Gorgias de Leontini :

Gorgias (en grec ancien Γοργίας / Gorgías) de Léontinoi (variantes : Léontini ou Léontium) est un philosophe présocratique, né à Léontinoi en Sicile (vers 480 av. J.-C.). Contemporain de Socrate, il apparaît dans plusieurs dialogues de Platon.

Sophiste, il enseignait l'art de persuader. Il vécut 108 ans. **(v. 483–375 av. J.-C.)**

On situe[8] la naissance de Gorgias un peu avant la 75e olympiade, c'est-à-dire vers 480 av.J.-C. Son père, Charmantide de Léontinoi, était orateur[9]. Il avait une sœur, dont on sait seulement qu'elle était la femme d'un nommé Déicrate, et un frère médecin, Hérodicos[9,10] qu'il ne faut pas confondre avec Hérodicos de Selymbrie.

Le terme *« sophiste »* dérive du grec *« sophia »* (sagesse) et signifiait à l'origine *« sage »*

: Grand maître de la rhétorique (l'art du discours). Pour lui, la persuasion est l'outil démocratique suprême. Dans une démocratie où les décisions se prennent à l'Assemblée (*Ecclésia*) ou devant les tribunaux populaires, Gorgias enseigne aux citoyens comment faire triompher une idée par la seule puissance de la parole

Gorgias de Leontini

est une figure charnière de l'Antiquité grecque, dont l'œuvre et l'enseignement de la rhétorique ont profondément structuré la pratique démocratique athénienne du Ve siècle av. J.-C. En théorisant le pouvoir de la parole (*logos*) et de la persuasion (*peitho*), il a fourni aux citoyens les outils nécessaires pour participer activement à la vie publique de la cité.

---

1. Origines et l'ambassade de 427 av. J.-C. : Le choc de la parole

Gorgias naît à Leontini, une colonie grecque de Sicile. Il grandit dans un contexte politique agité où la chute des tyrans siciliens donne naissance aux premiers tribunaux populaires, exigeant des citoyens qu'ils sachent défendre leurs biens par la parole. Élève de l'homme politique et philosophe Empédocle, Gorgias y développe une maîtrise absolue du langage.

En **427 av. J.-C,** sa cité natale étant menacée par Syracuse, Gorgias est envoyé à Athènes comme ambassadeur pour réclamer une aide militaire. Lorsqu'il prend la parole devant l'Assemblée démocratique (*Ecclésia*), son style poétique, rythmé et percutant fascine les Athéniens. Cette intervention marque les esprits et change la

donne politique : Athènes vote l'envoi d'une flotte, et Gorgias décide de s'installer en Grèce continentale.

2. Le maître itinérant : Démocratiser l'accès au pouvoir

Devenu une célébrité, Gorgias voyage de cité en cité, notamment à Athènes, Olympie et Delphes. Il gagne des fortunes considérables en devenant enseignant itinérant (sophiste).

Son importance pour la démocratie :

Avant l'arrivée des sophistes, le pouvoir politique et l'art de parler étaient considérés comme des dons innés, réservés à l'aristocratie de sang. Gorgias renverse ce paradigme en affirmant que **la rhétorique est une technique (*techn*è) qui s'apprend**. En monnayant ses leçons à quiconque veut payer, il brise le monopole de l'élite. N'importe quel citoyen ordinaire, enrichi par le commerce ou artisan, peut désormais acquérir les outils linguistiques pour s'imposer à l'Assemblée ou se défendre efficacement lors d'un procès populaire face à un noble.

3. Le théoricien du *Logos* : La parole comme outil de décision commune

Gorgias développe une philosophie radicale (exposée dans son traité *Du non-être*). Il soutient que la vérité absolue n'existe pas, ou que si elle existe, elle est impossible à communiquer fidèlement.

Son importance pour la démocratie :

Cette vision philosophique est le socle même du débat démocratique. Si la vérité politique absolue n'existe pas (contrairement à ce que pensera Platon), alors les lois et les décisions de la cité ne peuvent découler que d'un **consensus provisoire**. C'est par la confrontation des discours à l'Assemblée, par la persuasion (*peitho*), que les citoyens décident ensemble de ce qui est juste ou utile à un instant T. Pour Gorgias, la parole est un « grand souverain » qui remplace la violence physique par la négociation pacifique.

