

## Chapter 16

# Gorgias on Thought and its Objects\*

Victor Caston

*Und es ist kein Geschwätz, wie man sonst wohl glaubt; seine Dialektik ist objektiv.*  
– Hegel, 1833, p. 37

Gorgias' *On Not Being* is the Charybdis of Presocratic philosophy. If taken at face value, it undermines the foundations of philosophy and life itself, by arguing, first, that there isn't anything; second, that even if there were something, it could not be known; third, that even if something could be known, no one could inform anyone else of it. Yet there is at least one thing, a treatise, that contains demonstrations for various conclusions, written in order to inform us, thus undercutting all three claims. How are we to construe a text charitably whose arguments are so obviously self-refuting in this way?

This question alone makes it implausible to think that Gorgias endorses a particularly dark form of nihilism, the result (as some would have it) of philosophical despair and world-weariness.<sup>1</sup> Gorgias would have to be not merely disconsolate, but quite dull-witted, to have missed the conflict between his presentation and its content. Similar considerations put in doubt any attempt to take Gorgias as a kind of relativist.<sup>2</sup> The self-undermining character of

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\* It is a special pleasure to dedicate this essay to Alex Mourelatos, who has been a model teacher, a caring mentor, and a true friend. This piece is a very small return for all that I have gained and learned from him.

<sup>1</sup> The classic statement of this position can be found in Diels, 1884, who argues that after a period of pursuing Empedoclean physics, Gorgias entered a 'period of doubt, or rather despair,' during which Eleatic dialectic led him to reject natural science and write *On Not Being*; but unable to sustain this 'barren Nihilism,' in which 'the world of being had dissolved into empty appearance,' he turned to rhetoric, in an effort to turn 'appearance into reality in the beliefs of his audience' (pp. 371–3; cf. 368). This view occurs in other authors as well: Grant, 1866, p. 95; Windelband, 1888, p. 71 (though see n. 7 below); Süß, 1910, pp. 56–7; Huizinga, 1944, p. 245; Capelle, 1953, p. 24 (though see n. 14 below). A modified version of this position can be found in Praechter (in Ueberweg, 1920), who argues that the 'nihilism' of the first part of *On Not Being* is a 'paradoxical extension and trumping of the scepticism' of the second and third parts, whose conclusions Gorgias is supposed to have endorsed as his own (pp. 134–6). Newiger, 1979, argues that the demonstrated conclusions of the treatise *are* nihilistic, but that the underlying conviction is not, reflecting instead a 'sound' common sense.

<sup>2</sup> The clearest statement of this interpretation can be found in Calogero, 1932, pp. 205–7, 211, 215–17, 219–21; but see also Lattanzi, 1932, pp. 289–90; von Fritz, 1946, p. 32; Dupréel, 1948, pp. 64, 68, 74; Guthrie, 1962–81, pp. 272–3; Newiger, 1973, pp. 157–8 (cf. 138–40); Newiger, 1979, p. 58; Mansfeld, 1985, pp. 104–6; Pepe (1985), esp. pp. 503–4; Zeppi (1985), *passim*; Mourelatos, 1987, p. 164 n. 2; Mansfeld, 1988, pp. 224, 226. Cassin approaches this view, insofar as she takes the treatise to argue for an 'indifference' between all propositions: none is any less 'true,' and so not intrinsically preferable, than any other, beyond being of what appears to be the case at a given moment (1980, pp. 69, 91–4, 526–7).

Zeller should perhaps also be grouped here, even though he describes Gorgias as a 'sceptic,' since on Zeller's view 'scepticism' involves the denial of any objective truth, a position he claims Gorgias shares with Protagoras (see esp. 1919–23, vol. 1.2, p. 1368) – a view that goes back to Grote, who takes Gorgias to reject only the 'ultra-phænomenal existence' of things (1849–56, pp. 503–4), and to Grant (1866, pp.

the text implies that it could serve, at best, only as an indirect argument for relativism, with Gorgias playing Zeno, as it were, to Protagoras' Parmenides. But it would have to be very indirect, as a simple *reductio ad absurdum* is out of the question: there is a considerable gap between a relativist position and the mere negation of Gorgias' premises.<sup>3</sup> For the same reason, *On Not Being* could not establish any of the other positive positions that have been ascribed to it, whether it be radical empiricism,<sup>4</sup> 'tragic' existentialism,<sup>5</sup> or some form of antirealism.<sup>6</sup> It might be tempting, then, not to take the treatise seriously at all, but rather as a kind of elaborate joke or spoof<sup>7</sup> – tempting, at any rate, until about the fourth or fifth

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97–8), who adopts a more moderate, 'Kantian' form of this position. This emphasis on an exclusively 'phenomenal' focus easily lends itself to subjectivist and idealist interpretations: see n. 31 below.

One difficulty with this line of interpretation is that it generally operates with an imprecise, and sometimes confused, conception of relativism. (For a salutary corrective to this tendency, see the excellent and thorough examination in Bett, 1989.) But the greater stumbling block by far is that Protagoras *rejects* the possibility of error, which puts him into *direct conflict* with Gorgias – something already noticed by Levi, 1941, pp. 184–5 (= Levi, 1966, p. 232), and exploited by Di Benedetto, 1955. See below pp. 216–17.

<sup>3</sup> Just such an indirect argument is attempted by Mansfeld – see n. 41 below.

<sup>4</sup> Newiger, for example, compares Gorgias' position in Part III with Locke's affirmation that '*nihil est in intellectu quod non fuerit in sensu*' (1973, pp. 175–6, 180; 1979, pp. 58–9); even in Part II, where the possibility of knowledge is denied, Gorgias is supposed to have given sense experience paramount importance, resting his entire argument on the authority of its claims (1973, pp. 137–40; 1979, pp. 56–8). Similarly, Loenen, 1959, pp. 193, 195, 201, 203. Montano, 1985, argues that Gorgias' treatise is aimed at showing the bankruptcy of reason divorced from immediate sense experience, which is supposed to provide the ultimate standard.

<sup>5</sup> Untersteiner, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 151–318.

<sup>6</sup> This seems to be the thrust of Graeser, 1983, p. 41. Rosenmeyer may be thinking along similar lines, when he claims that for Gorgias speech 'does not distort reality, for it has *no measurable relationship* to it' (1955, pp. 231–2; emphasis mine).

<sup>7</sup> The most influential statement of this position can be found in H. Gomperz, 1912: 'there is only one thing one must not do ... one must not take the subject matter of these *παίγνια* "seriously"' (p. 28), and again, 'Gorgias' "philosophical nihilism" should be struck from the history of philosophy. His humorous speech on nature has its place in the history of rhetoric' (p. 35; Segal, 1962, p. 100, mistakenly characterizes this quotation as *endorsing* the view that Gorgias was a philosophical nihilist). But essentially the same position occurs earlier as well: Windelband considers *On Not Being* a 'grotesque farce' not to be taken seriously at all (1892, p. 69; cf. 1888, pp. 71–2); the Oxford pragmatist, F. C. S. Schiller, thinks it 'highly probable' that the essay was 'not a prosaic account of his own deepest convictions, but intended *merely* as an annihilating skit upon Eleatic metaphysics' (1908, p. 520; emphasis mine).

After Gomperz, this thesis is found quite widely. Maier, for example, holds that it is '*nothing more and nothing less* than a parody on eleatic dialectic (1913, p. 223; emphasis mine), a view stated even more strongly in Reinhardt's often quoted remark: 'Even the theory of cognition that is taken up and strongly caricatured, however important its content may be to us still today, should not obscure the fact that *the whole thing* is a farce. The Eleatics had outlived themselves, and in vibrant Sicily one ridiculed them' (1959, p. 39; emphasis mine). Praechter argues (in Ueberweg, 1920) that talk of earnestness has as little place as talk of jokes; like all Greek philosophical discussion, it has its origin 'in a people that delight in disputes' and in the competitive nature of eristic debate (p. 136). Although Robinson denies that it is a joke or merely a rhetorical exercise, he still derogates it as a 'very clever pastiche of "Eleatic logic"' (1973, p. 59). Huizinga similarly claims (1944, p. 245; cf. 238) *On Not Being* should be declared 'ein Spiel' just as much as the *Helen*. The view continues to find advocates today: Martin Ostwald, for example, has suggested to me (in conversation) that taking Gorgias seriously would be comparable to taking Danny Kaye seriously.

For criticisms of the details of Gomperz' interpretation, see Nestle, 1922 and his additions to Zeller, 1919–23, vol. 1.2, pp. 1367–8 n. 2.

argument, when the fun starts to wear off and one begins to worry about the Greeks' sense of humor.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, *On Not Being* is nothing if not ironic: Gorgias plainly uses Eleatic method to unravel Eleatic conclusions. But it hardly follows that it is *merely* a send-up of Eleatic philosophy, any more than the *Encomium of Helen* is merely 'amusement' (παίγνιον) or merely a display of rhetorical prowess.<sup>9</sup> The *Encomium* is no doubt all of that. But it is *also* a serious challenge to certain notions of agency and responsibility. It takes no great effort to see *that* his defense of Helen fails. The lasting and more important challenge is to find out *why* it fails. His arguments typically rest on assumptions that we ourselves share; and so to avoid his *reductio*, we may be forced to revise our beliefs considerably.

*On Not Being* poses a similar challenge for assumptions about the connections between being, mind, and language. Its evident irony only makes it more of an affront: it is something each of us *should* be able to answer and so something we cannot afford to brush off lightly.<sup>10</sup> But then Gorgias need not be advocating a positive position in offering these arguments.<sup>11</sup> Like later sceptics, he may be trying to do other things with arguments than just play them straight *in propria persona*. His arguments may be designed instead to engage certain views, by showing how they lead to absurdity and thus undermining their presuppositions.<sup>12</sup> Such an approach is not limited to the aims typically ascribed to Gorgias, moreover. He needn't have been attempting, for example, to undermine belief globally, by staging a kind of pyrrhonism *avant la lettre*,<sup>13</sup> or to set up a cynical *Gegenphilosophie*, revealing philosophical method to be a dead end;<sup>14</sup> or indeed even

<sup>8</sup> As both Bröcker (1958, p. 427) and Kerferd (1955/56, p. 3) aptly observe, *On Not Being* is not any more humorous than Plato's *Parmenides* (cf. *πραγματειώδη παιδιὰν παίζειν*, 137b).

<sup>9</sup> There is no evidence I know of to show that Gorgias' aim was *exclusively* satiric or epideictic, despite Gomperz' claim to the contrary. Gomperz claims that at the end of the *Encomium* 'the author expressly states that the whole text is *nothing but* an amusement' (*nichts als ein Spiel*, 1912, p. 25; emphasis mine), an interpretation he traces back to Isocrates (*Hel.* 3 f.), and which can be found in most of the authors cited above in n. 7. In fact, Gorgias lists several aims at the end of the *Encomium*: to rid us of unjust blame and ignorant opinion, by writing an encomium of Helen and an amusement for himself (the last two clauses linked by μέν and δέ). Similar comments would hold as well for Bux' claim that *On Not Being* is *nothing more* than a school exercise, 'an exemplary solution of an ordinary Eleatic practice topic' (1941, p. 403).

One of the few authors to recognize that parody does not preclude a more serious aim is Calogero, 1932, who characterizes Gorgias' aim as *both* ironic *and* polemical throughout; cf. also Dupréel, 1948, p. 72 and Guthrie, 1962–81, pp. 194–5. Grieder, who describes *On Not Being* as a 'rhetorical showpiece,' also doubts that it was meant *only* as a joke or a farce (1962, p. 44). Yet he still seems to think its point is the 'destruction of the philosophical tradition' and philosophical discourse more generally (p. 49); see n. 14 below. Others have raised doubts as to whether παίγνιον here can signify a 'joke': see Gigon, 1936, pp. 190f.; Sicking, 1964, p. 225; Newiger, 1973, p. 185, n. 20.

<sup>10</sup> To cite Gorgias himself: 'One should demolish the seriousness of one's opponents with laughter and their laughter with seriousness' (B 12).

<sup>11</sup> *Contra* Robinson, 1973, p. 54. As Bröcker rightly notes (1965, p. 115): 'surely Gorgias does not wish to convince the reader, whom he takes to be nonexistent, of his nonexistence. The treatise is polemical.'

