PATeRNS OF ARGUMENTATION IN GORGIAS*

BY

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Gorgias, according to Plato's *Phaedros* (267a), valued probabilities (εἰκότα) ahead of truth; in other words, Gorgias preferred probabilities to actual truth or—in a morally marked modification of this disclaimer—truth was practically neglected by him. To put it in Dodds' words he was the producer of "dazzling insincerities". An interesting version of this standard idea about Gorgias' argumentation is the one offered by Kerferd; commenting on *The Encomium of Helen* he says that Gorgias' "emphasis on truth" is "emphatic", because "deceit is only possible in relation to that which is actually true", which entails that truth in Gorgias' hands is nothing but a presupposition of effective deceit.1) This view has been challenged only very recently by Gagarin, who, instead of reading Plato's evaluation of early rhetoric, decided to read Gorgias' himself (and other early masters of rhetoric) and he concluded that what we have from Plato and some modern scholars is a distorted image of the so-called early rhetoric.2)

In this paper, following Gagarin's paradigm, I wish to shed some more light on Gorgias' argumentation; by attempting a classification of argumentative patterns employed by this Sophist, it will become more clear that arguments from probability is only one among several other patterns of reasoning used by him, and consequently that Plato singles out *this* argumentative pattern, because probabilities

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2) In his own words, "Plato's criticisms on this point reflect his own concern with the overriding primacy of an absolute standard of truth, which is tied to and validated by his Forms; for him anything less than absolute truth was no truth at all", Gagarin (n. 1), 56-57.

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can easily be regarded as opposed to factual truth. Moreover, I propose to show that Gorgias’ process of argumentation is more complicated than it is usually taken to be. The patterns I wish to examine seem to be relatively recurrent in Gorgias’ preserved texts (that is *The Encomium of Helen*, *The Defence of Palamedes*, and *On not Being*;³) I exclude the *Epitaphios* which should be considered as a longer fragment). They are the following: 1) arguments from probabilities, 2) arguments from antinomy, 3) ‘theorisation’ through examples, and finally 4) apagogic and ‘Russian doll’ argumentation.

1. *Arguments from probabilities*

The term argument from probabilities (εἰκός) means an argument which is not based on definitive factual reality; it is an argument the acceptability of which depends on its potential to reproduce facts on the grounds of common experience shared by humans. It is not necessary to go into details concerning the history of the probability arguments in Greek literature.⁴) It will suffice to mention the interesting case of the “reverse probability” argument (to use Gagarin’s words), attributed by Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1402a17-28) to Corax; in a conflict between a weak and a strong man the weak man can simply argue that he did not attack the strong man because he was not able to do so; this argument cannot be employed by the strong man who can instead use the reverse probability: if I had attacked the weak man the obvious suspect would have been myself, so I never attacked him.

As far as I know, the reverse probability is never used by Gorgias, although his *Palamedes* makes an ample use of εἰκότα;³) according

³) Unfortunately Gorgias’ original text has not been preserved; all the information we possess on its content is due to the accounts of the Anonymus author of the treatise *De Melisso Xenaphane Gorgia* (MXG) 5-6, 979a12-980b21, and that of Sextus Empiricus’ *Adversus mathematicos* 7,65-87.

⁴) Its origins are traditionally placed with Corax and Teisias, but it can be traced in early literature (see Gagarin (n. 1), 51, who maintains that “they did, however, develop a new form of this argument— . . . the ‘reverse probability’ argument”). On Corax and Teisias see S. Wilcox, *Corax and the Prolegomena*, *AJP* 64 (1943), 1-23; D. A. G. Hinks, *Teisias and Corax and the Invention of Rhetoric*, *CQ* 34 (1940), 61-69; and T. Cole, *Who Was Corax?*, ICS 16 (1991), 65-84.

⁵) The argument from probabilities in Gorgias has been discussed by I. Anastassiou, Ἡ Πιθανολόγηση ὡς Μέθοδος Ἀπόδειξης στὸ Γοργία, in K. I. Voudouris (ed.), Ἡ Ἀρχαία Σωφιστική (Athens 1982), 242-250.