

Gorgias' scepticism regarding Greek social class distinctions in the *Funeral Oration* (DK.82.B5a)

Victor S. Alumona

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the covert sceptical disposition of Gorgias of Leontini, one of the major Sophists, regarding social class distinctions in the Greek Society of his day. This epistemological tendency is put through ingenious poetical and rhetorical styles of the sophist in one of his many set speeches meant for either epideictic delivery or as teaching text or both. The term, scepticism, is used here broadly to embrace the known epistemological standpoint of the Sophistic Movement, i.e. the doubt about the possibility of absolute knowledge, as well as the sense of mere doubt as expressed for example, about the legal institution, whether or not positive laws were issued by Apollo (Guthrie 1950:69). This intellectual disposition statement raises doubt about the validity of law as a societal institution. The model work of Gorgias discussed in this paper for the said purpose is the *Funeral Oration* (DK.82.B5a).

Rhetorical devices of Gorgias

Suidas describes succinctly the rhetorical styles of Gorgias and records that "he was the first to give to the rhetorical genre the verbal power and the art of deliberate culture. He employed tropes and metaphors and figurative language and hypallage and catacheris and hyperbaton and doubling of words and repetitions and apostrophes and clauses of equal length" (DK.82.A2).

Similarly, Cicero discusses the theory on which exercises in epideictic or ceremonial oratory is based. He points out that:

great indulgence is shown neatly turned sentences, and rhythmical steady-

ly, compact periods are always admirable, pains are taken purposely... to make one word answer to another, as if they had been measured together and were equal to each other. So that words opposed to each other may be frequently contrasted and contrasted words compared together; and that sentences be terminated on the same manner and may give the same sound at their conclusion (Cicero, *Oratio* xii).

In view of Meno's testimony that Gorgias, unlike the other Sophists who claim to teach *arete*, specialised in teaching the art of clever speaking in public, and given also Deodorus Siculus' account that Gorgias was the first to invent rhetorical techniques and so surpassed others in Sophistry, he must have contributed a lot in developing these rhetorical or epideictic techniques (Plato, *Meno*:95c). Philostratus in the *Lives of the Sophists* remarks that in terms of revolutionary techniques, Aeschylus is to tragedy what Gorgias is to rhetoric or oratory (DK.82.A4).

The issue at stake

For the purpose of this paper, the question is whether or not there is a relationship between these oratorical and literary styles, on the one hand, and Sophistic scepticism as social commentary, on the other. It appears that apart from delighting the ears of the audience, Gorgias' styles in his encomia have an epistemological import. In order to determine this, a comprehensive analysis of Gorgias' *Funeral Oration* is required, so as to trace how these literary or oratorical devices could aid the articulation of suggested arguments in the speech, as a way of highlighting the epistemological significance of these arguments. It has been said that the *Funeral Oration*, to be analysed shortly, "includes in its few lines all the stylistic peculiarities of Gorgias" (DK.82.A1).

The period and its functions in epideictic oratory: the speaker's perspective

The *period* is quite effective in epideictic rhetoric. This effectiveness, however, depends on the pattern of *periodic* deployment. For instance, "in order to build a poetic rhythm in prose, neither rhymes nor foot is the unit upon which it is based, but it is rather *the period*" (Smith 1921:348). Furthermore, when the *period* is short, the rhythm effect is quite poetic. A careful observation of the *Funeral Oration* reveals that the Gorgias' *period* is often so short that it resembles a verse of poetry (Smith 1921: 348).

Aristotle can be relied upon for our understanding the nature of the *period*, and possibly the appreciation of the empirical or sensual significance of it. According to him, "a *period* is a sentence having a beginning and an end in itself, and a magnitude which admits of being easily comprehended at a glance" (Smith 1921:348). As such, a period rarely extends beyond a line on a page. Generally, a *period* is made to be spoken, especially in the rhetorical tradition of Gorgias. This attribute describes the *period* further.

The *periodic* compact as a style in oratory "is agreeable and can easily be learnt" (Smith 1921: 348). It is agreeable because the audience is constantly imagining himself to have apprehended something from a constant identification of a definite conclusion of the sentence. Given that a *periodic* style can be numbered, it is easily learnt because the numbering is a mnemonic facility. Thus, "the *period* should be completed by the sense as well as by the rhythm" (Smith 1921:348). Gorgias observed this condition.

In addition, "a *period* may be divided into members or clauses, or it may be simple: divided, each part being complete in itself, properly divided and capable of being easily pronounced at a single breath, not, however, at the arbitrary divisions of the speaker, but as a whole; simple, it should consist of a simple number" (Aristotle *Rhet.* III.9). This Aristotelian description of the nature, and manner of deployment of the *periodic* compact fits the style of Gorgias exactly, and this is the style which the *Funeral Oration* exemplifies (Smith 1921:348).