<sup>12</sup> The *ad hominem* character of the premises is sometimes overlooked: Gomperz, 1912, pp. 23–4 n. 29; Nestle, 1922, p. 557 n. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Mansfeld, 1988, for example, emphasizes that the author of the *MXG* – himself a later Pyrrhonist, according to Mansfeld (p. 227) – does not critique most of Gorgias' arguments, as he does other arguments in the treatise, because, Mansfeld suggests, Gorgias' arguments already lend themselves quite naturally to Pyrrhonist ends (pp. 223–6).

<sup>14</sup> The phrase is Sicking's (1964, p. 405), who argues that *On Not Being* is meant to demonstrate the bankruptcy of philosophical method in general, by showing that it can lead to *any* result, no matter how absurd; consequently, none of the arguments is to be taken seriously at all (pp. 402–5). Such a view was put

to conduct a polemic against a specific thinker's views.<sup>15</sup> His arguments might equally well have been intended constructively, as a way of challenging his readers to come up with a more adequate solution to the problems in question. For the moment, it doesn't much matter. The key point is that there isn't any difficulty in appreciating Gorgias' arguments, once we see them *dialectically* – once, that is, we stop thinking that the only way to be serious is to be dogmatic.

This, to my mind, has been the greatest advance in the study of Gorgias over the last century and the only one that has any hope of allowing him a substantive contribution to the history of philosophy. A. P. D. Mourelatos offers us a paradigm of this approach in his article 'Gorgias on the function of language' (1987), a case study of Part III of *On Not Being*, whose clarity and sound philosophical judgment stand out in a very dark area of scholarship.<sup>16</sup> (At times the secondary literature can be harder to understand than Gorgias himself.) My aim is to continue Mourelatos' project, by attempting a dialectical interpretation of Part II of *On Not Being*, concerning the relation between the mind and reality. Part I, the most difficult and recalcitrant section, will have to await someone better equipped to handle its subtleties.

## The Main Conclusion of Part II

Gorgias' arguments are reported in two quite different forms by Sextus Empiricus and the author of the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise, *On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias* (henceforth, *MXG*). The differences between the two versions of Part II are significant. Sextus includes at least one argument not found in the *MXG*. But even those which have a parallel differ in important respects, not merely as regards the nature of the inferences, but the conclusions as well. It is imperative, therefore, not to run the two versions together, but to evaluate the possibilities each text offers on its own.

Both agree on the main conclusion of Part II. There are only slight differences in wording and in the location:<sup>17</sup>

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forward even earlier by Windelband, 1892, p. 69 and Levi, 1941, p. 185 (= Levi, 1966, pp. 232–3); variants of the view can also be found in Grieder, 1962, p. 49 and Segal, 1962, p. 99; and it is later endorsed by Lesky, 1971, p. 506. Others see it as an opposition not so much to philosophy in general, but to philosophy which is abstract and rationalistic, in particular metaphysics: for example, Migliori, 1973, pp. 88, 90 (cf. p. 18); Montoneri, 1985. Nestle offers a different compromise: though he views the work as a rejection of philosophy (1922, pp. 559–60; cf. 1942, p. 310), he thinks some of the arguments, especially in Part III, must be taken seriously (1922, p. 554). A similar position can be found in Capelle, 1935, pp. 343–4, although he later accuses Gorgias of 'nihilism' (1953, p. 24). The most radical version of this approach can be found in Cassin, 1980, who argues that the work demonstrates how ontology collapses in on itself, leaving nothing but the 'autonomy of pure discourse,' a practice independent of all pretensions to truth and other grounds for preferring one statement to another: see esp. pp. 57–70, 98–103, 531–2, 535, 539.

<sup>15</sup> Calogero, 1932, is the clearest example of this sort of approach. But the view that Gorgias' treatise is a polemic against the Eleatics, and primarily Parmenides, is exceedingly widespread.

<sup>16</sup> Mourelatos is not the first to attempt such an approach. But no one else has worked as closely with the dialectical nuances and subtleties of the arguments – the only kind of work that could possibly justify such an interpretation. For gestures in this direction, see esp. Calogero, 1932, pp. 159 ff.; also Kerferd, 1955/56; Bröcker, 1958; Migliori, 1973, p. 80; and still more recently, Striker, 1996, pp. 11–14 and Wardy, 1996, ch. 1. I find myself especially sympathetic with Striker's approach, even though we are not in agreement on several key points.

<sup>17</sup> It occurs at the end of Part II in *MXG*, and at both the beginning and the end in Sextus. To bring the two texts into line, Apelt inserts the following phrase at the beginning in the *MXG* version: (εἰ δ' ἔστιν, ὅτι ἄγνωστόν ἐστι, μετὰ ταῦτα τὰς ἀποδείξεις) λέγει. But there is little reason to think that this feature represents the original more faithfully, since Sextus in general repeats theses at both the beginning and end of each section in a complex argument, in order to articulate its structure.

MXG 980a18–19:

ὥστε καὶ εἰ ἔστιν, ἡμῖν γε ἄγνωστα  
εἶναι τὰ πράγματα.

Consequently, things cannot be known  
by us, even if there is [something].

M. 7.77:

Ὅτι δὲ καὶ ἡ τι, τοῦτο ἄγνωστόν  
τε καὶ ἀνεπινόητόν ἐστιν ἀνθρώπῳ,  
παρακειμένως ὑποδεικτέον.

It is to be shown next that even if there should be  
something, it cannot be known or conceived by a  
human.

The concessive form of the conclusion – ‘even if there is ...’ – belongs to the larger rhetorical strategy of *On Not Being*. At each successive stage of the treatise, Gorgias seems to abandon stronger for weaker claims, in a way that suggests the courtroom tactics of lawyers, willing to use any and every argument to get their client off the hook.<sup>18</sup> (‘My client did not strike the plaintiff, Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury; and even if he did, the plaintiff hit him first; and even if my client did hit first, the plaintiff had it coming.’)<sup>19</sup> But in contrast with his *Defense of Palamedes*, which is staged as a courtroom speech that appeals openly to the standard of what is ‘probable’ or ‘reasonable’ (εἰκός), *On Not Being* clearly has higher, apodeictic aims, of the kind associated with Eleatic practice. The treatise’s most characteristic feature is its almost obsessive use of argument by elimination, beginning with an exhaustive enumeration of the logical alternatives. In this context, ‘even if’ takes on a different logical force. It indicates a form of ‘constructive dilemma’: either (a) there isn’t anything or (b) there is something; if (a) there isn’t anything, then (c) nothing is knowable; and even if (b) there is something, (c) nothing is knowable; therefore, in either case, (c) nothing is knowable. The consequent, that is, can be detached from the conditional in which it is embedded to stand categorically on its own. Part II is thus intended to have a quite general significance: *nothing can be known*.<sup>20</sup> We are assured of the truth of the initial disjunction, since the alternatives are contradictory and therefore exhaustive. The first arm of the dilemma is likewise trivial: if there isn’t anything at all, there isn’t anything to be known either. Part II takes up the nontrivial arm. Despite superficial resemblances to lawyerly tactics, then, Gorgias’ argument is all of one piece and defensible on logical grounds.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, I would argue that Gorgias’ argument is much more rigorous than it has generally been taken to be, and that most of the confusions ascribed to him are the result of commentators’ lack of precision. The only remedy is a closer logical analysis of his various theses and arguments. For ease of reference, I have adopted a simple system of acronyms, to make perspicuous what is at stake in each proposition. Claims to the effect that *something is* will be symbolized by ‘**B**’ (for ‘being’); that *something is known* will be symbolized by ‘**K**’ (for

<sup>18</sup> So Apelt, 1888, p. 205; Gigon, 1936, p. 191; Bux, 1941, p. 398; Di Benedetto, 1955, p. 287; Sicking, 1964, p. 407; Brunschwig, 1971, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> Cassin, 1995, p. 27, recounts Freud’s version of a similar joke.

<sup>20</sup> Cassin argues that the conditional conclusions of Part II and Part III are vacuously true, because their antecedents are false, and so could just as well have had the contradictory consequents; and then, turning to a modal analysis, she claims that the conclusions of the three parts represent incompatible possibilities (1980, pp. 430–1). But this mangles the logic of the argument. On the reading I have offered, the three parts are not only *compatible* with one another (since the conclusions of Parts II and III are conditionals and so do not imply their antecedents); when taken together, they also *entail* the consequents of the conclusions of Parts II and III: namely, that nothing can be known and that no one can be informed.

<sup>21</sup> Against Gigon, 1936, p. 191, who describes the assumption of Part II that things exist as a ‘philosophically senseless’ inconsistency, though familiar from juridical practice. Newiger rightly contests this (1973, pp. 11–13; cf. 109), citing Melissus B 8 and the structure of Zeno’s arguments; but he obfuscates, by pleading that the boundaries between philosophy and rhetoric were not sharp at this time, overlooking the logical justification for Gorgias’ procedure. A more positive assessment of this method can be found in Brunschwig, 1971, p. 83 (cf. pp. 80–1) and Long, 1982, pp. 235–6.

'knowledge'); that *something is thought about* or *had in mind* will be symbolized by 'M' (for 'mind'). The negation of each of these propositions will be labeled by the relevant letter, enclosed in square brackets, for example, '[B]', for the claim that *there isn't anything*. Finally, conditionals will be labeled by two letter acronyms, designating the antecedent and consequent, respectively: thus, 'BK' will stand for the conditional *if there is something, then it is known*. In general, we will be concerned with modal versions of these claims; but for simplicity's sake, I will leave these qualifications out of the acronyms.

Before looking at the inferences themselves, we should consider more closely the main conclusion of Part II. On the most plausible reading, it maintains that *necessarily, if there is anything, then it is not known*.<sup>22</sup> That is, every instance of the following schema will be true:

**B[K]** Necessarily, if *x* is, then *x* is *not* known

where '*x*' has for the moment been left ambiguous between objects and states-of-affairs, and 'is' has been left ambiguous between existential, predicative, and veridical uses of the verb 'to be.' But there is another, and even more critical, ambiguity here, involving the verb 'to know' (*γινώσκειν*). If the sense of 'know' is weak, indicating simply that we have made some sort of 'cognitive contact' with an object and apprehend it in some way or other – the sense it seems to have in Parmenides B 2.7 (see below, p. 216) – then Gorgias' denial is correspondingly strong. He is making a claim about intentionality, denying that our mental states can ever be about anything. Alternatively, 'know' might signal a higher epistemic achievement. It is in some such sense, presumably, that Ecphantus claimed 'it isn't possible to acquire true knowledge of what is' (*μὴ εἶναι ἀληθινὴν τῶν ὄντων λαβεῖν γνῶσιν*), but *only opinion* (DK 51, no. 1, = vol. 1, p. 442, ll. 8–9), a contrast also drawn explicitly in Xenophanes B 34.3–4. The nature of this higher achievement might be different for different thinkers: perhaps we only come to know when we think of things as they are 'together with an account'; or when they are presented 'in a secure way'; or on the basis of an 'unshakable' foundation. What is important is just that when the verb 'know' is used in this manner, it only signifies a *specific* way of grasping something, and not our ability to grasp items in general. On this reading, then, the conclusion of Part II – that nothing can be 'known by us' – would be compatible with our having *other* mental states about what there is, perhaps even true beliefs. To distinguish these two broad ways of construing 'know,' I will speak of the *intentional* reading and the *epistemic* reading, respectively.

<sup>22</sup> This reading may not be obvious at first glance. But reflection on the logical form of Gorgias' claim militates in favor of it. (1) When the antecedent of a conditional contains an indefinite pronoun that also serves as the (implicit) subject of the consequent, it expresses a universal generalization over the entire conditional. This is confirmed, moreover, by the use of *ἀν* with the subjunctive in Sextus and the plurals *ἀγνώστα* and *πράγματα* in the *MXG* version. To keep matters simple, I have used a schema rather than adding universal quantifiers explicitly. (2) The modal sense of the claim that whatever there is is 'unknowable' is best understood in terms of the necessity of the *consequence*, rather than the necessity of the consequent, that is,

(A) Necessarily (if *p*, then *q*)

rather than

(B) If *p*, then necessarily (*q*).