4. Fin de vie et postérité : Entre triomphe et critiques

Gorgias meurt à un âge très avancé (plus de 100 ans) en Thessalie, ayant conservé toutes ses facultés intellectuelles.

Bien que Platon ait dressé de lui un portrait critique (l'accusant de privilégier l'apparence de la vérité sur la justice), Gorgias reste le penseur qui a fourni à la démocratie athénienne son moteur technique. Sans la rhétorique de Gorgias pour structurer les débats à l'Assemblée et les plaidoiries dans les tribunaux, le

fonctionnement quotidien de la démocratie directe du Ve siècle avant J.-C. n'aurait pas pu exister.



https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gorgias

https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/gorgias/

Anne Yver de la Bruchollerie

Gorgias of Leontini: Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Artistic Prose

> Persuasion and Artistic Prose in Ancient Greece

Engraving of Gorgias of Leontini / Public Domain

Gorgias of Leontini transformed Greek rhetoric through ornate prose, paradox, and performance, showing how language could persuade, enchant, defend, and unsettle accepted ideas.

Introduction

Gorgias (c. 483 – 375 B.C.E.), was one of the most important Greek sophists of the fifth century B.C.E., a philosopher, rhetorician, and a gifted writer of artistic prose. Originally a native of Leontini in Sicily, he was sent to Athens in 427 B.C.E. at the head of an embassy to ask for Athenian protection against the aggression of neighboring Syracuse. He subsequently settled in Athens, and supported himself by the practice of oratory and by teaching rhetoric. He died at Larissa in Thessaly.

A brilliant rhetorician, Gorgias also contributed to the diffusion of the Attic dialect as the language of literary prose. Several of his works remain in existence. Two of his performatory speeches, *Encomium* and *Palamedes*, illustrate the principles he used to make a weak argument strong, and *On the Nature of Things* uses Eleatic arguments to reach a number of nihilistic conclusions. Gorgias appeared in Plato's dialogues as a moral relativist and one of dialogues was named after him.

Life

Veduta di Lentini (Italy) / Photo by Licia Castoro, Wikimedia Commons

Gorgias was a native of Leontini, a Greek colony in Sicily, which is often called the home of Greek rhetoric. Very little is known of his life before he emigrated to Athens, except that he had a father named Charmantides and two siblings; a brother named Herodicus and a sister who dedicated a statue to Gorgias in Delphi (McComiskey

2001, 6-7). In 427 B.C.E. Gorgias was sent to Athens as an ambassador to ask Athenian protection from the aggressive Syracusans (Leitch, et al 29). Gorgias' impressive oratorical style was said to have brought many of the leading politicians and intellectuals under his influence (Wardy 1996, 6). His mission completed, Gorgias settled in Athens. He was a student of Empedocles, and made a successful living by practicing oratory and teaching rhetoric to students, including Pericles, Critias, Menos, Isocrates and possibly Aspasia.

Philostratus *(Lives of the Sophists I 9, I)* recounts that Gorgias began the practice of extemporaneous oratory, and that he would say to his audiences, "'suggest a subject' …he was the first to proclaim himself willing to take the chance, showing apparently that he knew everything and would trust the moment to speak on any subject." He spoke at Panhellenic festivals, becoming well-known in Olympia and Delphi. His existing works include the *Encomium of Helen*, the *Defense of Palamedes*, *On Non-Existence* (or *On Nature*), and *Epitaphios*. Gorgias is reputed to have lived to be over one hundred years old. He died at Larissa in Thessaly in 375 B.C.E.

Thought and Works

Gorgias has been credited with introducing rhetorical innovations involving structure and ornamentation; and *paradoxologia*, the idea of paradoxical thought and paradoxical expression, to Greece, and is sometimes called the 'father of

sophistry

’ (Wardy 1996, 6). Gorgias is also known for contributing to the diffusion of the Attic dialect as the language of literary prose.

