). But since it is precisely his morality that has been called into question, Palamedes can place his hopes only on “*alētheia* itself” (Pal. 4) and “praise himself” (Pal. 32), which under normal circumstances would be inappropriate. The problem, in other words, is not

³¹ This is supported by Schirren and Zinsmaier, who translate “habituation to the custom” (“Gewöhnung an den Brauch” – Schirren, Zinsmaier 2003: 86 f.). Another emendation is suggested by MacDowell, who replaces *alētheia* with *ameleia* (2005: 24; see 38 for a comment).

³² For an interpretation along these lines, see Buchheim (2012: 171 f.). The passage cited above also underlines that power or strength can be closely linked to virtue.

that the truth is “private”, as Buchheim suggests (2012: 175 f.). It consists in the fact that the conditions of *alētheia* are unfavorable where the speaker’s virtue is questioned: the way of speech is “blocked” (Pal. 4). The only option for the speaker is to redeem his honor by demonstrating his immaculate *ēthos* one last time. By praising what is praiseworthy – by showing the right relation to what is virtuous – the speaker will himself *exemplify* a behavior worthy of praise, which implies that he will make such behavior attractive and provide a paradigm of moral beauty.

Palamedes’ intention to make ‘the truth itself’ appear is underlined by his idea that his “whole past life” can testify that he speaks the truth (Pal. 15). The point here is not an empirical probability that a person like Palamedes is incapable of certain misdeeds, but that his apology itself one last time reveals the ethos that has characterised Palamedes’ entire life. It is clear from the context that what is spoken of is an honorable, virtuous way of life: a life not governed by pleasure, but by clear insight into what is right. His virtuous life and his true speech form a unity.³³ This also sheds new light on the passage mentioned at the beginning, in which truth appears as something to be ‘known’: it is the accuser of Palamedes who “does not know the truth” (*alētheian ouk eidōs* – Pal. 24). But it seems unlikely that this is meant in a mere epistemic sense; rather, what is described here is a weak character without moral compass, and ignorance regarding the truth is an essential part of this ethical deficiency. Not knowing the truth here means as much as not knowing how to conduct oneself, be it in words or deeds.

The other uses in the *Palamedes* can serve to confirm these findings. When Palamedes mentions that a speech cannot be true if the speaker regards “wise men” as being “inconsiderate” (*anoētos*), this indicates that a speaker cannot speak the truth if he does not know to whom honour is due (Pal. 26). For Palamedes, true speech forms a contrast with slander and unjust defamation (Pal. 29); speaking the truth goes hand in hand with *justice*, the opposite being deceitful accusations (Pal. 33). When Palamedes calls on his judges to decide his case “according to the truth” (*meta tes alethes* – Pal. 35), he does so after having stated that they *cannot know* what he has really done; and since *alētheia* once again is opposed to injustice (*adikois*), it has an essentially ethical meaning. That Gorgias lets Palamedes speak of “the truth of the deeds” (*hē alētheia tōn ergōn* – Pal. 35) indicates that non-verbal behavior can be ‘true’ in this sense too.³⁴

³³ The same connection can be observed in Pal. 28.

³⁴ For reasons given in the introduction, *On Non-Being* does not have to be discussed here. In the version provided by Sextus Empiricus, the word *alētheia* appears only at the beginning, where it is explained that the speech eliminates “the criterion of truth” (DK 82 B 3 [87]), while the actual account of Gorgias’ speech is devoid of any mention of truth. In the anonymous rendering, *alētheia* is used sporadically, but more in the sense of ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ (MXG 7.1, 6.5, 6.20). The concept of truth does not play a role here.

