

GORGIAS' ACCOUNT OF TRUTH. MOURELATOS AND
BERMUDEZ BETWEEN BEHAVIOURISM AND COHERENCE¹

Erminia Di Iulio

(Università degli Studi di Roma "Tor Vergata")

Abstract

In his article *Gorgias on the function of language*, Mourelatos famously argued that while Gorgias aims to deny the possibility of communicating truth by means of speech, nonetheless a specific account of the function of language can be drawn out: namely, a behaviouristic one. Bermudez's reading, on the contrary, attempts to show that even though it is clear that Gorgias is providing a non-representationalist account of language, nonetheless there is still room for some conception of truth, i.e. one explicable in terms of coherence. My purpose is to discuss both Mourelatos' and Bermudez's theses in order to show that neither arises necessarily from the texts.

Keywords: Gorgias, epistemology, philosophy of language, behaviourism, coherence.

In his remarkable article concerning Gorgias' philosophy of language², Bermudez addresses a specific, yet crucial, problem: *how can it happen that a persuasive speech is false?* This is, indeed, the base for another, wider, crucial question: *what is, according to Gorgias, the function of speech?* The reason why these two issues are inextricably connected is clear: wondering and examining how it is possible for a speech to be false, and still persuasive, means nothing but wondering about the *nature of truth*. This is the line of thought: if it is possible for a speech to be persuasive, but not true, truth and persuasiveness cannot be said to coincide. Before proceeding, it might be convenient to clarify that the notion of truth Bermudez

¹ I would like to thank Giulia Felappi, Sigmund Bruno Schilpzand and two anonymous reviewers for their useful comments.

² Bermudez, *Truth and Falsehood for Non-representationalist: Gorgias on the normativity of language*, in «Journal of ancient philosophy», 11, 2 (2017), pp. 1-21.

has in mind is better defined in terms of a normativity explicable as coherence: according to him, even though, as already clarified by Mourelatos³ in his famous article, it is evident that Gorgias' philosophy is committed to denying the possibility of appealing truly to reality by means of language, nevertheless it is not necessary to follow Mourelatos right to the end and conclude that there is no room for truth at all; indeed, Bermudez claims, although the truth of language is said to be, *à la* Rorty, independent of the realm of facts, it is still possible for a speech to be true by showing the logical inconsistency of the opposite speech. Whether this conception is, indeed, exhaustive and entirely satisfying will be examined below.

Before giving Bermudez the credit I think he deserves for having highlighted the difference between persuasiveness and truth in Gorgias' philosophy, it is perhaps necessary to deal with a possible objection, namely that while it is obviously legitimate to underline a difference between truth and persuasiveness *in general*, it is not so obvious that Gorgias himself actually endorses this view; indeed, it could be argued that it is not obvious that Gorgias is ready to endorse some notion of truth *at all*. Actually, this is precisely what Mourelatos, among others, denies: in his article *Gorgias on the function of language*, Mourelatos commits himself in showing that Gorgias is actually embracing a behavioral account of language. According to Mourelatos, while the *Treatise* is clearly dedicated to refute two "classical" accounts of linguistic meaning, viz. the referential and the mentalist ones⁴, «the panegyric of *logos*

³ Mourelatos, *Gorgias on the function of language*, in «Philosophical Topics», 15, 2, (1987), pp. 135-170.

⁴ Mourelatos focuses on the third thesis of the *Treatise* and individuates here two different arguments, each of them pointing at one specific conception of meaning. As he clearly states: «The categorical argument is especially well-suited to counter a certain perennially attractive, even though ultimately misguided, assumption concerning the function of language, viz, that if the words are to have meaning, they must refer to thing in the real (at least extra-linguistic, and perhaps extra-mental) world. The assumption is that the meaning of all words is constituted by their reference⁴. Thus we would say that a referential conception of meaning is, in effect, the target of the elenchus pressed in the categorical argument. The puzzles of perceptual sameness are correspondingly well-suited to discredit a mentalist or ideational conception of meaning. The target

in *Helen* presents, in effect, a third alternative, a behavioral conception of meaning⁵. The “destructive attitude” of the *Treatise* is indeed well known by the scholars, but since the third thesis is the starting point of both Mourelatos and Bermudez, it is perhaps convenient to focus briefly on it. Here, Gorgias seems to deny any possibility of communicating truth by means of three arguments⁶: the first (980a20-b7) aims at underlining the ontological difference between things and language that makes it impossible to speak truly of reality⁷; the second (980b8-14) denies the possibility for the speaker and the hearer of sharing the same mental image, so that communication turns to be impossible as well⁸; the third (980b14-17) is actually related to the second, in the sense that it seems to suggest that sharing the same mental image not only is impossible for two subjects, but also for the same individual inasmuch he himself can be said to be different at different times⁹. The conclusion seems to be that communication is impossible.

assumption would be that words have some sort of a tie or pairing with perception (sensory impressions or mental images or thoughts). In its simplest and purest version the assumption is that the hearing of a word “W” brings to the mind of each speaker of a certain language the same mental image or thought and that conversely when either that same mental image or thought or the corresponding sense impression should occur to the speaker, the perception can be conveyed to others through use of the word W», p. 151. While it would be fascinating deepening into this argumentation, it is not possible to focus on this here. We will focus, instead, only on Mourelatos' assumption that Gorgias is committing himself to defend a behavioral account.