Study Philosophy

Gorgias’ surviving rhetorical works (*Encomium of Helen, Defense of Palamedes, On Non-Existence*, and *Epitaphios*) exist in the form of rhetorical exercises that were used to teach his pupils and demonstrate various principles of rhetorical practice. Although some scholars claim that each work presents opposing statements, the four texts can be read as interrelated contributions to the up-and-coming theory and art *(technê)* of rhetoric (McComiskey 2001, 32). Of Gorgias’ surviving works, only the *Encomium* and the *Defense* are believed to exist in their entirety. Gorgias’ *Epitaphios* is probably only a fragment of a significantly larger funeral oration, and *On Non-Existence* appears in summary form. These works are each part of the Diels-Kranz collection; although academics consider this source reliable, many of the works included in it are fragmentary and corrupt.

Gorgias’ writings are both rhetorical and performative, exhibiting his ability to make a weak argument appear strong. Each of his works defends positions that are unpopular, paradoxical and even absurd. The performative nature of Gorgias’ writings is exemplified by the way that he playfully approaches each argument with stylistic devices such as parody, artificial figuration and theatricality (Consigny 2001, 149). Gorgias’ style of argumentation can be described as poetics-minus-the-meter *(poiêsis-minus-meter)*. Gorgias argues that persuasive words have power *(dunamis)*

equivalent to that of the gods and as strong as physical force. In the *Encomium*, Gorgias likens the effect of speech on the soul to the effect of drugs on the body:

Browse Art Prints

“Just as different drugs draw forth different humors from the body – some putting a stop to disease, others to life – so too with words: some cause pain, others joy, some strike fear, some stir the audience to boldness, some benumb and bewitch the soul with evil persuasion” (Gorgias, 32).

Gorgias also believed that his “magical incantations” could bring healing to the human psyche by controlling powerful emotions. He paid particular attention to the sounds of words, which, like poetry, could captivate audiences. His florid, rhyming style seemed to hypnotize his audiences (Herrick, 42). Gorgias’ legendary powers of persuasion would suggest that he had a somewhat supernatural influence over his audience and their emotions. Gorgias thought that an orator had an ethical obligation to avoid deception, and that it was “…the duty of the same man both to declare what he should rightly and to refute what has been spoken falsely.”

Learn Sociology

Rhetoric and Oratory

Encomium of Helen



Hamilton, Gavin. *The Abduction of Helen*. 1784. Palazzo Braschi, Rome. / Web Gallery of Art, Wikimedia Commons

Of the three divisions of rhetoric discussed by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* (forensic, deliberative, and epideictic), the *Encomium* can be classified as an epideictic speech, expressing praise for Helen of Troy and absolving her of responsibility for causing the Trojan

War

. The popular and literary tradition of the time blamed Helen of Troy for instigating the Trojan War by leaving her husband and eloping with Paris.

Study Philosophy

The *Encomium* opens with Gorgias explaining that “a man, woman, speech, deed, city or action that is worthy of praise should be honored with acclaim, but the unworthy should be branded with blame” (Gorgias, 30). Gorgias discusses the possible reasons for Helen’s journey to Troy. He explains that Helen could have been persuaded in one of four ways:

by the gods, by physical force, by love, or by speech *(logos)*. If it was the plan of the gods that caused Helen to depart for Troy, Gorgias argues that those who blame her should face blame themselves, “for a human’s anticipation cannot restrain a god’s inclination” (Gorgias, 31).

Gorgias explains that, by nature, the weak are ruled by the strong, and, since the gods are stronger than humans in all respects, Helen should not be held responsible. If Helen was abducted by force, it is clear that the aggressor committed a crime and should be blamed for the consequences. And if Helen was persuaded by love, she should also be absolved because

Browse Art Prints

“…if love is a god, with the divine power of the gods, how could a weaker person refuse and reject him? But if love is a human sickness and a mental weakness, it must not be blamed as mistake, but claimed as misfortune” (Gorgias, 32).

Finally, if it was speech that persuaded Helen, she should not be blamed, because speech *(logos)* is a powerful force that can persuade people to do things against their own interests. In the final section of the *Encomium* he writes:

"I wished to write this speech for Helen's encomium and my amusement" (Gorgias, 33).

