

**Select one argument from Gorgias' 'On What is Not' and discuss its interpretation and validity.**

To a certain extent, Gorgias, like Protagoras suggests an emphasis on relativism. We are all infected with perspective and none of us can see the totality of reality. Gorgias goes further even than Protagoras, and appears in his work, *On What Is Not*, to seriously question the possibility of us being able to formulate any views *at all* about what constitutes being.

His argument may be summarised in three propositions as follows;

*I. Nothing exists*

*II. If Anything does exist, it is incomprehensible (or unthinkable)*

*III. If anything is comprehensible, it is incommunicable.*

Although the above is a paraphrase of Gorgias, it does not distort his theses, which sound like a satire on certain schools of philosophy. We might even wonder whether he is serious at all, for there is certainly something of the Monty Python Faculty of Philosophy in the above summary. We may note the following opinions;

*"My view is that Gorgias did not believe any of the theses he argues for, and that the fallacies in some of his arguments are so blatant that he must have been aware of them. " (McKirahan; Philosophy Before Socrates)*

and

*"On the face of it, the piece starts off as a razor-sharp lampoon of the arguments of Parmenides and Melissus, aimed at destroying any confidence in the Eleatic arguments for the One or 'What Is', by showing that it was just as easy to prove the opposite conclusion: that nothing 'is'." (Klempner, Unit 15, 276)*

Gorgias was a Sophist, and therefore a well-practised rhetorician. In demonstrating his skill, he is famously alleged to have said "mention a subject.....", and then extemporise on that same subject. So there is something of the crowd-pleasing showman about Gorgias, a fact which might arouse our suspicions. However, lampoons can have purpose, and Gorgias was able to use

the language of Parmenides, Melissus and Zeno to devastating effect. Some of his conclusions may be fallacious, but that does not make his argument necessarily ineffective. In addition to his skills in lampooning Elea, Gorgias raised serious questions which stimulated thinking about the proper objects of thought, and the truth of these objects.

In what follows I will restrict myself to Gorgias' second proposition;

*"Next in order is to teach that even if something is, it is unknowable and inconceivable by humans."*

I think it is possible to paraphrase Gorgias thinking on this matter as follows;

- i. We can think of things that exist*
- ii. We can think of things that do not exist.*
- iii. The presence/absence of visual and auditory evidence does not guarantee that something does or does not exist.*
- iv. This means that there is no necessary connection between what is in our minds and what exists.*

To use an example quoted by Gorgias himself, it is clearly not the case that chariots riding in the sea exist. However, it is possible to think of such things. We can therefore clearly think about things which do not exist, which seems to deny the Eleatic principle that only what *is* can be objects of thought. Gorgias uses Eleatic logic to suggest that anything we think must *be*, which is clearly absurd. The arguments used may not always be without error, but we have to remember at all times that Gorgias is attempting to show that Elea's own arguments, can also be used to 'prove' the contrary of what they assert. As far as I can see, it is not possible to deny all of the conclusions Gorgias makes without the Eleatics conceding one or more of their propositions.

Gorgias, although he did not develop the ideas himself, began a process which eventually unravelled the puzzle about truth. Greek philosophers made no distinction between the "is" used as a statement of being, and the "is" used in predication. When we think of a thing, we must be something about that thing.

The process of discovering this took a long time. Plato was aware of it but did not develop a full blooded analysis.

The medieval scholastics developed the idea of "beings of reason" to make it possible for them to think of something in such a way as to hold it as a legitimate object of thought and yet be able to say that it is not.

What constitutes truth about things are not the terms in themselves, but what we think about them. Thus we can think of a chariot, but it makes no sense to speak of its truth or falsehood. Truth or falsehood belong to the ways in which we combine the terms with predicates. So to say "the chariot is racing in the sea" is making a statement which can have a truth value. We can distinguish the truth of "there are such things as chariots" from the falsity of "the chariot is riding in the sea" without getting into trouble.

Although these ideas of truth and language are still being developed, they provide sufficient information to see the fallacies in Gorgias' arguments.

So in assessing the validity of this part of Gorgias' trilemma, we should remember that he used an argument which was effective against the Eleatics in their own terms, and further, he anticipated some of the problems which were to be solved about legitimate objects of thought, and their truth values.