⁵ Mourelatos, *ivi*, p. 136.

⁶ The second (“intersubjective”) and the third (“intrasubjective”) are reported only by the author of the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *On Melissus, Xenophanes, Gorgias* (MXG); Sextus Empiricus who provides another version of this text focuses only on the first argument, i.e. the Categorical Argument.

⁷ ὁ γὰρ εἶδε, πῶς ἂν τις, φησί, τοῦτο εἶποι λόγῳ; (...) ἀρχὴν γὰρ οὐ <ψόφρον> λέγει <ὁ λέ>γων οὐδὲ χρῶμα, ἀλλὰ λόγον, ὅστ' οὐδὲ διανοεῖσθαι χρῶμα ἔστιν, ἀλλ' ὄρα, οὐδὲ ψόφρον ἀκούειν.

⁸ Εἰ δὲ καὶ ἐνδέχεται, γινώσκει τε καὶ ἀναγινώσκει <ὁ> λέγων, ἀλλὰ πῶς ὁ ἀκούων τὸ αὐτὸ ἐννοήσῃ; οὐ γὰρ οἶόν [10] τε ταῦτ' ἅμα ἐν πλείοσι καὶ χωρὶς οὐσιν εἶναι· δύο γὰρ ἂν εἶη τὸ ἓν.

⁹ Φαίνεται δὲ οὐδ' αὐτὸς αὐτῷ ὅμοια αἰσθανόμενος [15] ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ χρόνῳ, ἀλλ' ἕτερα τῆ ἢ ἀκοῆ καὶ τῆ ὄψεως, καὶ νῦν τε καὶ πάλαι διαφόρως. ὥστε σχολῆ ἄλλω γ' ἂν ταῦτ' αἰσθαιτό τις.

Nonetheless, as mentioned above, Mourelatos finds in the *Helen* an alternative suggestion, i.e. the behaviouristic one. By “behavioral conception of meaning”, Mourelatos explicitly refers to what he himself defines as the “classical version”:

in John B. Watson’s classical statements: “the words function in the matter of calling out responses exactly as did the objects for which the words serve as substitutes” (...), these substitute responses may in turn become substitute stimuli for other persons who may be within hearing¹⁰.

Mourelatos’ ultimate purpose is to show how Gorgias, in denying the possibility of appealing to reality *at all*, i.e. both directly (referential account) and indirectly (mentalist account), by means of λόγος, is *not* consequently denying the possibility of communication *tout court*: on the contrary, Gorgias, understanding speech in terms of “power” (classical behavioral account), would just be rejecting the possibility of ascribing truth-value to propositions. On this view, since the function of λόγος is to rise stimuli and responses, the efficacy of speech is perfectly and sufficiently definable in terms of persuasiveness and thus “truth”, as something different, is simply left out of the picture¹¹. The underlying idea is that displayed clearly by Ayer regarding ethical statements:

if a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is true or false (...). They are pure

¹⁰ Mourelatos, *ivi*, p. 155.

¹¹ On this regard Mourelatos is quite explicit: «I hasten to point out that the phrase “behavioral conception of meaning” might be understood to cover a wide variety of assumptions, proposals and theories. (...) there are now sophisticated versions of behavioral conception that accommodate not only the referential function, but also such concepts as logical entitlement and truth conditions. For purposes of my comparison with Gorgias, however, the relevant version is that suggested by my quotation of Watson. It is the version associated with the heyday of behaviorism in psychology and linguistics (Watson, A. P. Weiss, Clark Hull, Leonard Bloomfield) and with the flourish of emotivism in philosophy (A. J. Ayer, C. L. Stevenson) (...) something very like the classical conception of behavioral conception of meaning is implied in Gorgias’ celebration of the power of *logos* in *Helen*», *ivi*, p. 156.

expressions of feelings and as such do not come under the category of truth and falsehood¹².