Defense of Palamedes

Defense of Palamedes is another performative speech in which Gorgias shows how plausible arguments can cause an audience to doubt conventional truths. The speech is presented as the legal self-defense, in a trial setting, of Palamedes, a figure from Greek mythology credited with the invention of the alphabet, written laws, numbers, armor, and measures and weights. Odysseus feigned madness in order to avoid going to Troy with Agamemnon and Menelaus to bring Helen back to Sparta. Palamedes tricked Odysseus into revealing that he was only pretending to be mad, and Odysseus never forgave him. Later Odysseus accused him of cooperating with Troy, and Palamedes was condemned and executed.

Study Philosophy

Throughout the speech, Gorgias composes logical *(logos)* and ethical *(ethos)* arguments from possibility, a type of argument that Aristotle later defined as forensic *topoi*. Palamedes rejects the use of emotional arguments *(pathos)*, saying "among you, who are the foremost of the Greeks…there is no need to persuade such ones

as you with the aid of friends and sorrowful prayers and lamentations." Gorgias posits that in order to prove that treason was committed, we must first establish that a set of possible events took place. In the *Defense* these events are: communication between Palamedes and the enemy, exchange of a pledge in the form of hostages or money, and not being detected by guards or citizens. In his defense, Palamedes claims that a small sum of money would not have warranted such a large undertaking and reasons that a large sum of money, if indeed such a transaction had been made, would have required the aid of many confederates to transport it.

Palamedes reasons further that such an exchange could neither have occurred at night because the guards would be watching, nor in the day because everyone would be able to see. Palamedes continues, explaining that if the aforementioned conditions were, in fact, arranged then action would need to follow. Such action would take place either with or without confederates. If these confederates were free men then they were free to disclose any information they desired, and had not done so. If they were slaves there was a risk of them voluntarily accusing to earn freedom, or accusing by force when tortured. Slaves, Palamedes says, are untrustworthy. Palamedes goes on to list a variety of possible motives for committing treason, such as status, wealth, honor or security, all of which he proves groundless.

On Nature, or the Non-Existent

The original work has been lost, and there are two existing transcripts which differ slightly from each other, one preserved by the philosopher Sextus Empirica in *Against the Professors*, and another by the author (possible Aristotle or Theophrastus) of *De Melissus, Xenophane, Gorgia*. There is some disagreement among scholars as to whether this was intended as a serious

philosophical

work, or as a caricature of the metaphysical arguments of Parmenides.

The subject of *On Nature* is ontological (about the nature of being), and it also discusses epistemology and language. It is also a rhetorical exercise that showcases Gorgias' oratorical skill. He attacks the idea that if we examine our world, we must conclude that things exist, and demonstrates that 1) Nothing exists; 2) Even if existence exists, it cannot be known; and 3) Even if it could be known, it cannot be communicated.

Learn Sociology

He does not completely deny the possibility of communication altogether; rather it is *logos* that is communicated to others (Jarratt 1991, 55), because those things that the human mind can know, believe, and communicate are merely mental representations created by *logos*. But the relationship between *logos* and reality presents a problem because *logos*, existing only within the realm of human speech and thought, is different from the reality it represents (Walker 2000, 27).

This argument has led some to label Gorgias as either an ontological skeptic or a nihilist (one who believes nothing exists, or that the world is incomprehensible, and that the concept of truth is fictitious). But it can also be interpreted as an assertion that it is *logos* and *logos* alone which is the proper object of our inquiries, since it is

the only thing we can really know. *On Nature* is sometimes seen as a refutation of pre-Socratic essentialist

philosophy

Study Philosophy

Critics

Roman copy of a portrait bust of Plato by Silanion for the Academia in Athens (c. 370 BC) / Capitoline Museums, Wikimedia Commons

Gorgias and other sophists were often criticized for placing more emphasis on rhetoric and oratory than on a legitimate quest for truth, and for tearing down arguments rather than building a system of thought which could make a positive contribution to the improvement of society. Oratory played an important role in the Athenian democracy, where the ability to persuade an audience meant

political

influence and power. Teachers of rhetoric made a living by giving instruction on how to argue successfully.