Applied to the case at hand, I am arguing that the conclusion should be understood as claiming (A) that it is impossible for something *both* to be *and* be known, rather than (B) that the only things there are are the sort of things it is impossible to know.

It is clear from Sextus' version of the conclusion that Sextus understood Gorgias along the lines of the intentional reading: he adds 'inconceivable' (ἀνεπινόητον) to 'unknowable' (ἄγνωστον), suggesting quite generally that we cannot have anything in mind whatsoever. The first half of Part II in both versions also supports this reading, as the arguments plainly concern intentionality, turning on the possibility of falsehood and (in Sextus' version) thoughts of nonexistent objects.<sup>23</sup> But the epistemic reading cannot be completely ruled out. The second half of Part II concerns conflicts between different types of mental states and the evidence that each provides against the claims of the rest; and while the arguments here are harder to make out, they clearly involve more properly epistemic concerns. There is also the possibility, of course, that Gorgias exploits both senses. So it is better to keep both in play.

It may also be worth mentioning an important point of agreement. Both versions of the conclusion restrict what is unknowable: either it is unknowable 'by us' (ἡμῖν) or 'by a human' (ἀνθρώπῳ). The gap this leaves open might be unimportant to the argument: it might simply be a way of indicating that nothing short of supernatural powers or magic could possibly bring us into contact with objects (on the intentional reading) or into the right sort of contact (on the epistemic reading). But it might also be an allusion to Parmenides. If the goddess is right about how things stand in truth, then there may be no room for human knowledge, a theme that would not by any means be peculiar to Gorgias (cf. Xenophanes B 34).

### The Intentional Argument: The *MXG* Version

We may now proceed to the intentional arguments as they occur in each version. In the *MXG*, there is only a single intentional argument and it is brief and elliptical.<sup>24</sup> But unlike Sextus' version, its philosophical force and intent are clear:<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Against Graeser, who claims that 'Gorgias was not concerned with the phenomenon of intentionality thematized by medieval philosophers and consequently also cannot assert a distinction between factual existence on the one hand and merely imagined existence on the other' (1983, p. 36). Worrying about how it is possible to have a false belief or think of a nonexistent object is surely sufficient for being concerned with 'the phenomenon of intentionality,' as I am using the term; having a concept of 'merely imagined existence' is not.

<sup>24</sup> I omit the opening line of Part II (980a9–10), which has been a source of endless conjectures, even though it is almost universally agreed to be a fairly anodyne transition between Part I and Part II of *On Not Being*, and so not of great consequence to our study. (A less anodyne transition, found in a number of Italian studies that follow Untersteiner's edition, 1961, depends entirely on an adventurous emendation by Gercke, who reads τὰς ἀποδείξεις λέγει ἀπατᾶν instead of the mss. τὰς ἀποδείξεις λέγειν ἅπαντα: see Untersteiner, 1967, vol. 1 p. 239 n. 64 and, for example, Migliori, 1973, pp. 63–5; Montoneri, 1985, p. 290.)

A significant exception to the rule is Cassin, who takes this sentence to be decisive for the interpretation of the treatise as a whole, while insisting on a strict adherence to the mss' reading of this sentence: 'if there isn't anything, then the proofs say everything without exception.' She takes this to indicate the 'autonomy' of discourse, which is supposed to be independent of any corresponding reality – indeed, reality is instead the 'product' of discourse (see esp. 1980, pp. 62–5, 530–9 and 1995, pp. 47–8; her interpretation is also accepted by Montano, 1985, p. 122 n. 28 and p. 126). Such a position seems so manifestly incoherent that it is difficult to take it as little more than word-play (although perhaps the author would welcome this characterization as an exemplification of her thesis and so as appropriate). In any case, there is little in the actual wording to justify such extreme conclusions – blood is being extracted here from a turnip. (On this point, see the trenchant remarks in Barnes, 1983.)

<sup>25</sup> If, that is, we stay with the manuscripts: at the very beginning of our citation, Cook Wilson (1892–93, p. 34) inserts the protasis (εἰ τὸ ὄν φρονεῖται) ('if what is is had in mind'), which he thinks necessary to complete the argument. Newiger (1973, p. 125) similarly thinks such a protasis must be understood even if we don't insert it into the text; cf. also Grieder, 1962, p. 44. In point of fact, the argument of the *MXG* version seems intelligible as it stands: such an addition is 'necessary' only if we have already

- καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν, εἴπερ μὴ ἔστι, μηδὲ φρονεῖσθαι. εἰ δ' οὕτως,  
 οὐδὲν ἂν εἴποι ψεῦδος οὐδεὶς, φησὶν, οὐδ' εἰ ἐν τῷ πελάγει  
 φαίη ἀμιλλᾶσθαι ἄρματα. πάντα γὰρ ἂν ταῦτα εἴη.

9 δέ R δέ L || εἰ τὸ ὄν φρονεῖται post εἶναι add. Cook Wilson || 11 ἂν εἴποι  
 Apelt: ἂν εἴποι εἰ Mansfeld: ἂν εἶναι codd. || 12 οὐδεὶς] οὐδ' εἰ Cook Wilson ||  
 οὐδ' εἰ] om. Cook Wilson: οὐδ' εἴ τις Mansfeld || 13 ταῦτα R: ταῦτὰ L: ταῦτὰ  
 Diels: ταύτ' Apelt

For it must be the case that the things had in mind are and what is not, if it really is not, is not had in mind either. But if so, no one could say anything false, he claims, not even if one were to claim that a chariot-team is striving on the sea. For all these things would be.<sup>26</sup> (MXG 980a9–12)

The shift to the verb *φρονεῖσθαι*, which I have translated here as ‘have in mind,’ plainly suggests the intentional reading.<sup>27</sup> The active form *φρονεῖν* is used by Presocratic authors for mental states of all sorts: Empedocles, for example, uses it for dreams and delusions (DK 31 B 108).<sup>28</sup> It signifies simply that one *has something in mind*, a sense that can later be narrowed to being *mindful* of something and paying it *due attention*, and so ultimately responding *intelligently* and *prudently*. That the broad use is at issue here is confirmed by the emphasis on falsehood. If in general it is impossible to state a falsehood, then it is impossible for the content of any mental state to be false too – since, if the content of some state were false, it could be articulated in a sentence that would be false as well, against the hypothesis. There are therefore no grounds for restricting this argument to a specific type of mental state, as an epistemological reading would require.<sup>29</sup>

The use of *φρονεῖσθαι*, it is important to note, is neutral as regards the status of the ‘things had in mind’ (τὰ φρονούμενα). It does *not* signify that such things are ‘in the mind’ in the sense that they are subjective mental entities that ‘exist’ *only insofar* as they are thought. It simply expresses that something happens to *be thought about*; hence, it can be applied to real, mind-independent objects in our environment about which we are thinking. To have something in mind, therefore, is compatible with an ability to think of things *beyond* the mind, which exist outside and independently of the mind. In fact, on my view Gorgias *never* rejects such transcendence.<sup>30</sup> The common impression that he does is due to Sextus’ misconstrual and the

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assumed that the argument is the same as in Sextus’ version. But that assumption is precisely what I am calling into question.

<sup>26</sup> On reading the mss.’ ταῦτα (against Apelt, Cook Wilson and Gigon), see Newiger, p. 129. Reading ταύτη or taking ταῦτα as equivalent to διὰ ταῦτα (as Newiger suggests) introduces a subjective idealist interpretation that is not in evidence anywhere in the MXG, by suggesting that a chariot-team strives on the sea *insofar as* or *because* it is thought. Such a claim, being quite controversial, would weaken the effectiveness of Gorgias’ counterexample and thus run counter to his strategy of *reductio ad absurdum*, which is to derive as straightforward a falsehood as possible.

<sup>27</sup> Cook Wilson (1892–93, p. 34) also renders *φρονεῖσθαι* as ‘be in mind,’ but takes this in a subjectivist manner, glossing *φρονούμενα* as ‘objects in consciousness’ (my emphasis) and ‘appearance[s] to consciousness’ (see n. 31 below). Cook Wilson also thinks Sextus mistakenly restricts the meaning of this verb to imagination (p. 36). But nothing in his version implies such a restriction.

<sup>28</sup> The application to dreams is clear from the original context of this fragment: Ps.-Philoponus *In De an.* 486.13–16, cf. 486.34–487.3, and Ps.-Simplicius *In De an.* 202.30–34. Ps.-Philoponus explicitly draws attention to the fact that *φρονεῖν* here does not bear the technical sense it has, for example, in Aristotle.

<sup>29</sup> With Newiger (1973, p. 130) and against Apelt (1888, p. 217), who accuses Gorgias of trading fallaciously on the ambiguity in *φρονεῖν*.

<sup>30</sup> This is even true of Gorgias’ use of *ἐννοεῖν* in Part III: what we see and hear is something external, even if the way in which it appears should turn out to be peculiar to each of us. This reading goes against



widespread tendency to read this back in to the *MXG* (see below, p. 219). But such a rejection is not to be found anywhere in the *MXG* itself.<sup>31</sup>

The argument Gorgias offers in the *MXG* version is plainly intended as a *reductio ad absurdum*. It begins from an exceptionally strong thesis of intentionality and derives a manifestly unacceptable consequence from it. It doesn't stop there, however, but moves immediately to the next argument, without drawing Part II's main conclusion.<sup>32</sup> This may just be a failure to dot one's i's and cross one's t's, like a late Scholastic's impatient '*ergo, et cetera*' at the end of an obvious proof. But the omission also leaves room for an alternative we will have to consider later, namely, that the intentional argument is *not* meant to establish the main conclusion of Part II by itself, but functions instead as part of a larger strategy that incorporates an epistemological argument as well.

The intentional argument itself seems so obvious and commonplace that we tend not to pay sufficient attention to its details. The thesis of intentionality it starts from is stated both positively (980a9), in terms of the following schema (for any permissible substituent of 'x'):

**MB**      Necessarily, if *x* is had in mind by someone, then *x* is

and negatively (980a10), in its more familiar contrapositive version:

**[B][M]**      Necessarily, if *x* is *not*, then *x* is *not* had in mind by anyone.

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Newiger, who claims that Gorgias and Protagoras both reject '*Transzendenz*' (1973, p. 140; 1979, p. 56); cf. Fritz, 1946, p. 32; Loenen, 1959, p. 194 (though cf. p. 195 n. 38). Graeser may also attribute this rejection to Gorgias, but he hedges (1983, pp. 40–1).

<sup>31</sup> Cook Wilson argues that the argument in *MXG* is based on a 'principle of subjective idealism,' according to which 'even those objects of consciousness which are supposed to be real exist *only in consciousness* (like what are called imaginary) and *not otherwise*' (1892–93, p. 36, emphasis mine; cf. 34) – a view that goes back at least to Hegel (1833, p. 41); cf. Grant, 1866, p. 97. But there is nothing in either version of the argument that corresponds to Cook Wilson's 'only,' not to mention the notion of existing 'in' consciousness. The sentence he repeatedly cites – 'for things seen and things heard both are, due to the fact that each of them is had in mind' (καὶ γὰρ τὰ ὁρώμενα καὶ ἀκουόμενα διὰ τοῦτ' ἔστιν, ὅτι φρονεῖται ἕκαστα αὐτῶν, 980a12–14) – is quite neutral. It requires nothing more than the simple covariation between being and mind expressed just a few lines earlier: 'it must be the case that things had in mind are' (δεῖ γὰρ τὰ φρονούμενα εἶναι, 980a9). This, together with the assumption made explicit in the γὰρ clause here – that 'each of the [things seen and heard] is *had in mind*' – is sufficient to entail the conclusion that things seen and heard are. And that is incompatible with Cook Wilson's 'subjective idealism': things had in mind do *not* exist *only* in consciousness, as he claims. On the contrary, whatever is had in mind *is*.

Kerferd (1955/56, pp. 5, 13, 24; 1981, pp. 96–7) appears to be thinking along similar lines to Cook Wilson, when he claims that Gorgias is concerned *only* with 'objects of perception' or 'phenomena'; cf. also Newiger, 1973, pp. 21–2, 32; Pepe (1985), pp. 503–4. But there is no indication in Gorgias' text of any such restriction, especially not in the use of the word πράγματα (*MXG* 979a27–8) which simply refers indifferently to 'things.' For further arguments against this view, see Mansfeld, 1985, pp. 102–3.