This reading has indeed become a classic for almost every scholar interested in Gorgias' philosophy of language and it presents the clear advantage of conciliating the powerful critique of λόγος from the *Treatise* with the panegyric of the same λόγος from the *Helen*; actually, it is undeniable that both the famous definition of λόγος as a "great master" and the description of its power in the text seem to perfectly fit the behavioral picture. As noted by Mourelatos:

the celebration of *logos* concludes with the famous comparison of power of *logos* with that of drugs: "just as different drugs draw different humors from the body, and some put an end to disease, while others put an end to life, so too with *logoi*: on those who hear them, some cause pain, others pleasure, some cause fear, others instill courage and still other poison and bewitch the soul through some sort of ruinous persuasion". If only we changed the archaic expression "drawing out humors" to the behaviorist idiom of "eliciting a physiological reaction" this sentence could just as well have been written by such advocates of the stimulus-response conception of meaning as Leonard Bloomfield, B. F. Skinner, or C. L. Stevenson¹³.

Thus, it is not a surprise that Mourelatos' understanding of Gorgias' philosophy of language is also the starting-point of Bermudez argumentation¹⁴. Nevertheless, what makes the

¹² Ayer, A. J., *Language, truth and logic*, London, 1949, p. 68.

¹³ Mourelatos, *ivi*, pp. 157-158. There are other examples of a clear resemblance between Gorgias' words about the power of speech and, in particular the emotivism; if we consider this classical claim by Stevenson: «Emotive meaning is a meaning in which the response (from the hearer's point of view) or the stimulus (from the speaker's point of view) is a range of emotions» (*Ethics and Language*, New Haven, 1945, p. 59), we cannot but note the echo of gorgianic celebration of poetic speech.

¹⁴ «Mourelatos convincingly argues that each of these arguments criticizes a particular conception of linguistic meaning. The argument from category differences objects to the referential conception (...), and the argument against perceptual sameness objects to the mentalist conception (...). So, Gorgias claims that, since words or expressions do not map onto external things or

difference, a fundamental difference, is that Bermudez does not fail to note what Mourelatos' point of view either misses or decides to ignore: the panegyric of speech and its power in the *Helen* ends with the significant acknowledgement by Gorgias that it is due to the lack of knowledge that people are often persuaded by the power of speeches, even by the *false* ones (*Helen* 10-11):

αἱ γὰρ ἔνθεοι διὰ λόγον ἐπιδαῖ ἐπαγωγοὶ ἡδονῆς, ἀπαγωγοὶ λύπης γίνονται· συγγινομένη γὰρ τῆι δόξει τῆς ψυχῆς ἢ δύναμις τῆς ἐπιδαῖς ἔθελε καὶ ἔπεισε καὶ μετέστησεν αὐτὴν γοητεία. Γοητείας δὲ καὶ μαγείας δισσαὶ τέχναι εὗρονται, αἱ εἰσι ψυχῆς ἀμαρτήματα καὶ Δόξης ἀπατήματα. [11] 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 <ἔννοιαν> 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. ἢ δὲ δόξα σφαλερὰ καὶ ἀβεβαίος οὔσα σφαλεραῖς καὶ ἀβεβαίαις εὐτυχίαις περιβάλλει τοὺς αὐτῆι χρωμένους¹⁵.

If this is the case, neither that there is no concept of truth at all nor that truth is nothing but persuasiveness can be legitimately maintained: on the contrary, the claim that, according to Gorgias, a speech can be at the same time persuasive and false – due to the fact that it appeals to the unstable opinion of the hearer – clearly

mental states, the function of language can be neither referential nor representational», Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Bermudez provides a translation of this passage: “inspired incantations conveyed through words becomes bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain; for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power of the incantation beguiles it and persuades it and alters it by witchcraft. Of witchcraft and magic twin arts have been discovered, which are errors of the soul (ψυχῆς ἀμαρτήματα) and deceptions of opinion (δόξης ἀπατήματα). How many people have persuaded or persuade how many others about how many things by forging a false speech? (ὅσοι δὲ ὅσους περὶ ὅσων καὶ ἔπεισαν καὶ πείθουσι δὲ ψευδῆ λόγον πλάσαντες)”; Bermudez adds: «Gorgias goes on to argue that in many cases people are persuaded of things about which they lack knowledge and have mere opinion; he states that if people had knowledge of thing past, present and future, “logos would not be similarly similar” and that the defective kinds of logos works on the basis of unstable opinion», *ivi*, p. 7.

remarks that, firstly, *there is* some kind of truth, and secondly that other *epistemic criteria* «related to a distinction between knowledge and opinion»¹⁶ must be involved in evaluating language.

I would say, again, that Bermudez deserves huge credit for having drawn the attention on such elements which are usually overlooked by scholars, including, as mentioned above, Mourelatos himself: in effect, among the readers of Gorgias, Bermudez is one of the few ready to recognize not only the distinction between truth and persuasiveness, but also the epistemic gap between knowledge (as *direct experience*) and mere opinion, although it seems to me, as we will see below, that in the end he fails to deal with it properly¹⁷.