The period and its functions in epideictic oratory: the audience's perspective

The foregoing describes the nature and functions of the *period* from the point-of-view of the hearer or audience. Here also, Aristotle is our surest guide. His dictum is that for the utmost benefit of the audience, "the members of the *periods* or the *periods* themselves should neither be truncated nor too long. If too short, they often make a hearer stumble, for if, while he is being carried along to the completion of the measure or rhythm, of which he has a definite notion in mind, he is suddenly pulled up by a pause on the part of the speaker, there will necessarily follow a sort of stumble in consequence of the sudden check. If, on the other hand, they are too long, they produce in the hearer a feeling of being left behind" (Aristotle *Rhet.* III.9).

The underlying theory of communication

The preceding consideration of the *period*, from the perspectives of both the speaker and the hearer, is guided by a theory of communication in a given context. From the foregoing discussion, we can see, along with Bromley Smith, that:

Aristotle had noticed concerning the length of a period or a member of a period that it should be capable of being "pronounced at a single breath" (Smith 1921:335-359).

In other words, the guiding "theory rests on the fact that Greek orators generally spoke out of doors and to large audiences either in the courts of law or at festivals. Thus forceful voices over the large gatherings or assemblies were imperative for the orator. Hence, a short unit of speech capable of being uttered in one breath was naturally developed" (Smith 1921:335 - 359).

A speaker who employed the "jointed" or "run-on" style now termed "loose" would have no regular places to breathe; therefore, his voice would trail out and, of course, would not be heard. The Orator in the *agora*, accordingly, used the same breath control as the rhapsodist or the actor, hurtling out short *period*, which is equivalent in vocal content to a verse in poetry (Smith 1921:335-359). So the *period* as described here was created firstly for the purposes of making audible and effective speeches.

This theory of communication is congruent with a particular intellectual epoch in Greece. This epoch, Havelock (1957) and Connors (1986:38), have described as a transitional period from orality, (when the [human] mind depended on mnemonic devices built into poems and other oral accounts of events to recall what has been learnt), to literacy when writing had commenced because of the introduction of Greek alphabets, although, at this stage, according to them, writing and learning was restricted to a few professionals. Thus, Connors calls it the epoch of "craft literacy". A prominent feature of this intellectual phase was that pedagogic subjects and materials were poetically and rhythmically arranged and thus enhanced the sense of sentimental attachment to what was learnt, and in consequence, there was a loss of objectivity regarding it. Thus, model speeches were suffused with compact *periodic* devices in order to achieve optimum rhetorical effect in accordance with the communication theory discussed above. Overall, we can say that the infusion of *periods* in the rhetoric of Gorgias was allied to an oral state of mind in the Greek culture of his time and thus explains its oratorical effectiveness.

Deductions from the preceding discussions

At this stage, some conclusions can be reached regarding the orator's intentions in using *periods*, especially in the light of Aristotle's characterisation of *periods*:

- The orator uses *periods* in speeches believing that he expresses meaning or sense through them.
- The audience apprehends meaning or sense from *periods* deployed in a speech by the orator.
- Thus, these *periods* are not merely ornamental devices designed to indulge the auditory appetites of the audiences, but are also vehicles of epistemological sense or meaning.

Philosophical/epistemological significance of the sense-bearing periods in Gorgias' *Funeral Oration*

Much as *periods* convey sense, this feature of them alone cannot be of great importance to us philosophically. That is, they do not necessarily give us significant arguments from which further deductions can be made. For, meanings can be expressed in bits and pieces in such a way that they yield no further knowledge about a subject, just as so many bricks left unstructured build no house, even though they can be identified individually as bricks. Thus, for us to determine the philosophical significance of the sense-bearing *periods* in the *Funeral oration*, it is necessary to ascertain the principle(s) of arrangement of the *periods*, as it is through the principle(s) of arrangement of the *periods*, that further conclusions can be deduced from the meanings conveyed by them. An excerpt of the *Oration* reveals, the arrangement in question.

Going by Bromley Smith's analysis of the *Funeral Oration*, the following structure manifests:

Main thought:

These men possessed a virtue that was divine, a mortality that was human.