<sup>32</sup> Pace Cassin, who does not take the argument to be a *reductio* at all: on the contrary, she alleges that Gorgias *accepts* the conclusion that there is no falsehood and infers *on that basis* that nothing can be known, on the grounds that thoughts will be 'indiscernible' with regard to truth and falsehood (1995, p. 47). But it is difficult to see how the absence of falsehood would preclude the possibility of knowledge – if anything, it *removes* an obstacle to knowledge, as a Protagorean might well insist (cf. Plato *Tht.* 152c5–6: τοῦ ὄντος αἰεὶ ἔστιν καὶ ἀψευδὲς ὡς ἐπιστήμη οὐδα). Nor does the *MXG* version appeal to such indiscernibility as the basis for the conclusion of Part II. It invokes indifference only later, in a subsequent argument, which depends on the opposite assumption (εἰ δὲ μὴ διὰ τοῦτο, 980a14). See below, pp. 226–8.

It is important to distinguish the latter from another thesis, with which it is sometimes confused, namely, the *converse* of (MB),

**BM** Necessarily, if  $x$  is, then  $x$  is had in mind by someone.

This is a *very* strong thesis – *only* those things that are thought about are – and together with (MB), it would imply that *esse est concipi*, or at any rate that they are extensionally equivalent.<sup>33</sup> But the converse of (MB) is never stated in *MXG*, only the contrapositive, ([B][M]); and of course the converse, (BM), is neither equivalent to (MB), nor implied by it.<sup>34</sup> Gorgias, that is, only states the relation *in one direction*, from mind to being; in fact, he doesn't assert anything more than a certain *covariation* between the two. In particular, he doesn't claim that things are *insofar as* or *because* – or even more strongly, *only* insofar as or because – they are had in mind. His argument does not require anything so strong. For (MB), as weak as it might seem, is sufficient to preclude falsehood. Once the verb 'to be' is construed veridically,

**MB'** Necessarily, if someone has it in mind that  $p$ , then  $p$  is the case

and ' $p$ ' is substituted by any proposition, then any thought, however bizarre, will correspond to the way things are and so be true.<sup>35</sup> To show the absurdity of (MB'), any arbitrary example of falsehood will do: something that is thought, but is not in fact the case.<sup>36</sup> Far from placing all thoughts on a par with regards to truth and falsehood,<sup>37</sup> Gorgias' refutation depends upon their clear difference.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Newiger attributes this form of idealism to Gorgias, which he identifies (1973, pp. 133–4) with the 'subjective idealism' Cook Wilson attributes to Gorgias (see n. 00 above). But the two are quite different. (1) According to Cook Wilson's brand of 'subjective idealism,' *nothing* we have in mind is –

**M[B]** Necessarily, if  $x$  is had in mind, then  $x$  is *not*

But according to the form of idealism we have been considering, being and mind are coextensive; in particular, everything had in mind *is* – (MB). But on the assumption that some things *are* had in mind, (MB) and Cook Wilson's (M[B]) are incompatible. (2) Although both forms of idealism reject 'transcendence,' they do so for very different reasons. The form of idealism now under consideration holds that we can't think of anything beyond the mind, because there *isn't anything* beyond the mind: whatever is, is necessarily had in mind – (BM). Cook Wilson's (M[B]), in contrast, is compatible with there being things beyond the mind; it's just that we would never think of them. Transcendence, then, must fail for some other reason, having to do with the mind's own limitations.

<sup>34</sup> Against Cassin (1980, pp. 66–7, 518, 521, 526, 533, 537), who consistently takes Gorgias to be committed to (BM) as well as (MB); cf. Newiger, 1973, pp. 133–4.

<sup>35</sup> With Mansfeld (1985, p. 103) and against Kerferd, who argues that the treatise is, in general, concerned with the *predicative* use of the verb 'to be' (1981, pp. 95–6) and that Part II takes thoughts to have *the same characteristics* as the objects thought about (p. 97). This last claim appears to assume that there are subjective mental entities in addition to objects in the world for Gorgias. Against this, see n. 31 above.

<sup>36</sup> Bröcker (1965, p. 117) thus gets it doubly wrong when he takes Gorgias to concede to Parmenides that 'nothing can be that one cannot think' – a modal version of ([M] [B]), which corresponds to (BM), that is, the *converse* of (MB) – and then to observe that it doesn't follow that 'everything is which we can think,' that is, (MB). In the *MXG*, Gorgias never concedes, or even considers, (BM); and he rejects (MB), not because it doesn't follow from some Parmenidean thesis – on the contrary, it arguably *is* the Parmenidean thesis – but because of the counterexample of the chariot-team racing on the sea.

<sup>37</sup> As Nestle claims: indeed, the whole of Part II is supposed to depend on this 'no less audacious assumption' (1942, p. 309). So, too, Cassin: 1995, p. 47; cf. 1985, p. 307 (see n. 24 above).

<sup>38</sup> On this point, Dupréel appears to agree (1948, p. 73), although he wrongly takes the version in *MXG* to be at odds with this.

The example Gorgias picks is spectacular. He does not contest the absence of falsehood merely by relying on ‘sound commonsense,’<sup>39</sup> that is, on conventional assumptions about the truth or falsehood of contingent beliefs. Instead, he offers an *adunaton*, a manifestly impossible state of affairs,<sup>40</sup> so that the corresponding thought is not merely false, but *necessarily so*, an ideal choice for a *reductio ad absurdum*:

- 1 Necessarily, if someone has it in mind that *p*, then *p* is the case.
- 2 Someone has it in mind that a chariot-team is striving on the sea.
- ∴ 3 A chariot-team is striving on the sea.

This puts Gorgias’ opponent on the defensive. Either he must accept the conclusion and show that (3) is not false after all;<sup>41</sup> or he must reject one of the premises. And within that dialectic, the innocence of (2) is delicious. It is not simply that it is obvious that we can think such things. It is that by stating (2) and having us read and understand it, Gorgias has *made* it true: as a result of his argument we, the reader, now have it in mind that a chariot-team is striving on the sea.

The proponent of (1) actually faces an even more difficult problem. He is not in a position to reject (2) by insisting that it is *false*. For it to be false, it must be intelligible and so something that *can* come to mind; but then by (1), it can be true and so not an *adunaton* after all, against the hypothesis. If Gorgias’ opponent is to maintain (1) while rejecting (3), he must instead deny that (2) is coherent or meaningful – a tall order, to say the least.

It is tempting to think of Parmenides here (as scholars typically do in this context). For the goddess in his poem firmly admonishes us that what is not *cannot be thought*:<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Against Newiger, 1973, pp. 137–8 (cf. 142–3, 147), although he acknowledges that this poses not only a difficulty, but a ‘contradiction that Gorgias must have noticed.’

<sup>40</sup> Gorgias’ *adunata* may have a slight edge to them as well. They tend to derive from myth: here, either Poseidon’s chariot (*Il.* 13.17–38; cf. also Erichthonius’ horses at 20.226–9), or perhaps the Oceanids’ chariot (Aesch. *Prom. vinc.* 128–35, esp. *περὶ γῶν θοαῖς ἀμίλλαις*, 129), as Untersteiner has suggested (1967, vol. 1, pp. 267–8, n. 71); while in Sextus’ version, one also finds Scylla and Chimera (*M.* 7.80), not to mention a flying man (7.79), which is perhaps an allusion to Daedalus (as Guthrie, 1962–81, p. 198 n. 1 suggests). If so, then Gorgias would also be getting his readers to admit that none of them really believes such myths, but instead takes them to be incontestable examples of falsehood.

<sup>41</sup> Mansfeld (1985, pp. 104–5) seems to be the only interpreter to have taken this option seriously. He argues first, against (3), that chariots *can* race on the sea – provided that it is frozen. But this objection affects at most the letter of Gorgias’ counterexample, not its spirit, and it is easily repaired. Surely what makes the example so striking is the idea that a chariot might travel on the sea *as it presently is* – that is, in a liquid state – and this, at least, remains an *adunaton* and could easily be incorporated into the wording of the objection. Mansfeld’s second argument is more general: he argues that Gorgias is not in a position to assert that there are any necessary truths, since then it would be possible to have incontrovertible knowledge, against the professed conclusion of Part II; and he concludes from this that the most Gorgias is entitled to is a *relativistic* conclusion, namely, that the proposition in question is true only *for oneself*. There are at least two difficulties with such a view. First, the argument, so reconstructed, is invalid: it does not follow from the fact that there are necessary truths that it is possible to know them. The existence of such truths makes *true belief* possible. But we still might not be in a position to attain knowledge – if, for example, we could not distinguish true from false beliefs because of the absence of a criterion of truth (as Gorgias’ epistemological argument will go on to suggest). Second, considerations about knowledge are in any event out of place here. The intentional argument, on the reconstruction I have offered, requires nothing more than that our rejection of (3) as an *adunaton* be correct. It does not further require that we *know* it to be correct. Only the latter claim that would contradict the main conclusion of Part II.

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, the negative version of the thesis – the contrapositive, ([B][M]) – predominates in Parmenides’ poem. Whether the positive version, (MB), even occurs in the poem at all depends on whether the following controversial readings are acceptable:

οὔτε γὰρ ἂν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔδν (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν)  
οὔτε φράσαις.

For you cannot grasp what is not – for it cannot be accomplished –  
Nor can you describe it. (B 2.7–8)

οὐ γὰρ ἄνευ τοῦ ἐόντος, ἐν ᾧ πεφρατισμένον ἔστιν,  
εὐρήσεις τὸ νοεῖν.

For without what is, on which its declaration depends,  
You will not find thinking. (B 8.35–6)

To keep us from straying from the true path of inquiry, the goddess restrains us by fencing off the rest. But Gorgias' counterexample does not exhibit the normal sort of confusion she says mortals are subject to, of thinking that 'what is and what is not are the same and not the same' (B 6.4–9; B 7). Rather it would lead us down the *first* route of inquiry (B 6.1–3), a 'path from which no tidings ever come' (παναπευθέα ἀταρπόν, B 2.6), to use Mourelatos' felicitous translation (1970, pp. 23–4). From the goddess' point of view, though, such an argument is wholly in vain, a complete nonstarter: *one simply cannot have the thoughts in question*.<sup>43</sup> If this is Gorgias' target, the debate will come to an abrupt halt, for he would be striking at bedrock differences. His argument has no leverage over a Parmenidean and so his efforts at persuasion will be entirely ineffective. The most he can do, without begging the question, is just reiterate that they disagree.<sup>44</sup>

The obviousness of this response should make us question whether Parmenides is the sole, or even primary, target of the intentional argument. He is not the only person to maintain (**MB**) or (**[B][M]**), even if, as is likely, he is the first. The same view is stated in the pseudo-Hippocratic treatise *On Expertise* and attributed to Protagoras, Anaxagoras, and Metrodorus of Chios; and a specifically veridical form is attributed to Euthydemus, Cratylus, and Antisthenes, as the denial

τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι

For what can be thought and can be are the same. (B 3)

χρὴ τὸ λέγειν τε νοεῖν τ' ἔδν ἔμμεναι· ἔστι γὰρ εἶναι  
μηδὲν δ' οὐκ ἔστιν.

What can be said and thought must be what is. For it can be,  
Whereas nothing cannot. (B 6.1–2)

ταὐτὸν δ' ἔστι νοεῖν τε καὶ οὐνεκεν ἔστι νόημα.

That which can be thought and on account of which a thought is are the same. (B 8.34)

Though logically equivalent, the two formulations differ pragmatically. The contrapositive (**[B][M]**) will, if true, be *vacuously* true – since there won't *be* anything of which it can be truly said that it is not, the antecedent will always be false and therefore the conditional trivially true.

<sup>43</sup> And if this seems counterintuitive, she will deny that observation too: for if there aren't any such thoughts, we cannot even *think* we have them either! (And hence not think that we think that we have them; and so on *ad infinitum*.)

<sup>44</sup> Newiger (1973, p. 134) briefly considers an alternative, namely, where the 'Eleatic thesis,' (**MB**), is 'radicalized by the Sophists' so as to apply to sensible things. Yet he continues to take the Eleatics as Gorgias' primary target, without taking account of how seriously this weakens Gorgias' position. A similar objection faces Grieder, 1962, p. 46.

of falsehood.<sup>45</sup> For our purposes, Gorgias' sophistic contemporaries are the most important.<sup>46</sup> Consider Protagoras' version of ([B])[M]:

οὔτε γὰρ τὰ μὴ ὄντα δυνατόν δοξάσαι οὔτε ἄλλα παρ' ἃ ἂν πάσχει, ταῦτα δὲ αἰεὶ ἀληθῆ.