In consequence of this key difference between their approaches, Mourelatos and Bermudez end up examining different passages: while Mourelatos focuses his attention on the *Helen*¹⁸, Bermudez's argumentation, even though his efforts in providing a holistic reading are definitely clear, is mainly based on the *Palamedes*: indeed, it is here that the problematic question of truth emerges brightly¹⁹. As efficaciously noted by Bermudez, it is here clearly stated that truth cannot be reduced to persuasiveness:

here [*Pal* 33-35] Palamedes holds that the right thing for him to do is defend himself from the accusation by “teaching the truth”, without resorting to deception (the same word that in the *Helen* portrayed one of the art of witchcraft: “the deception of opinion”). Since his audience is so distinguished, he prefers to teach them truth *rather than* aim at persuasion. So, this passage implies a distinction between the methods of truth and the methods of persuasion that leads to deception²⁰.

¹⁶ Bermudez, *ibidem*.

¹⁷ On the distinction between knowledge and opinion and their role in the philosophy of Gorgias more below.

¹⁸ Actually Mourelatos draws also a connection between the panegyric of logos in *Helen* and the third thesis of the *Treatise* in the version of Sextus Empiricus, but that passage is too complex to be addressed here.

¹⁹ It is perhaps worthwhile mentioning that there are at least eight occurrences of the word ἀλήθεια in this text.

²⁰ Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 8.

Nonetheless, according to Bermudez, even though it has been rightly established that Gorgias is in effect concerned with some notion of truth that exceeds that of persuasiveness, the puzzling question is still to be settled: namely, «how can *logos* teach the truth, despite not being capable of directly revealing it?»²¹. The answer provided is, actually, clear and sophisticated: as already briefly mentioned, the assumption is that Gorgias is embracing a conception of truth better definable in terms of *coherence* or logical consistency, so that falsehood turns out to be, consequently, identified with *incoherence* or logical inconsistency. Therefore, the true speech, according to Bermudez, although incapable of making things evident, i.e. incapable of showing the truth *directly*, is still able to communicate it *indirectly* «by showing the logical impossibility of the accusation’s position»²². My aim here is providing a discussion of Bermudez’s position concerning the nature of truth in Gorgias’ texts, in order to figure out whether we are entitled to conclude, with Bermudez, that Gorgias embraces the conceptions of truth as logical consistency and of falsehood as logical inconsistency.

In order to show the legitimacy of identifying truth with logical consistency and, therefore, the true speech with the one that finds out the logical weaknesses in the opposite position, Bermudez underlines a passage in the *Helen* (§ 2):

ἐγὼ δὲ βούλομαι λογισμόν τινα τῷ λόγῳ δοῦς τὴν μὲν κακῶς ἀκούουσαν παῦσαι τῆς αἰτίας, τοὺς δὲ μεμφομένους ψευδομένους ἐπιδειῖξαι καὶ δεῖξαι τὰ ληθῆς καὶ παῦσαι τῆς ἀμαθίας²³.

²¹ Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 9.

²² Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 10

²³ Bermudez provides the following translation: “I would like [i] to put a stop to the accusations of her bad reputation by informing my speech (*logoi*) with *reasoning* (*logismos*), and [ii] to put a stop to the ignorance by showing that her detractors are *liars* and revealing the *truth*”. It could be noted at first that the implication according to which “revealing the truth is nothing but showing that the detractors are liars” and so that “revealing the truth is nothing but showing the impossibility of accusation’s argument” does not arise explicitly in the text. Indeed, if we consider the Greek text we will notice that Gorgias is affirming that by means of “informing his speech with reasoning” he wants to a) to put a stop to the accusation of Helen’s bad reputation b) to put a stop to the

According to him, this passage clearly suggests that Gorgias' aim is to make evident that "revealing the truth" is nothing but "showing that her detractors are liars" and that this can be accomplished by means of a specific kind of *reasoning*, i.e. «a kind of counterfactual technique, which indirectly teaches the truth by showing the logical impossibility of the accuser's position»²⁴. And it is in the light of this assumption that Bermudez explains his reading of both the *Helen* and the *Palamedes*:

(...) they are *counterfactual* arguments. They are not composed of factual claims about what really happened, but of claims about *what would be the case* if the accuser were right in his accusation²⁵.

This kind of strategy would be sufficiently valid to state a truth, since

a *defense speech* can be spoken truly by simply stating inconsistencies or *logical flaws* in the accusation's argumentative structure²⁶.