Study Philosophy

Plato ridiculed Gorgias and his rhetorical beliefs in a well-known dialogue, *Gorgias*. Plato distinguished between philosophy and rhetoric, characterizing Gorgias as an orator who entertained his audience with eloquent words and who believed that it is unnecessary to learn the truth about actual matters when one has discovered the art of persuasion (Consigny 2001, 36). In the dialogue, Gorgias responded to one of Socrates' statements as follows:

"Rhetoric is the only area of expertise you need to learn. You can ignore all the rest and still get the better of the professionals!" (Plato, 24).

Plato argued that Gorgias was not a true philosopher. Gorgias described philosophy as a type of seduction, but did offer some respect to philosophers (Consigny 2001, 37). Plato answered Gorgias by reaffirming the Parmenidean ideal that being is the basic substance and reality of which all things are composed, insisting that it is a philosophical dialectic distinct from and superior to rhetoric (Wardy 1996, 52).

Aristotle also criticized Gorgias, calling him a mere sophist whose primary goal was to make money by appearing wise and clever, and faulting his excessive use of compound words and overly poetic language.

Browse Art Prints

TRAD

Gorgias (vers 483 – 375 avant notre ère) fut l'un des sophistes grecs les plus importants du Ve siècle avant notre ère, philosophe, rhéteur et écrivain doué pour la prose artistique. Originaire de Leontini en Sicile, il fut envoyé à Athènes en 427 avant notre ère à la tête d'une ambassade chargée de demander la protection athénienne contre l'agression de la ville voisine de Syracuse. Il s'installa par la suite à Athènes, où il gagna sa vie en exerçant le métier d'orateur et en enseignant la rhétorique. Il mourut à Larissa, en Thessalie.
Brillant rhéteur, Gorgias a également contribué à la diffusion du dialecte attique en tant que langue de la prose littéraire. Plusieurs de ses œuvres ont survécu. Deux de ses discours de scène, *Encomium* et *Palamède*, illustrent les principes qu'il utilisait pour renforcer un argument faible, tandis que *Sur la nature des choses* recourt à des arguments éléatiques pour aboutir à un certain nombre de conclusions nihilistes. Gorgias apparaît dans les dialogues de Platon comme un relativiste moral, et l'un de ces dialogues porte son nom.

VIE

Gorgias était originaire de Leontini, une colonie grecque de Sicile, souvent considérée comme le berceau de la rhétorique grecque. On sait très peu de choses sur sa vie avant son émigration à Athènes, si ce n'est qu'il avait un père nommé Charmantides et deux frères et sœurs : un frère nommé Hérodique et une sœur qui lui dédia une statue à Delphes. En 427 avant notre ère, Gorgias fut envoyé à Athènes en tant qu'ambassadeur pour demander la protection des Athéniens contre les Syracusains belliqueux. On dit que l'impressionnant style oratoire de Gorgias aurait placé sous son influence de nombreux hommes politiques et intellectuels de premier plan. Sa mission accomplie, Gorgias s'installa à Athènes. Élève d'Empédocle, il gagnait bien sa vie en exerçant l'art oratoire et en enseignant la rhétorique à des étudiants, parmi lesquels Périclès, Critias, Ménos, Isocrate et peut-être Aspasie. Philostrate (Vies des sophistes I 9, I) rapporte que Gorgias fut le premier à pratiquer l'art de l'improvisation oratoire, et qu'il disait à son public : « "Suggérez-moi un sujet"… il était le premier à se déclarer prêt à relever le défi, montrant ainsi, apparemment, qu'il savait tout et qu'il se fiait à l'instant présent pour s'exprimer sur n'importe quel sujet. » Il prenait la parole lors des fêtes panhelléniques, ce qui lui valut une grande notoriété à Olympie et à Delphes. Parmi ses œuvres qui nous sont parvenues, on trouve l'Éloge d'Hélène, la Défense de Palamède, Sur « Sur la non-existence » (ou « Sur la nature ») et « Épitaphios ». On dit que Gorgias aurait vécu plus de cent ans. Il est mort à Larissa, en Thessalie, en 375 avant notre ère.

Gravure représentant Gorgias de Leontini



https://brewminate.com/gorgias-of-ancient-greece-an-orator-with-artistic-prose/