For it is not possible to believe things that are not, nor anything other than what one experiences; and these are always true. (Plato *Tht.* 167a7–8)

This statement comes from Protagoras' so-called 'defense,' which Socrates puts in his mouth. But it accords fully with Protagoras' *homomensura*. To claim that

Πάντων χρημάτων μέτρον ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος, τῶν μὲν ὄντων ὡς ἔστιν, τῶν δὲ οὐκ ὄντων ὡς οὐκ ἔστιν.

Man is the measure of all things, of what is that it is and what is not that it is not. (DK 80 B 1)

is just to assert that whatever humans think *is in fact the case* – that is, (MB).<sup>47</sup> Protagoras' doctrine is thus a form of what might be called *infallibilism*.<sup>48</sup> We are infallible about how things are: the wind really is cold for me and really is hot for you.

Gorgias' argument is tailor-made for the Protagorean version of (MB).<sup>49</sup> Unlike Parmenides' goddess, Protagoras is explicitly concerned with what can be known *by humans*; and it is precisely this which Gorgias challenges in the conclusion of Part II. And for just the same reason, Protagoras lacks the goddess' means of defense: he is not in any position to deny that we can think of a chariot racing on sea. Such thoughts typically enter the human mind – to deny that would be to remove any teeth the *homomensura* has. But then Gorgias' *reductio* is

<sup>45</sup> As Gigon, 1936, 206 rightly noted in several of these cases. For references to Protagoras and *On Expertise*, see p. 217 and pp. 225–6 below, respectively. Anaxagoras: DK 59 A 28. Metrodorus of Chios: DK 70 B 2. Euthydemus: Plato *Euthydemus* 283e–284c. Cratylus: Plato *Cratylus* 429c–434b. Antisthenes: V A 152, 153, 155 Giannantoni (cf. D. L. 6.1).

<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Plato includes the veridical version in his characterization of the sophist at *Sophist* 260c–d, as Di Benedetto rightly points out (1955, p. 290): 'we said that the sophist had himself taken refuge in this arena, while having denied that there was, or had ever come about, anything false at all, on the grounds that no one thinks or says what is not, since nothing that is not can in any way participate in being' (Τὸν δὲ γε σοφιστὴν ἔφαμεν ἐν τούτῳ που τῷ τόπῳ καταπεφευγέναι μὲν, ἔξαρνον δὲ γεγονέναι τὸ παράπαν μὴ εἶναι ψεῦδος· τὸ γὰρ μὴ ὄν οὔτε διανοεῖσθαι τινα οὔτε λέγειν· οὐσίας γὰρ οὐδὲν οὐδαμῇ τὸ μὴ ὄν μετέχειν).

<sup>47</sup> On this point, I am in agreement with Di Benedetto, 1955, p. 290, and against Migliori, 1973, p. 83, who dismisses this line of interpretation as unconvincing (although without offering significant argument).

Di Benedetto further suggests (pp. 290, 297–8) that the opposition to Protagoras is evident even in the title '*On Not Being*,' as Protagoras is reputed to have written a treatise entitled '*On Being*' (Περὶ τοῦ ὄντος) – cf. DK 80 B 2. But as the evidence for both titles is not beyond question, and there are in any event several possible targets here (in particular, Melissus' treatise), this must remain a conjecture. See n. 00 below.

<sup>48</sup> To borrow a term from Gail Fine's excellent discussion of Protagorean relativism in Plato's *Theaetetus* (1996, esp. p. 129). To claim that we are infallible about objects is to hold that the properties of objects *really* vary whenever they appear differently, even if those properties are merely relational ones that essentially involve a perceiving subject. As she points out, it is only on such a reading that we can make sense of Plato's claim that Protagoras' theory presupposes a kind of Heracliteanism (the so-called 'Secret Doctrine').

<sup>49</sup> Evidence for relative chronology is hazy, but I am assuming (i) that Olympiodorus' dating of *On Not Being* to 444 BCE is at least roughly right (despite the somewhat suspicious coincidence of this date with the founding of Thurii), and (ii) that the elder Protagoras had already developed his views on truth by this point.

ineluctable. It is a direct challenge to the Protagorean, contrary to the frequent attempts to make allies of the two thinkers (see n. 2 above).<sup>50</sup>

This shows that there are two quite different ways in which one can embrace (MB). If we maintain our ordinary intuitions about what can be thought, (MB) commits us to there being such things in reality. If, on the other hand, we maintain our ordinary intuitions about what isn't real, then (MB) requires us to deny that such things can even be thought. In itself, (MB) makes no commitment either way: it simply expresses a certain relation between what there is and what can be thought. It is only when further assumptions are added, about what there in fact is or what can in fact be thought, that (MB) yields consequences, either by affirming the antecedent or by denying the consequent – Protagoras' *modus ponens*, if you will, is the goddess' *modus tollens*. In her hands, (MB) is the axe of a deflationary ontology; in Protagoras' hands, the engine of a fully inflationary one.<sup>51</sup>

But then why not grant there is a chariot-team 'striving on the sea' – why can't Protagoras just stare Gorgias' counterexample down? After all, one might object, if Protagoras maintains, beyond mere perceptual relativism, a general relativism of truth, he could allow each person to be the arbiter of what is possible and impossible: then, for the person who thinks of the chariot-team on the sea, it would not be impossible after all, against what Gorgias had assumed. As already noted, I do not think this is a correct interpretation of Protagoras. But putting that aside, Gorgias would still have leverage over such a relativist, so long as he continues to honor ordinary intuitions about what we can think. For clearly a chariot-team on the sea will seem an impossibility to *some* people who think of it, and according to (MB), if it even *appears* impossible, it will *be* impossible. And yet such a person can still think of a chariot-team striving on the sea; and so by (MB) what cannot happen would happen after all, thus resulting in contradiction.<sup>52</sup> Relativizing these truths to a subject, it should be noted, makes no difference here at all. For we still arrive at contradictions, since in the case described all the truths in question are relative to the *same* subject at the same time. The only way such a subject could avert disaster would be by *never thinking* certain things that we obviously can, and typically do, think – that is, the relativist can save his doctrine only by *abandoning our ordinary intuitions* about what we can think.<sup>53</sup> Gorgias' argument thus keeps its point. To remain true to these intuitions, as Protagoras wishes, we must reject (MB).

<sup>50</sup> The gist of this was already seen clearly by Levi, 1941, pp. 175–6 (= Levi, 1966, pp. 220–1); but it is Di Benedetto, 1955, 299–300, who explicitly makes the link with Protagoras.

<sup>51</sup> Cassin is thus wrong to claim that it is Parmenides' ontology 'and it *alone*' that guarantees infallibility (1995, p. 47; emphasis mine).

<sup>52</sup> One might object that this is unacceptable only if the Principle of Non-Contradiction holds. But Gorgias only needs one case for his *reductio* to work; and he secures that, provided that there is a person who (i) thinks that the Principle of Non-Contradiction in fact *holds*, in addition to (ii) thinking that it is impossible that a chariot-team strive on the sea while also (iii) thinking of a chariot-team striving on the sea. And surely there are such people.

<sup>53</sup> A better response for Protagoras, one might think, would be to argue (i) that the *homomensura* only concerns what humans *believe* or more generally *take* to be the case and (ii) that Gorgias' counterexamples to (MB) crucially involve imagination. But such a defense is not ultimately satisfying. Grant, for the sake of argument, that there couldn't be a person who *believed* the sorts of things in question; there is still a deeper problem. The motivation behind (MB) is a general conceptual point that applies to *all* intentional states: it holds that for a mental state to be about anything, there must be something for it to be about. Holding that (MB) only holds in some restricted form therefore requires independent motivation. One can easily motivate a version of (MB), for example, that is restricted to *epistemic* states: if one knows that *p*, then it is the case that *p*, by definition. But there does not seem to be an independent motivation for restricting (MB) to *doxastic* states, as this defense of Protagoras requires. Protagoras is caught, as it were, between Gorgias and Plato, between the intentional and the epistemic. (I would like to thank Dominic Scott for valuable discussion on this point.)

### Sextus' Account of the Strategy Behind the Intentional Arguments

As we noted earlier, while the *MXG* does not state the main conclusion of Part II until after a further argument, Sextus draws it immediately at the end of the intentional argument. This requires an inference different from anything we find in *MXG*, and Sextus supplies it, attributing it explicitly to Gorgias:

Ὅτι δὲ καὶ ἢ τι, τοῦτο ἄγνωστόν τε καὶ ἀνεπινοήτόν ἐστιν ἀνθρώπῳ, παρακειμένως ὑποδεικτέον. εἰ γὰρ τὰ φρονούμενα, φησὶν ὁ Γοργίας, οὐκ ἔστιν ὄντα, τὸ ὄν οὐ φρονεῖται.

Next it is to be shown that even if there should be something, it cannot be known or conceived by a human. For if, Gorgias says, the things had in mind are not things that are, then what is is not had in mind. (*M.* 7.77)

Unfortunately, there are systematic ambiguities here, as in what immediately follows it, involving quantifiers and negation. If we construe these claims in the customary way, taking the definite article to indicate universal quantification and giving negation narrow scope, each is equivalent to a universal negative statement. That at least gives Gorgias a valid argument. By establishing for any permissible substituent of 'x' that

**M[B]** If x is had in mind by someone, then x is *not*

it follows trivially by contraposition that

**B[M]** If x is, then x is *not* had in mind by anyone.

But assuming that each of these is intended to hold necessarily, and not merely as contingent matters of fact, it reasonably follows that

**B[K]** Necessarily, if x is, then x is *not* known

since nothing can be known if it cannot be had in mind by anyone.

According to Sextus' account of Gorgias' strategy, then, Gorgias only needs to establish (**M[B]**) in order to secure the general conclusion of Part II. But that just shows how incredibly strong (**M[B]**) is; and Gorgias hasn't a hope of offering a cogent argument for it. In both versions, the intentional argument merely offers a *reductio* by counterexample; and while this is sufficient to *refute* a general thesis such as (**MB**), it is not sufficient to *establish* the contrary generalization, (**M[B]**), in its place.<sup>54</sup> And no other argument for (**M[B]**) is offered, either in Sextus' version or in the *MXG*. This point bears special emphasis, since it is only a thesis like (**M[B]**) that supports subjectivist interpretations of Gorgias, according to which objects of thought are *only* 'in the mind' and not in reality, which is precisely what (**M[B]**) states.

Someone might object, however, that whether or not Gorgias can *establish* (**M[B]**), it is reasonable to assume he *accepts* it – Sextus, at any rate, seems to think so. And even though (**M[B]**) is quite extreme, we do find it ascribed to a rough contemporary of Gorgias, Xenias of Corinth, who apparently claimed that

πάντ' εἰπὼν ψευδῆ καὶ πάσαν φαντασίαν καὶ δόξαν ψεύδεσθαι

Everything, he said, is false and every appearance and belief deceives. (*M.* 7.53; cf. 7.399)

<sup>54</sup> As Cook Wilson (1892–93, pp. 35–6), Calogero (1932, p. 200), and Graeser (1983, p. 36) rightly point out.

a position that Gigon, for example, characterizes as ‘merely a variation on the Gorgianic idea’ (1936, pp. 205–6).<sup>55</sup> One might argue further that Gorgias asserts both (**B[M]**) and (**M[B]**) himself in fragment B 26, at least if the participles are construed causally:

ἔλεγε δὲ τὸ μὲν εἶναι ἀφανὲς μὴ τυχόν τοῦ δοκεῖν, τὸ δὲ δοκεῖν ἀσθενὲς μὴ τυχόν τοῦ εἶναι.

He says that being is nonapparent *because* it does not attain seeming, while seeming is weak *because* it does not attain being.

The causal clauses can be reasonably taken to presuppose, respectively, that what is *never* seems to anyone to be the case, or (**B[M]**); and that what seems to be the case *never* is, or (**M[B]**). So it might seem that Sextus is justified after all.