Two things are to be noted here: firstly, the kind of speech Bermudez has in mind is that of defense and, in fact, he himself makes explicit that the conception of truth he has in mind is the one emerging from an "agonistic context"²⁷. Secondly, according to Bermudez, the employment of *counterfactual examples* should allow the speaker to reveal the truth by talking not about facts or

ignorance c) to show that her detractors are liars d) to reveal the truth. Thus, according to the text, it is not so evident that "revealing the truth" is possible *only* by "showing that her detractors are liars". In the light of these remarks I would suggest a slightly different translation: "I would like, then, providing a certain reasoning to the speech, to free this calumniated woman from the accusation, to show that her detractors tell lies, to reveal the truth and to cease the ignorance".

²⁴ Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 10.

²⁵ Bermudez, *ivi*, pp. 15-16.

²⁶ Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 9 (my emphasis).

²⁷ «A speech is true in the sense that it is shown to be more robust than its alternative in a competitive, agonistic context», Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 10.

things²⁸ in reality (“what Helen and Palamedes actually did”), but just about the logical inconsistency of the alternative speech: the underlying suggestion is that this approach makes it possible to stay faithful to the third thesis of the *Treatise* according to which λόγος cannot successfully appeal to reality.

Therefore, to sum up, the “reasoning” from the *Helen’s* passage above would consist in an argumentation that, proceeding *without stating or referring to things or facts*, leads the opposite speech to absurd consequences and, in doing so, shows its logical impossibility. In order to show if this is actually the case, it is convenient to focus mainly on the *Palamedes* since Bermudez seems to consider it a striking example of Gorgias’ counterfactual approach: according to him, the significance of the *Palamedes* lies in the fact that even though Palamedes himself declares explicitly, as we have already seen, that his goal is “teaching the truth”, and “teaching the truth” seems to imply a direct appeal to the facts, he will *not*, in the end, refer to facts at all. Hence, “teaching the truth”, Bermudez claims, should not be understood referentially, because Palamedes

does not use speech to refer to matters of facts about what really happened. The only matters of facts Palamedes does appeal to (...) are those of which the member of the audience have themselves experienced directly²⁹.

Now, it appears to me that this kind of reading has to deal with at least two objections. Firstly, it is not *so* evident that in the *Palamedes* the argumentation has necessarily to be described *as proceeding counterfactually in order to show the truth indirectly*. Secondly, the claim “appealing to matters of facts that the jury has directly experienced” not only is problematic in itself, but also seems to imply the possibility for the speaker and the hearer of sharing the same mental image, but this is exactly what, according to Mourelatos and Bermudez, Gorgias denies in the third thesis of the *Treatise*.

²⁸ “Things” and “facts” will be used interchangeably for neither is employed in a technical sense; broadly speaking, they both mean “reality”.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

Concerning the first puzzle, Bermudez insists strongly and repeatedly that Gorgias decides to employ an argumentative structure that does not imply a direct appeal to reality in order to escape the incapacity of λόγος of communicating things. But, it could be asked: is it truly so evident that Gorgias, through Palamedes, is *consciously avoiding* to refer to “what he actually did”? *Is this the only possible reading?* It seems to me that the answer is “no, it is not”. Rather, it could be suggested that Palamedes *is forced to not refer* to facts simply because, since he did not betray, *there is actually no fact at all*. In effect, even if we accepted for a moment that Palamedes *is actually avoiding* to invoke the realm of fact, we would, then, find us wondering: what would be these facts? It is not clear at all to *what* facts Palamedes should refer to. Besides, the difficulty arising from being forced to deal with the absence of facts is clearly stated by Palamedes himself who, at the beginning of his argumentation (*Pal* 5), wonders how it is possible to know something that has not happened: “οὐδὲ οἶδ’ ὅπως ἄν εἰδείη τις ὄν τὸ μὴ γινόμενον”! If we take knowledge to be the necessary starting point of true speech it is evident that the “impossibility to know” is also an “impossibility to speak”. It perhaps could be objected that knowledge is not, after all, a necessary condition of truth, or better, of true speech, but, as Bermudez himself explains efficaciously, it seems that according to Gorgias, as far as opinion is the source of false speech, knowledge *is* the sufficient and necessary condition of the true one³⁰.