6. Concluding remarks

For Gorgias, speech is meaningful by being expressive in a certain way; and it ought to be expressive of virtue. Whenever someone speaks, a way of life, an *ēthos* emerges; and, ideally, we should speak in such a way that a commendable *ēthos* emerges. This is achieved by right praise and blame, where the speaker will himself exhibit a behavior worthy of praise, thereby making such behavior attractive and bringing moral beauty to bear. Here speech achieves its highest form, its *kosmos*, and this is what Gorgias calls *alētheia*. Thus the normative requirement of having to ‘praise what is praiseworthy and to blame what is blameworthy’, spelt out in the second sentence of the *Helen*, explains the conception of *alētheia* implied in the first sentence. Pindar’s principle is Gorgias’ criterion of truth, i.e. his crucial standard of speech.

Plainly, this standard differs significantly from the ones we are used to. In particular, the principle of praise and blame requires one to do what a situation demands or what the *kairos* requires. Being faithful to this standard, then, would mean to know what is appropriate *in each case*, i.e. to possess a trained moral judgment. Although Gorgias’ *alētheia* is essentially ethical, the truth of a *logos* has to be determined on aesthetic grounds. The line between ‘true and false’ would have to be drawn by some kind of moral perception. As an educational programme, Gorgias’ practice of discourse could have been directed at cultivating precisely this capacity, which enables one to ‘speak the truth’ and to recognize ‘true speech’. As soon as such discursive practice has become second nature, Gorgias might have said, *alētheia*, i.e. true moral beauty, can be distinguished from skin-deep beauty or misleading *doxa*. Acquiring this capacity, of course, requires a transformation of character. The truth of a *logos* can only be determined by the well-trained eyes and ears of a virtuous person.

If this account is correct, one might of course wonder whether translating the word *alētheia* as ‘truth’ is justified. How is such a standard related to what we know as ‘truth’ today? Obviously, this question could be discussed at length. In this article I simply wanted to ask how Gorgias did in fact understand his criterion of *alētheia*, and for this purpose I set aside questions as to whether or not this criterion actually works or how it relates to more modern concepts of truth. However, I hope to have shown that it would be premature to simply reject it as ‘cosmetic’, as the excentric ideal of a rhetorician who is interested in persuasion.³⁵ Given the way Gorgias uses the term, his understanding may have had a basis in the culture that surrounded him. For Gorgias, the standard of *alētheia* played as central a role as our standard of ‘truth’ does for us today. And should it be the case that his contemporaries were familiar with the idea of *alētheia* as an embodiment of how

³⁵ Likewise, it would be mistaken to interpret Gorgias’ *alētheia* as part of the ‘subjective’ conditions of speech, the right translation being ‘sincerity’ or ‘truthfulness’. In the framework of Gorgias’ practice of speech the question of whether or not a piece of discourse has *alētheia* cannot be settled by examining separately the inner attitude of a speaker. Speaking is something public, and its quality cannot be determined with reference to ‘subjective’ attitudes. The *ēthos* of a speaker is not hidden ‘behind’ speech but embodied in speech.

things ought to be, this idea will certainly have played a role in the debates from which the philosophical concept of truth emerged.

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Alētheia in Gorgias of Leontini. An Excerpt from the History of Truth

It is often assumed that the concept of *alētheia*, or 'truth', in Gorgias of Leontini belongs to the art of rhetoric. Along these lines, it is usually understood as an *aesthetic* concept or even a mere 'adornment' of speech. In this paper, it is argued, by contrast, that Gorgianic *alētheia* is a definable criterion of speech figuring in the practice of moral education. While the 'truth' of a *logos* indeed has to be assessed on aesthetic grounds, the underlying concept of *alētheia* is predominantly ethical. For Gorgias, speech is 'true' when it *promotes virtue (aretē)* by being *expressive of virtue*. The principle stated in the opening passage of the *Encomium of Helen*, that a speaker has 'to praise what is praiseworthy and to blame what is blameworthy', explains precisely this understanding of *alētheia*.

KEY WORDS

Gorgias of Leontini, sophists, history of truth, *alētheia*, Pindar, *Encomium of Helen*