But, as Diels already noted in his translation of the fragment (DK, vol. 2, p. 306),<sup>56</sup> the participles in B 26 can be construed conditionally instead of causally,<sup>57</sup> in which case the text reads quite differently:

He says that being is nonapparent *if* it does not attain seeming, while seeming is weak *if* it does not attain being.

On this reading, Gorgias makes a much more innocuous statement about ignorance and false belief, respectively – what is in fact the case, if it does not seem to anyone to be the case, will remain unnoticed; and what seems to be the case, if it is not in fact the case, will not ultimately matter – just the kind of banal antithesis typical of Gorgias’ style.<sup>58</sup> Considerations of grammar and the original context of the citation also favor a conditional reading.<sup>59</sup>

So B 26 does not offer independent support for the subjectivist theses found in Sextus, (**B[M]**) and (**M[B]**), or more generally sever being from appearance. On a conditional reading, B 26 is in fact compatible with cases where something *both* appears *and* in fact is, against both (**B[M]**) and (**M[B]**), as well cases where we have one but not the other. This fits well with what we know from Gorgias’ extant writings. Both sorts of cases, for example, can be found towards the end of the *Defense of Palamedes*: Palamedes does not think he can make the truth apparent to the jurors (§35); he is confident, however, the real injustice of his punishment will be evident to the rest of the world (§36).<sup>60</sup> The emphasis on falsehood, moreover, is what we would have expected from our examination of the *MXG*. Falsehood is a clear counterexample to the thesis critiqued there, (**MB**).

<sup>55</sup> For an excellent discussion of the evidence for Xenias, see Brunschwig, 1984, translated in this volume.

<sup>56</sup> Though Kranz subsequently rejected this reading in the Nachtrag, DK vol. 2, p. 425.

<sup>57</sup> With Calogero, 1932, pp. 221–2 n. 1; Grieder, 1962, p. 43 n. 28; Lesky, 1971, pp. 505–6.

<sup>58</sup> For example, ‘it is equally an error and ignorance to blame what is worthy of praise and to praise what is worthy of blame’ (*Hel.* §1); ‘for the stronger is not by nature hindered by weaker, but the weaker is ruled and led by the stronger, that is, while the stronger leads, the weaker follows’ (*Hel.* §6); ‘so then, if I am wise, I did not err; and if I erred, I am not wise’ (*Palam.* §26). Also *Palam.* §3 *passim*.

<sup>59</sup> As Lesky has shown (1971, pp. 505–6): the use of *μή* with the causal use of the participle would be an exception to the general rule in the classical period (Schwyzer-Debrunner, *Griechische Grammatik* vol. 2, p. 594); and in the original context of the citation, Proclus clearly contests just the weaker thesis that seeming is weak if untrue, as given by conditional reading (*Scholia vetera in Hesiodi Opera et dies*, ad 760–4, 232.10–16 Pertusi).

<sup>60</sup> Mansfeld, 1985, takes much of the *Palamedes* to concern ‘personal knowledge,’ consistent with the relativist reading he offers of *On Not Being*. I am inclined, though, to take the *Palamedes*’ clear statements about truth at face value, as concerning objective states of affairs that can, but need not, be known by individuals.



The fact remains, however, that according to Sextus, Gorgias actually *says* (*φησὶν ὁ Γοργίας*) that ‘if the things had in mind are not things that are, then what is is not had in mind.’ And Sextus plainly interprets this as an inference from one subjectivist thesis to the other,

A.  $M[B] \vdash B[M]$

as is clear from the logical analysis he immediately goes on to offer for this claim:

καὶ κατὰ λόγον· ὥσπερ γὰρ εἰ τοῖς φρονουμένοις συμβέβηκεν εἶναι λευκοῖς, καὶ συμβεβήκει τοῖς λευκοῖς φρονεῖσθαι, οὕτως εἰ τοῖς φρονουμένοις συμβέβηκε μὴ εἶναι οὖσι, κατ’ ἀνάγκην συμβήσεται τοῖς οὖσι μὴ φρονεῖσθαι. διόπερ ὑγιὲς καὶ σωζόν τὴν ἀκολουθίαν ἐστὶ τὸ εἰ τὰ φρονούμενα οὐκ ἔστιν ὄντα, τὸ ὄν οὐ φρονεῖται. τὰ δέ γε φρονούμενα (προληπτέον γάρ) οὐκ ἔστιν ὄντα, ὥς παραστήσομεν· οὐκ ἄρα τὸ ὄν φρονεῖται.

And reasonably so. For just as [the following is the case]:

If being white is an attribute of things had in mind, then being had in mind would also be an attribute of white things

so too

If not being things that are is an attribute of things had in mind, then necessarily not being had in mind will be an attribute of things that are.

For this reason, then, [the inference] ‘if the things had in mind are not things that are, then what is is not had in mind’ is valid and preserves entailment. But, as was to be expected, things had in mind are not things that are, as we are about to show. Therefore what is is not had in mind. (*M.* 7.77–8)

If Sextus is right, the prospects for Gorgias are quite depressing: his argument would rest on fairly transparent fallacies. Each of the propositions Sextus uses is ambiguous with regard to quantity: each can be construed as either a universal or a particular generalization. Yet whichever way we construe them, if we construe them all in the same way, at least one inference will be invalid. The first conditional is valid only if it involves particular affirmatives, while the second is valid only if it involves universal negatives.<sup>61</sup> And if we construe each differently, then the similarity in form is merely superficial and so no longer offers a shared basis for validity, as Sextus’ justification presupposes. In either case, then, the argument Sextus offers does not support (A), the inference he attributes to Gorgias.

At this point, we might reasonably question whether Sextus understood Gorgias correctly in the first place. Fortunately, each part of the conditional he attributes to Gorgias – viz., ‘the things had in mind are not things that are’ and ‘what is is not had in mind’ – can be read in a different way. If, unlike Sextus, we assign the negations *wide* scope, both statements become *denials* of universal affirmative statements:

[MB] It is *not* the case that (for any  $x$ , if  $x$  is had in mind, then  $x$  is)

[BM] It is *not* the case that (for any  $x$ , if  $x$  is, then  $x$  is had in mind)

<sup>61</sup> From ‘some things had in mind are white’ it follows that ‘some white things are had in mind’; but from ‘all things had in mind are white’ it does not follow that ‘all white things are had in mind.’ On the other hand, from ‘nothing had in mind is’ it follows that ‘nothing that is is had in mind’; whereas from ‘some things had in mind are not things that are’ it does not follow that ‘some things that are are not had in mind.’

Thus understood, each claim is far more reasonable – most of us, in fact, would readily assent to both. They are also easier to establish. As denials of universal generalizations, they logically require only a single counterexample. The first, ([MB]), is established directly by the intentional arguments in both versions: the chariot-team on the sea is intended precisely as a refutation of the original (MB). The second thesis, ([BM]), is slightly more ticklish, but only for pragmatic, and not logical, reasons: although there may be genuine counterexamples, we could not find any compelling, since as soon as we consider them, they would be had in mind and so cease to be counterexamples. Nevertheless, we might take ([MB]) as a reasonable basis for accepting ([BM]), even though it does not logically follow: for once a necessary connection between mind and being has been ruled out in the better motivated case, (MB), there is even less reason to accept it in the less motivated one, (BM). That is, Gorgias may well endorse

**B. If [MB], then [BM]**

even if the consequent cannot be *logically derived* from the antecedent, as (A) assumes.

This should lead us to question Sextus' other pretense, namely, that these arguments by themselves give us reason to conclude,

**B[K]** Necessarily, if  $x$  is, then  $x$  is *not* known.

For this result does not follow either from ([MB]) or from ([BM]); and they do not seem to provide reasonable grounds for inferring it either. But this is all for the best. On Sextus' interpretation, the subsequent epistemological argument becomes superfluous, since he takes Gorgias to have already secured the main conclusion of Part II. In fact, when Sextus actually comes to the epistemological argument, he seems confused and returns to the chariot racing on the sea, making it a degenerate form of intentional argument – the epistemological details play no role in the argument at all. The fact that the *MXG* version does not draw the main conclusion until *after* the epistemological argument suggests that it might, on the contrary, play an integral and necessary part of Gorgias' strategy.

Sextus' report, then, is doubly misleading. He misconstrues both the logical form of the main theses in Part II and the logical relations between them. If his report has value, it can only be in his reports of the individual arguments.<sup>62</sup>

### The Intentional Arguments: Sextus' Version

The first intentional argument in Sextus is offered against (MB), which Sextus explicitly formulates in veridical terms:

εἰ γὰρ τὰ φρονούμενά ἐστιν ὄντα, πάντα τὰ φρονούμενα ἔστιν, καὶ ὅπῃ ἂν τις αὐτὰ φρονήσῃ. ὅπερ ἐστὶν ἀπεμφαῖνον· [εἰ δέ ἐστι, φαῦλον.] οὐδὲ γὰρ ἂν φρονῇ τις ἄνθρωπον ἱπτάμενον ἢ ἄρματα ἐν πελάγει τρέχοντα, εὐθέως ἄνθρωπος ἵπταται ἢ ἄρματα ἐν πελάγει τρέχει. ὥστε οὐ τὰ φρονούμενά ἐστιν ὄντα.

For if the things had in mind are things that are, then all things had in mind are, and in whatever way one might have them in mind. Which is outrageous: for it is not the case that if one were to have in mind a flying man or a chariot-team racing on the sea, then *eo ipso* a man flies or a chariot races on the sea. Consequently, the things had in mind are not things that are. (*M.* 7.79)

<sup>62</sup> I am thus sympathetic with the conclusions in Migliori, 1973, pp. 71–5, even though our analyses of the flaws differ thoroughly.

The argument here is not substantially different from the intentional argument in *MXG*. The version of (**MB**) at issue is still a propositional one, and the problem concerns thoughts about states-of-affairs that are *prima facie* impossible. In Sextus' version, the conclusion is explicitly rejected as absurd and used to overturn the premise on which it rests, (**MB**). This is how the *MXG* argument should be interpreted in any case.

The second intentional argument Sextus offers is more interesting, since most of it is unparalleled in the *MXG*:

πρὸς τούτοις εἰ τὰ φρονούμενά ἐστιν ὄντα, τὰ μὴ ὄντα οὐ φρονηθήσεται. τοῖς γὰρ ἐναντίοις τὰ ἐναντία συμβέβηκεν, ἐναντίον δέ ἐστι τῷ ὄντι τὸ μὴ ὄν· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο πάντως εἰ τῷ ὄντι συμβέβηκε τὸ φρονεῖσθαι, τῷ μὴ ὄντι συμβήσεται τὸ μὴ φρονεῖσθαι. ἄτοπον δ' ἐστὶ τοῦτο· καὶ γὰρ Σκύλλα καὶ Χίμαιρα καὶ πολλὰ τῶν μὴ ὄντων φρονεῖται. οὐκ ἄρα τὸ ὄν φρονεῖται.

In addition, if the things had in mind are things that are, then the things that are not will not be had in mind. For opposites are attributes of opposites, and what is not is opposite to what is. For this reason, if being had in mind is an attribute of what is, then obviously not being had in mind will be an attribute of what is not. But that is absurd: for Scylla, Chimaera, and many other things that are not are had in mind. What is, then, is not had in mind. (*M.* 7.80)

This argument begins much as the intentional argument in *MXG* does, by validly inferring (**[B][M]**) from (**MB**), by contraposition:

### C. **MB** ⊢ **[B][M]**

But immediately following this inference, Sextus offers a logical analysis that once again does not fit. The principle that 'opposites are attributes of opposites' sounds like it belongs to Gorgias: a similar principle, at any rate, underlies an argument in Part I (cf. *MXG* 979a28–9; *M.* 7.67). But it is adventitious here, as the Aristotelian terminology in Sextus' explanation makes evident, since it involves a quite different inference, namely, the *invalid* inversion:

### D. **BM** ⊢ **[B][M]**

A proclivity for logical punditry has once again led Sextus astray.

The argument in fact appears to be a *reductio* of (**[B][M]**) by counterexample, roughly parallel to the first intentional argument. But the counterexamples differ in a crucial way.<sup>63</sup> The principle involved here requires that (**[B][M]**) be construed existentially:

- 1' Necessarily, if *x* does *not* exist, then *x* is *not* had in mind by anyone.
- 2' Scylla does *not* exist.
- ∴ 3' Scylla is *not* had in mind by anyone.