Moreover, Bermudez claims, in the passage above, that Palamedes *refers indirectly to what he actually did* by appealing directly only to those facts, those experiences, the juries have been witnessed. I would say that it cannot be a surprise that Palamedes is referring *directly to these facts and indirectly to the others*: in his apology

³⁰ In other words, according to Gorgias, if with “truth” we mean the “truth-value” of a proposition, knowledge is “truth-entailing” *strictu sensu*: just as the false speech is based on “opinion”, the true one has “knowledge” as its source. On this view, “knowledge” is defined in the terms of an “acquaintance” with reality that allows the knowing subject to speak truly and the hearer (*viz.* the juries who had *experienced* the truth stated by Palamedes for they have been witnesses of it) to recognize the truth communicated by the speaker. More on this below.

he will be recalling all he accomplished in favor of the Greeks, which means that he will show to be perfectly capable of speaking about what he has actually accomplished, facts that actually happened and, thus, facts that actually exist. What I am trying to suggest is that even if Palamedes wanted to refer to the “fact that he did not betray”, what could he have said more than simply *stating the fact* that he did not betray? Indeed, he *does* claim his innocence:

ὅτι μὲν οὖν οὐ σαφῶς <εἰδῶς> ὁ κατηγοροῦς κατηγορεῖ μου, σαφῶς οἶδα· σύννοια γὰρ ἐμαυτῶι σαφῶς οὐδὲν τοιοῦτον πεποιτηκῶς³¹.

But, again, speaking of his own condition, what could he have added? Since there is nothing that has been done, since there is no event to speak about, it is not extraordinary that Palamedes proceeds hypothetically: again what else should he do?

Thus, this seems to be Gorgias’ reasoning: *since there is no fact* that λόγος can appeal to, nothing is left but proceeding *hypothetically*. But if this is the case, the picture is not that Palamedes’ speech focuses on the incoherence of Odysseus’ accusation because λόγος cannot communicate facts; on the contrary, it seems that Gorgias is claiming that it is *because there is no fact*, no thing, no reference, that the speech cannot communicate the truth directly: in fact, as I have already mentioned and I will show better below, Palamedes proves to be capable of speaking of facts that actually happened. But again if this is the case, it is not that truth is identified with logical consistency, the realm of facts being irrelevant³²; on the contrary it seems that for λόγος to be and

³¹“I know with the finest certainty that the accuser is accusing me without a certain knowledge: indeed, I know with the finest certainty that I did not do something of this kind”, *Pal* 5. I would say that the insistence on “knowing” in terms of “seeing” and “experiencing directly” is worth of being borne in mind: more below. Cf also *Pal* 30: “φήσαιμι δ’ ἄν, καὶ φήσας οὐκ ἂν ψευσαίμην οὐδ’ ἂν ἐλεγχθεῖην, οὐ μόνον ἀναμάρτητος...”

³² At the beginning of his argumentation Bermudez declares that he is embracing, at least partially, a Rortyan account of truth as justification in front of a competent audience: «the underlying suggestion is that the only judges of the correctness of our claims are the member of our human community of justification and that

to be true, there must be a fact: if there is no fact, there is no possibility of communicating truth either. Obviously, this assumption implies a *robust* conception of truth that can be understood neither in terms of coherence and logical consistency nor from a deflationist point of view, which is, indeed, Bermudez position:

Interpreting Gorgias' texts is relevant to the problems surrounding truth deflationism – since he seems to endorse a non-representational theory of language, but his normativity of speech goes well beyond mere persuasive power. So a study of his view should provide insights into how a deflationary account of truth could respond to the accusation of reducing normativity to power³³.

To sum up, it seems to me that it is not so obvious that Gorgias is employing a counterfactual technique in order to escape the incapacity of language to appeal to something that did happen: on the contrary, he shows to be concerned, at least here in the *Palamedes*, precisely with the impossibility of speaking of something that did *not* happen – viz. with the impossibility of speaking of “what-is-not”.

The second problematic question concerns the assumption that in order to prove his innocence, “Palamedes, speaking to the juries, reminds of things they have witnessed, in order to appeal indirectly to the matter of facts”³⁴: as I mentioned above, it is difficult to understand how this assumption could efficaciously fit with a reading that denies the possibility for the speaker and the hearer of sharing the same mental image. Indeed, it seems to me that the strategy of “reminding his audience of the facts that have themselves witnessed” is actually rich in consequences: firstly, it

no-human reality (“objects themselves” or “the nature of things”) could or should play a part in its assessment. There is nothing more to truth than justification, since the distinction between truth-as-correspondence and truth-as-justification is not relevant in practice», *ivi*, p. 1.

³³ Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 3.

³⁴ «the only matter of facts that Palamedes does appeal to (...) are those to which the members of the audience have themselves experienced directly (...). Thus, he uses *logos* not to refer to facts directly, but rather indirectly by reminding his audience of the facts that they have witnessed, particularly, his way of life which they have longed been acquainted with», Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 9.

entails that an appeal to facts is possible, provided that *there are* facts; secondly, it shows that, in employing this strategy, Palamedes takes for granted to be appealing to facts or deeds that the juries *certainly know to be true inasmuch they themselves have been acquainted with them*.

ὡς δ' ἀληθῆ λέγω, μάρτυρα πιστὸν παρέξομαι τὸν παροιχόμενον βίον· τῷ δὲ μάρτυρι μάρτυρες ὑμεῖς ἦτε· σύνεστε γάρ μοι, διὸ σύνεστε ταῦτα³⁵.

Therefore, a strong connection between “witnessing”, “being acquainted with”, “knowledge” and “speaking” seems to be drawn, in the sense that “being witnessing” or “being acquainted with” *as* constituting knowledge are also the *conditio sine qua non* of true speech. If so, again, it can be suggested that a different account of truth is required in order to explain Gorgias’ conception of true speech.

Besides, Bermudez himself seems to be perfectly aware of the epistemological implications of Gorgias’ philosophy of language: for instance, he is the first to draw the attention on that passage in the *Palamedes* where the accused wonders if his accuser is accusing on the base of *knowledge* or merely on the base of *opinion* and explains that

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 available³⁶.

I think that this is, indeed, a quick yet remarkable explanation of Gorgias’ epistemology: truth is the object of a direct experience, but, since it is not always the case that direct experience is possible, opinion, as I have already said, ends to be the common cognitive state for people, replacing knowledge³⁷. Nevertheless, Bermudez,

³⁵ “Since I am telling the truth, I will provide my life so far as a trustworthy testimony; and of this testimony *you* are witnesses; you live with me and thus you know this”.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

³⁷ Cf. n. 9.

leaving every possible implication aside, focuses his attention mainly on the rhetorical arguments in the *Palamedes* and it is due to this methodological approach, I would say, that he fails to provide an account for the evident insistence by Gorgias in the text on the *epistemological* ground.

At this point, it could still be argued that even though Bermudez does not delve deep into the Gorgias' epistemological account – i.e., even though he does not draw a connection between this account and his philosophy of language – nonetheless he could be right in ascribing to Gorgias a coherentist account of truth: as I have highlighted, Bermudez' main concern is one of pure philosophy of language so it could be that it does not make a great difference whether the epistemological account is included or not. To put it more clearly, it could be argued that the reason why the *Palamedes*' argumentation proceeds counterfactually is, in the end, not relevant: what is relevant, for Bermudez's explanation, would be that, *for whatever reason*, the *Palamedes*' argumentation *does* proceed counterfactually aiming to show the logical inconsistency of Odysseus' accusation: from Bermudez's point of view, therefore, this observation could be enough to legitimately ascribe to Gorgias a specific philosophy of language that individuates "truth" as logical consistency and consequently "true speech" as the one that shows the logical impossibility of the accuser. Nonetheless, I think that the reason why *Palamedes*' argumentation is of this kind *is* actually relevant in the sense that, even if Bermudez could be right in describing the rhetorical argument, yet he misunderstood Gorgias' conception of truth, at least in this text. As I tried to show, even though it is evident that Palamedes speaks hypothetically, it is legitimate to say that he is forced to do so, not because he cannot express truly by means of λόγος what he did, on the contrary because he cannot express truly by means of λόγος what he actually *did not do*. It is in this sense that the epistemological connection between reality and words turns out to be fundamental: it is exactly because he fails to recognize the importance of the epistemological ground that Bermudez does not recognize as well that the problem for Palamedes is not avoiding to appeal to facts, but, on the contrary, the impossibility

of appealing to the absent fact. If this is the case, again, the realm of facts, far from being irrelevant, is the necessary starting point of truth and true speech.

Moreover, as already noted, Bermudez himself underlines the implications in *Hel 11-12* where Gorgias explains that it is due to lack of knowledge that opinion and false speeches arise, but Bermudez tries to explain it from a pragmatic point of view concluding that

in Gorgias' texts a speech that exposes the agent to practical errors – in other words, an opinion – counts as a false speech³⁸.

I would say that, even if it is true that Gorgias is *also* showing that a lack of knowledge can lead to practical errors, as maintained by Bermudez, again it could be suggested that an exhaustive account of Gorgias' conception of truth should consider also the epistemic implications that Gorgias himself seems to be committed to highlight.

In conclusion, we should quickly turn up to the latest issue: the fact that Palamedes is reminding to the juries of experiences and deeds they have witnessed, in order to prove that he is not that kind of man who could betray the Greeks, seems to imply, as I already mentioned, not only a conception of truth that exceeds that of coherence, but also the possibility of communicating the truth: Palamedes is speaking about things and events that actually happened *taking for granted that the juries understand both his words and the truth of his words*. Thus, this seems to be in contrast with what Gorgias asserted in the *Treatise*. This is how Bermudez resumes the refutation of the “mentalist account of meaning” in the third thesis:

two subjects cannot have the same perceptual experience or mental image of the given object (...); therefore, communication is impossible, since such sameness is one of its condition³⁹.

³⁸ Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 13.