Because the target here is the contrapositive thesis, (**[B][M]**), rather than the positive (**MB**), the order of the argument differs: it is the conclusion, rather than the minor premise, that concerns what can be thought. This completely alters the pragmatic force of the *reductio*. The conclusion is objectionable, not because it represents an impossibility, but because it is *pragmatically self-refuting*: as soon as we read (3') and understand it, we have thereby thought of Scylla and thus demonstrated its falsehood. Short of declaring (3') unintelligible, there is no alternative for Gorgias' opponent: he must reject one of the premises. The proponent of (1') can, if he likes, reject (2'): it is a factual premise and can be denied without contradiction. But claiming that

<sup>63</sup> Against Calogero (1932, p. 200) and Newiger (1973, pp. 142, 145), who take the examples to be exactly on a par.

Scylla exists obviously comes at a cost for a theorist who is trying to defend our ordinary intuitions.

Sextus' report has aroused some suspicion, though, because it involves an existential use of the verb 'to be,' which, it is claimed, does not occur until much later.<sup>64</sup> But this worry is ill-founded. The appeal to mythical creatures as an example of something manifestly fictitious occurs already in Xenophanes, who dismisses titans, giants, and centaurs as the 'fabrications' (πλάσματα) of earlier generations (B 1.21–2). And in the fifth century such worries are naturally extended to the gods themselves. In his profession of agnosticism, Protagoras uses the unadorned verb 'to be' to make a point about the existence of gods and explicitly distinguishes this from concerns about what *sort* of thing they are (by adding the interrogative ὅποιοι to the verb 'to be'):

περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὔθ' ὥς εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὥς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὅποιοί τινες ἰδέαν.

I have no knowledge about the gods: neither that they are, nor that they are not, nor what they are like in form. (B 4)

There is nothing anachronistic, therefore, in attributing an existential use of the verb 'to be' to Gorgias. Given that Sextus' version contains material of value not preserved in the *MXG*, and there is no persuasive objection against it,<sup>65</sup> we can tentatively accept this passage as potential evidence for another intentional argument, concerning nonexistent objects and directed at the negative thesis, ([B][M]), in addition to the first argument concerning the positive thesis (MB).

### The Epistemological Argument: The *MXG* Version

In the *MXG*, the intentional argument is *not* meant to establish the main conclusion of Part II independently of the epistemological argument. They are meant to be read as part of a single strand of argument, for an epistemological conclusion. This requires that the epistemological argument deliver the *coup de grâce*.<sup>66</sup>

The epistemological argument picks up precisely where the intentional argument leaves off. And the conclusion of the intentional argument is quite moderate: it does not claim that we are *never* able to apprehend what is in the world, but only that the world does *not always* correspond to what we have in mind. The problem then becomes, to put it crudely, whether we can 'sort out the good from the bad' – whether there is some principled ground for privileging one kind of mental state over another. In the absence of any such difference, it might seem as though knowledge would be impossible and opinion 'allotted to all' (Xenophanes B 34).

Gorgias sharpens the problem by focusing on cases of conflict, cases where we seem to have incompatible things in mind and which therefore require adjudication. He is concerned in particular with the conflict between sense experience and reason, not an unreasonable worry for those working in the wake of Parmenides:

γὰρ τὰ ὁρώμενα καὶ ἀκουόμενα διὰ τοῦτό ἐστιν, ὅτι φρο-  
νείται ἕκαστα αὐτῶν· εἰ δὲ μὴ διὰ τοῦτο, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ οὐδὲν  
15 μᾶλλον ἂ ὁρώμεν ἐστίν, οὕτω (οὐ) μᾶλλον ἂ [ὁρώμεν ἢ] διανοούμεθα.  
καὶ γὰρ ὥσπερ ἐκεῖ πολλοὶ ἂν ταῦτα ἴδοιεν, καὶ ἐνταῦθα  
πολλοὶ ἂν ταῦτα διανοηθείμεν. τί οὖν μᾶλλον

<sup>64</sup> Ebbesen, 1986, p. 116; cf. Gigon, 1936, p. 204.

<sup>65</sup> For a similar case in Part III, see Mourelatos, 1987, pp. 158–64.

<sup>66</sup> Against Newiger (1973, p. 170), who remarks that 'so little of the discussion' in Part II concerns knowledge, apart from the conclusion.

17a

δῆλον εἰ τοιάδ' ἢ τοιάδ'  
 ἐστί; ποῖα δὲ τὰ ληθῆ, ἄδηλον. ὥστε καὶ εἰ ἔστιν, ἡμῖν γε ἄγνωστα  
 εἶναι τὰ πράγματα.

13 ἔστιν] ἔσται Apelt || ὅτι ὁράται καὶ ἀκούεται, καὶ ὁμοίως τὰ φρονούμενα ἔστιν  
 ante ὅτι add. Diels || 15 ἃ ἀκούομεν ἢ post μάλλον add. Sicking || ἃ L: om. R || ἢ  
 ὁρώμεν ante ἔστιν add. Apelt || οὐ add. Apelt γ' οὐδὲν add. Cook Wilson || ὁρώμεν ἢ  
 del. Diels: ἢ Apelt ἢ ἃ add. Sicking || 17. 17a πολλοὶ] πολλὰ Diels || ταῦτα] ταῦτα  
 Cook Wilson || διανοηθείμεν] διανοηθείεν Apelt || τί Didotiana: τὸ codd. || δῆλον  
 εἰ τοιάδ' ἢ τοιάδ' Apelt: δῆ ... τοιάδ' Bekkeri codd. (lac. 1 l litt.): sine lac. L: ὅτι  
 οὐδὲν μάλλον διανοητὰ τοιάδε (ἢ τοιάδε) conj. Diels

For things seen and things heard both are, due to the fact that each of them is had in mind. But if it isn't due to this, then just as what we see no more is [than is not] so what we think no more [is than is not] – for just as many over there might see these things, so many of us here might think these things – why, then, is it clear that they are of this sort rather [than that sort]? Of which sort the true ones are is unclear. Consequently, things cannot be known by us, even if there is [something]. (MXG 980a12–19)

Gorgias' argument here offers a dilemma, with each arm constituting a form of indifference argument. The first arm targets (MB), extending the intentional argument to the senses: seeing and hearing involve 'having things in mind' (*φρονεῖσθαι*) just as much as thinking in a more narrow sense (*διανοεῖσθαι*) does. Gorgias does not pursue this line further, but abruptly switches to the second arm. The suggestion clearly is, however, that the first arm is not tenable. And the reason is not far to seek. Since all mental states equally involve having things in mind, then by (MB) whatever we sense or think will obtain in reality, even if our experiences should conflict – as they no doubt will – and this, surely, is unacceptable.<sup>67</sup> But if it is not the case that whatever we have in mind obtains in reality, then we have abandoned (MB) in its most general form: not all experiences are true. And this is precisely where the second arm of the dilemma comes in. For absent some general correspondence like (MB), it will no longer be clear in such conflicts whether things are in accordance with one mental state rather than another. Hence, knowledge will be impossible.

Gorgias no more than alludes to the conflict between the senses and reason in the first arm. But the point is, after all, a familiar one in the Eleatic tradition. It features centrally, for example, in Melissus' argument against the senses. What we see and hear is incompatible, he argues, with what we understand by reason to be true; yet it is not possible to satisfy both. Therefore, if (MB) has to apply equally to both the senses and reason, the only conclusion we could draw is that *neither* can apprehend reality:

ὥστε συμβαίνει μήτε ὁρᾶν μήτε τὰ ὄντα γινώσκειν.

So it follows that we neither see nor know the things that are. (B 8, DK vol. 1, p. 274.12)

Melissus' target here is clearly the sophistic author of *On Expertise*, who maintains, in virtually the same terms, the opposite thesis:

ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν ὄντα αἰεὶ ὁράται τε καὶ γινώσκεται, τὰ δὲ μὴ ὄντα οὔτε ὁράται οὔτε γινώσκεται.

<sup>67</sup> Newiger again thinks it necessary here to supply an implicit assumption, 'if what is is thought' (see n. 25 above), and so takes the conclusion to be accordingly restricted: the objects of sight and hearing are, but only '*qua φρονούμενα*' (1973, pp. 129–30). But as before, the argument is intelligible on its own without such additions. All Gorgias is doing is pursuing the consequences of (MB), the converse of the thesis Newiger thinks is at stake.

But the things that are are always seen and known, while those that are not are neither seen nor known. (*On Expertise* 2, 38.2–4 Gomperz)

The author of *On Expertise* insists that seeing and knowing are both intentional states along the lines of (MB), because it would be absurd to believe that what is seen is something that is not:<sup>68</sup>

εἰ γὰρ δὴ ἔστι γ' ἰδεῖν τὰ μὴ ἔόντα ὥσπερ τὰ ἔόντα, οὐκ οἶδ' ὅπως ἂν τις αὐτὰ νομίσειε μὴ ἔόντα, ἃ γε εἶη καὶ ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ἰδεῖν καὶ γνώμῃ νοῆσαι ὡς ἔστιν. ἀλλ' ὅπως μὴ οὐκ ἦ τοῦτο τοιοῦτον.

For if it is in fact possible to see things that are not just as [it is possible to see] things that are, I do not know how a person could believe that they are not, things which he can see with his eyes and can grasp with his mind that they are. But it is impossible that things should be so. (*On Expertise* 2, 36.20–38.2 Gomperz)

Yet if Melissus is right, we cannot afford to be so sanguine. For there will be cases where the senses and reason conflict, and so something will have to give – the problem of conflicting appearances requires some sort of further response. Melissus himself settles in favor of reason, against the senses, without argument. He does not explain, moreover, how vision and hearing can be false, or indeed how anything other than what is could ever seem to us to be the case. But he recognizes clearly that (MB) cannot be maintained in its full generality.

The first arm of Gorgias' epistemological argument hints at a similar worry. Going beyond the intentional argument, which objects to (MB) on the grounds that some mental states do not correspond to reality, it raises the specter of conflict between mental states and with it a new threat to (MB). The second arm takes the logical next step.<sup>69</sup> Suppose (MB) *isn't* true without restriction (εἰ δὲ μὴ διὰ τοῦτο, 980a14).<sup>70</sup> What then? Not Melissus' conclusion, according to Gorgias. For the rejection of (MB) in the case of sense experience does *not* entail that *all* such experiences are false. It only shows that sense experience, as a class, is *not always* true: while *some* sense experiences are true, *some* are false, which Gorgias expresses by saying that what we see 'no more is the case [than is not the case]' (980a14–15).<sup>71</sup> And the same will hold, he

<sup>68</sup> T. Gomperz, 1910, pp. 97–8, interprets this claim as follows: if we could have appearances of what is not real, we would not have any 'secure mark' to distinguish the real from the unreal – precisely what we find in the second arm of the epistemological argument in the *MXG*. Whether the author of *On Expertise* had this in mind or not, it is at any rate not explicit in that text. But Gomperz is surely right to anticipate the objection.

<sup>69</sup> For a different understanding of the dialectical relation between Gorgias' and Melissus' arguments, see Newiger, 1973, p. 136. In tracing the similarities between the two, Newiger seems to collapse the epistemological argument into the intentional argument, much as Sextus does (see below, pp. 228–9). Newiger does, however, recognize an epistemological dimension to the argument: whereas Melissus rules in favor of reason in the conflict between reason and the senses, Gorgias' verdict in his view is a simple *non licet*. But in fact Gorgias goes further than that: see below, p. 228.

<sup>70</sup> Cook Wilson (1892–93, p. 34; also endorsed by Newiger, 1973, pp. 131–3 and 1979, p. 55) takes this argument quite differently: to the response that we can resolve conflicts between perception and thought by appeal to consensus, Gorgias objects that there will be consensus about false beliefs as well. This reading depends, however, entirely on his emendation of ταυτά το ταυτά. The reading adopted above stays closest to the manuscripts.