³⁹ Bermudez, *ivi*, p. 5. As already explained (cf n. 3), Mourelatos and Bermudez individuate in the third thesis two distinct arguments: the first directed against

Since Bermudez commits himself to a holistic reading of Gorgias' texts, that, following Mourelatos, establishes the third thesis of the *Treatise* as the key set to enlighten the other texts, it is difficult to understand how these destructive claims concerning the impossibility of communication, (or at least of the true one), could be conciliated with the positive assumptions of the *Palamedes*. It seems, actually, that for the Gorgias of the *Palamedes* not only it is possible to speak about the same things, or the same mental images, but it is also possible speaking *truly* of them. Indeed, also the idea according to which the main problem in the *Palamedes* is finding a way for λόγος to show the truth without appealing to reality, is due to the same reasons: a) that both Bermudez' and Mourelatos' interpretations have their starting-point in the third thesis of the *Treatise* and b) that both Bermudez' and Mourelatos' interpretations do not account for the connection between the epistemology and the philosophy of language. Mourelatos solves the puzzle, as I said, simply by ignoring both the *Palamedes* and the suggestions in the *Helen*. Bermudez, on the contrary, shows to be partially aware of the possible implications of an epistemological reading of the texts and of the *Palamedes* in particular, but he fails to provide a conclusive explanation as he does not recognize that it is not so obvious that every claim of Gorgias could be perfectly explained in the light of the third thesis of the *Treatise*.

To conclude, the attempt in this paper has been to show that even if Mourelatos is right in interpreting the *Treatise* as a monumental *pars destruens* denying the capacity of λόγος to communicate truth whatsoever, nonetheless the suggestion that Gorgias is wholly embracing a behaviouristic account of meaning, far from figuring out all the puzzles, fails to provide an exhaustive

the "referential meaning" and the second against the "mentalist one". Incidentally, I would say that, regarding the latter, it is not so evident to me that the only possible rendering is that provided by Mourelatos and Bermudez, for it seems to fail to deal with the epistemological ground properly. Nonetheless, for the present purposes we can adopt their reading.

explanation of Gorgias' philosophy. Indeed, as I tried to show, this kind of reading does not deal successfully, actually it does not deal at all, with the gorgianic insistence on truth as something different from persuasiveness. Besides, the necessity of reconsidering some aspects of Gorgias' philosophy has been rightly highlighted by Bermudez who drew the attention on specific passages in Gorgias' texts that seem to imply a qualitative difference between the persuasiveness and the truth of λόγος and therefore that Gorgias did embrace some other notion of truth. This "other notion of truth" is defined by Bermudez, as I said, in terms of coherence or logical consistency so that the true speech is that which is able to show the logical impossibility of its opposite. It seems to me that this reading, assuming the irrelevance of the "realm of facts", fails to recognize that, in order to provide an exhaustive explanation of the conception of truth in Gorgias, it seems impossible to leave the epistemological ground aside: as I tried to show, the *Palamedes* argumentation, far from stating the independence of truth and true speech from the realm of facts, seems to point out precisely the contrary, namely that it is not possible to speak truly if there is no fact to appeal to.

It will be objected, I suspect, that this alternative reading of the *Palamedes* is, indeed, far from satisfying, in the sense that it leaves a lot of questions – questions regarding the link between the *Treatise* and the *Palamedes*, for example – unanswered: if it is true that Gorgias is concerned in the *Palamedes* with the impossibility of speaking of what-is-not and its problematic consequences, what should be thought of the third thesis of the *Treatise*? Are we forced to conclude that these two texts simply express contradictory positions? Is it possible to accept that Gorgias is just trying to confuse the reader and force her to strongly express doubt regarding the relationship between language and reality? Is it a satisfying answer? This is precisely the topic I am currently working on since, it seems to me, it surely deserves an answer.

In this paper I just wanted to draw attention on some doubts that can be legitimately advanced regarding the traditional modality of dealing firstly with the gorgianic philosophy of language and secondly, and mainly, with his epistemological account, which is

usually ignored by the scholars. My aim, then, has been simply to identify those unanswered questions in two of the most significant interpretations of Gorgias' philosophy (of language) – those provided by Mourelatos and Bermudez – in order to show that a deep comprehension of it really needs a deep comprehension of his epistemology as well.

Bibliography:

Ayer, A. J., *Language, truth and logic*, London, 1949, p. 68.

Bermudez, J., *Truth and Falsehood for Non-representationalist: Gorgias on the normativity of language*, in «Journal of ancient philosophy», 11 (2), 2017, pp. 1-21.

Mourelatos, A., *Gorgias on the function of language*, in «Philosophical Topics», 15 (2), 1987, pp. 135-170.

Stevenson, C., *Ethics and Language*, New Haven, 1945, p. 59