<sup>71</sup> Although the phrase 'no more' (οὐ μᾶλλον) is widely recognized as a hallmark of later scepticism, philosophical uses of the phrase can already be found in the 5th century to indicate that one state-of-affairs is not the case *rather than* another: for example, Democritus, *apud* Theophr. *Sens.* 69; Sext. *Emp. P.* 1.213; Arist. *Metaph.* I.4, 985b8, IV.5, 1009b9–12 (= DK 68 A 12); Plut. *Adv. Colot.* 1109a. For a survey, see De Lacy, 1958, esp. pp. 59–61.

The passage from *Metaphysics* IV.5 is especially pertinent, as has often been noted (for example, Apelt, pp. 216–17 n. 2; Calogero, 1932, p. 206 n. 1; Gigon, 1936, p. 208–9; Di Benedetto, 1955, pp. 301–

argues, by parity of reasoning for what we think, since just as there will be other people somewhere else that perceive things differently, we will likewise think differently than they do (a16–17). Consequently, what we think will not always be the case: *some* thoughts will be true and *others* false (a15). There is, therefore, no guarantee *either* for what we perceive *or* for what we think.<sup>72</sup> Gorgias' argument is again valid – it is a form of indifference reasoning.<sup>73</sup> For if one accepts the premise that there are no relevant differences between perception and thought regarding intentionality (ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ... οὕτω, a14–15), then either *both* must be infallible or *neither*; but both cannot be infallible, because of the conflicts that exist between them; therefore neither is infallible. Gorgias is fully entitled, then, to ask the question he does: *on what grounds* can we privilege one over the other? Melissus, at least, has not given us any.<sup>74</sup>

2). In it, Aristotle considers the view that opposites appear to different species of animals and even to a single individual at different times; and then he continues, 'of these, which sort is true or false is unclear; for this [sort] isn't any more true than that [sort], but they are similarly disposed. It is for this reason, at any rate, that Democritus claims either that nothing is true or that it is at least unclear to us (ποῖα οὖν τούτων ἀληθὴ ἢ ψευδῆ, ἀδελον· οὐθὲν γὰρ μᾶλλον τὰδε ἢ τὰδε ἀληθῆ, ἀλλ' ὁμοίως. διὸ Δημόκριτός γέ φησιν ἥτοι οὐθὲν εἶναι ἀληθές ἢ ἡμῖν γ' ἀδελον, 1009b9–12). This has sometimes been understood as the claim that no *token* mental state, of any kind, is more true than any other *token*, of any other kind – that all mental states are equally true, or perhaps all equally false. This reading should be resisted, however, since the latter alternative is as self-refuting as the former, a point that would not have been lost on Democritus in particular, given his criticism of Protagoras along just these lines (*apud* Sext. Emp. *M.* 7.389 = DK 68 A 114 & 80 A 15). Either alternative, moreover, would make nonsense of his philosophy. Democritus is far more likely to have made the epistemological claim that it is *not clear to us* whether any given appearance is true. And this might reasonably be thought to follow if we read the passage above as primarily concerned with types rather than tokens, something clearly indicated by ποῖα, 'of which *sort*': the claim would be that truth does not belong to one *type* of mental state rather than another. That is, truth no more belongs to *all* the token states of *one type* (such as perception), than to *all* the token states of *another* (such as thought). Rather, truth belongs to *some* of one and *some* of the other; and hence none of them provides a clear criterion of truth.

This reading is confirmed by other uses of the phrase οὐ μᾶλλον, where a type reading is clearly required. Leucippus and Democritus claim, for example, that atoms are 'no more' one shape rather than another – that is, they are not *all of one* shape rather than *all of another* shape; instead, *some* atoms are of one shape, *some* atoms of another (Simpl. *In Ph.* 28.4–27, esp. 10, 25–6 = in part, DK 67 A 8; in part DK 68 A 38). A token reading would require that no given atom had any one shape rather than another, thus making them all indeterminate, which is plainly absurd for an atomist to hold. It is not, at any rate, what Democritus is reported to have believed.

<sup>72</sup> The argument does not, then, rely on pitting the 'normal' person's adherence to the senses against the philosopher's adherence to reason, as Newiger claims (1973, p. 136; 1979, p. 54–6). The argument is rather that *just as* perceptions as a class are not true rather than false, *so too* thoughts as a class are not true rather than false. The appeal to what others experience is not aimed at favoring either type of mental state over the other, but at *undermining both* – it is used to extend the kinds of conflict at stake, so as to reject (**MB**) for both types of mental state. It certainly is not introduced as a relativistic assumption, as Calogero, 1932, pp. 205–7 claims.

<sup>73</sup> Grieder (1962, pp. 44–5) is the only author I have found who comes close to recognizing the essential role of indifference claims here.

<sup>74</sup> On this point, I am partially sympathetic with Loenen, 1959, pp. 181 ff., when he argues that Melissus is the target of Gorgias' treatise, not Parmenides. Lattanzi, 1932, p. 289, suggests Melissus is the primary target at any rate of the treatise, and appeals to the fact that the title of Gorgias' work – *On Nature or On Not Being* – may be a parody of the title of Melissus' work, *On Nature or On Being*. (On this point, see also Migliori, 1973, p. 86 n. 170; Kirk, Raven and Schofield, 1983, p. 102–3 n. 1; Wardy, 1996, p. 15.)

Such evidence is of limited value, however, as Protagoras is also reputed to have written a work entitled *On Being* (DK 80 B 2); see n. 47 above. Gorgias needn't in any case have had a single, or even

Gorgias thus has a successful right-left combination. The thesis of intentionality, (MB), when taken in full generality, leads to contradictions. But restricting its scope does not appear to be viable either: we have not yet been given any principled reason why (MB) should apply to one mode of cognition rather than another; and without such a reason, (MB) will have to be rejected for cognition in general. But then there would be no guarantee of truth for *any* mode of cognition – within any given type, some cognitions will be true and others false – and this leaves us in serious need of a criterion of truth. Gorgias has not shown that such a criterion is in principle impossible. But it is clearly not to be found in the theories then available, and so he is right to press the challenge: without such a criterion, knowledge will be impossible, *even if* there is something in the world. The conclusion of Part II is not that we cannot think of anything, or even that we cannot think anything truly; but only that we cannot *know* anything, even if we were to think truly.<sup>75</sup>

### The Epistemological Argument: Sextus' Version

The argument in Sextus requires little comment, since it contains little new argument. As already pointed out, as it proceeds, it degenerates into another instance of the first intentional argument:

ὥσπερ τε τὰ ὁρώμενα διὰ τοῦτο ὁρατὰ λέγεται ὅτι ὁράται, καὶ τὰ ἀκουστὰ διὰ τοῦτο ἀκουστὰ ὅτι ἀκούεται, καὶ οὐ τὰ μὲν ὁρατὰ ἐκβάλλομεν ὅτι οὐκ ἀκούεται, τὰ δὲ ἀκουστὰ παραπέμπομεν ὅτι οὐχ ὁράται (ἕκαστον γὰρ ὑπὸ τῆς ἰδίας αἰσθήσεως ἀλλ' οὐχ ὑπ' ἄλλης ὀφείλει κρίνεσθαι), οὕτω καὶ τὰ φρονούμενα καὶ εἰ μὴ βλέπειτο τῇ ὄψει μὴδὲ ἀκούοιτο τῇ ἀκοῇ ἔσται, ὅτι πρὸς τοῦ οἰκείου λαμβάνεται κριτηρίου. εἰ οὖν φρονεῖ τις ἐν πελάγει ἄρματα τρέχειν, καὶ εἰ μὴ βλέπει ταῦτα, ὀφείλει πιστεύειν, ὅτι ἄρματα ἔστιν ἐν πελάγει τρέχοντα. ἄτοπον δὲ τοῦτο· οὐκ ἄρα τὸ ὃν φρονεῖται καὶ καταλαμβάνεται.

And just as things seen are said to be visible due to the fact that they are seen, and audible things are said to be audible due to the fact that they are heard, and we don't reject visible things because they are not heard or dismiss audible things because they are not seen – since each ought to be discerned by its own sense and not by another – so there will be things in mind even if we do not see them by sight or do not hear them by hearing, because they are grasped by their own standard. So if one has in mind a chariot racing on the sea, even though one does not see this, one ought to believe that there is a chariot racing on the sea. But this is absurd. What is, then, is not had in mind or apprehended. (M. 7.81–2)

Sextus' version of the argument differs from the *MXG* in two important ways. First, Sextus does not treat having something in mind (*φρονεῖσθαι*) as a genus, under which seeing and hearing fall, but rather as a coordinate species.<sup>76</sup> He therefore needs to justify the application of (MB) to sense experience; and he does this by introducing an epistemic principle about the proper domain and authority of different mental states. But the principle in question is highly problematic. The

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primary, target in mind throughout the treatise. Indeed, he plainly did not – a point well emphasized by Levi, 1941 (= Levi, 1966); see also Migliori, 1973, p. 87.

For our purposes, however, the historical claim is ultimately less important than the dialectical one. In this passage, Gorgias is certainly targeting the *type* of position Melissus held, whether or not Melissus himself was an intended target at all.

<sup>75</sup> As Newiger rightly observes (1973, p. 137). The same conclusion seems to have been reached by Loenen (1959, pp. 192–6) and Guthrie (1962–81, p. 198), though their arguments for this point seem confused.

<sup>76</sup> Cook Wilson, 1892–93, p. 36; Newiger, 1973, pp. 130, 143.



expression ‘what is seen’ (τὰ ὁρώμενα), for example, can either signify (1) something that can be accessed *only* visually, perhaps the phenomenal quality of a color like ochre; or it can signify (2) something that is accessible by means of several senses *including* vision, that is, a visible object, such as a table. But the principle in question is plausible only if it involves ‘what is seen’ in the first, restrictive sense. If taken in the second sense, the authority that sight or any other sense possesses is only defeasible at best – its testimony can be overruled – and so would not provide the leverage the argument needs. The plausibility of the principle when taken in the first sense, though, is of little help. If ‘what is seen’ is construed in this way, the conflict envisaged between our experiences disappears entirely: what we see in this restricted sense, for example, counts neither for nor against what we hear. But then this case does not have any direct bearing on the *conflict* between seeing and thinking, as the argument requires. A classic equivocation: either the principle is plausible, but not relevant, or it is relevant, but not plausible; but in no case can it be both. And the explanation is near to hand: Sextus has simply borrowed a principle stated later in Part III (MXG 980b1–2; M. 7.83–5) and applied it in an inappropriate context.

Second, unlike the epistemological argument in MXG, Sextus’ version is not dilemmatic. It assumes right up until the conclusion that (MB) holds quite generally – the second arm of the MXG’s dilemma is never taken up. Nor does Sextus’ version reduce to the first arm of the MXG dilemma. The problem, on Sextus’ version, is not conflict *per se*, that if (MB) were applied to all cognitions equally, it would lead to contradiction. The objection instead is simply that the thought in question is false: there are no chariots racing on the sea. But then it takes us no further than the first intentional argument already had.

## Conclusion

In Part II of *On Not Being*, then, Gorgias argues against a certain strong thesis of intentionality, namely, that we can only have in mind what is, (MB). But he is not primarily concerned with this thesis as it occurs in Parmenides<sup>77</sup> – at any rate, his arguments would come to an abrupt impasse there, since the goddess can always respond on principle with silence. Gorgias seems to focus instead on later figures who apply (MB) to a human domain, including not only Melissus, but more importantly sophistic contemporaries such as Protagoras and the author of *On Expertise*, who take this thesis in new and different directions. Gorgias’ strategy in the first intentional argument is to show that (MB) immediately leads to absurdities, and even impossibilities. In the subsequent epistemological argument, he extends the thesis to different forms of cognition and raises a dilemma. If (MB) is applied to *all* forms of cognition equally, it leads to contradiction. But then it applies to *none*, since there seems to be no clear reason to assign it to one form of cognition rather than another (in the way Melissus himself, for example, maintains). And that leaves us a serious problem, namely, of how to sort out the true from the false in any given mode of cognition – a problem that later came to be called the problem of the criterion and which we may perhaps credit Gorgias with having first motivated.

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<sup>77</sup> Against the general consensus: for example, Nestle, 1942, pp. 308–9; Bröcker, 1958; Newiger, 1973, p. 181.

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# Presocratic Philosophy

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EDITED BY

VICTOR CASTON

*University of California, Davis*

and

DANIEL W. GRAHAM

*Brigham Young University*

ASHGATE