Modifiers in parallel formation:

- **Preferring**
- **Considering**
 - (a) To speak
 - (b) To be silent
 - (c) To act
 - (d) To let alone
- **Cultivating**
 - (a) Planning
 - (b) Performing
- **Helpers**
- **Chastisers**
- **Pitiless**
- **Propitiating**
- **Checking**
- **Violent**
- **Moderate**
- **Gentle**
- **Terrible.**

Apparently, this exhibits a staccato arrangement, but rhetorically, it is an exquis-

ite statement in view of its "short, complete clauses... yet each connected with the main movement of the symphony" (Smith 1921:350). This musical feature of the sentence is produced by assonance, others by antitheses especially when the enumeration is taken in pairs. For instance, "to speak" versus "to be silent", "to act" versus "to let alone", "helpers" versus "chastisers", "violent" versus "moderate", "gentle" versus "terrible". Evidently, Gorgias balances *period* against *period*, word against word. This is the antithetical style for which Gorgias was famous.

Explanation of the antithetical periods in the context of the fifth century B.C. Greek enlightenment

The first major sentence of that *Oration* contains the following *periods*. It is said that the men possessed: "Virtue that was divine; mortality that was human". Understanding these *periods* in context requires examples of persons who could fit into the description, apart from the "unknown soldiers" eulogised in the speech. This first of such examples that comes to mind is Achilles. He was said to have had a dual parentage. His mother, Thetis, was a goddess while his father was human. This kind of parentage was consistent with certain Greek legendary beliefs according to which kings, prominent families, and other persons traced their origin to the gods. Socrates, in Plato's *Euthyphro*, hinted that Scephronicus, his father, descended from the mythical patron god of stonemasons - Daedalus. Thus, Bury (1966:55) maintains that "we must take it for granted, as an ultimate fact, that certain families had come to hold a privileged position above the others - had in fact, been marked out as noble, and claimed descent from Zeus". In the case of Achilles, his heroic exploits in the Trojan War can be said to be a vivid manifestation of his divine *arete* or virtue, which placed him firmly in the class of the *aristoi*-nobles who had leadership in the society as birth rights.

Later in Greek history, there were men who exhibited extraordinary leadership qualities that could have conferred on them the appellations of nobility similar to those of Achilles. Among these were the heroes of Marathon: Callimachus, the *strategos* of that year, Aeschylus, Miltiades, Themistocles. In the heyday of Athens, its unchallenged leader for thirty years was Pericles. The exploits of these men could have served as grounds for their descendants' claims to leadership positions in the Athenian Society. An example of this is shown in the fact that the conduct of war, which the Delian confederacy waged against Persia, was entrusted to

Cimon, son of Miltiades. Moreover, social class division in Greek Society between nobles and commoners was a fact of life. In the fifth century B.C. Athens, the age of the Sophists, one of the cultural beliefs that came under attack in the intellectual ferment of that epoch, was the "distinction between either high and low birth, or different races" (Guthrie 1969:153). Both Antiphon and Lycophron castigated social distinctions based on birth; they maintained that "there is much division and obscurity about its significance even among philosophers than among ordinary men" (Guthrie 1969:153). Even the dramatic creations of Euripides during this time bear a stamp of the critique of the idea of nobility. In the *Electra*, Oristes ruminates: "about manly virtues nothing is clear, for there is much confusion in the natures of men. I have seen a worthless son of a noble father, and fine children spring from the unworthy, poverty in the wit of a rich man and a great mind is a poor man's body" (Euripides, Fr.336). A more stringent opinion in this matter is the one by the unidentified character in the *Dictys* which essentially maintains that social distinction is not by nature (*physis*) but socially contrived (by *nomos*) (Guthrie 1969:153).

These critical opinions pertaining to the question of social class distinctions in society indicate that:

- there was obscurity and confusion about the matter - it was a period when the division aristocrat-commoner, by no means necessarily coincided with the political division, oligarch-democrat (Guthrie 1969:155).
- the nobility was a counter force to democracy up to the end of the fifth century B.C. in Athens.
- for Euripides (and possibly for Protagoras and Gorgias) the test for personality/character was moral; noble and good base-born and bad, were no longer interchangeable terms (Guthrie 1969:155).

These three conclusions are consequences of the humanist criticisms of the then current division in social classes based on pedigree and sometimes justified by claims to divine virtues. The interest of this paper is in the first of these conclusions. It maintains that obscurity and confusion attended the debate on the suitability of the noble-commoner distinction as a basis for social class division and assessment in society.

This very fact needs explanation: that in the generations preceding the epoch of the sophists in Greek cultural history, and even during their time, a person was regarded as either a noble or commoner because of the kind of *arete* or virtue he was deemed to possess, and which also manifested in his achievements. But how these *aretai* (virtues) were acquired by such persons was a subject of intense controversy. Some argued that the virtues were by *physis* or nature, while others maintained they were by *nomos*, in this case, meaning a product of socialisation. Thus, the origin of *arete* of a person upon which the social class distinction of aristocrat-commoner was predicated was one of the many topics within the encompassing *nomos-physis* antithesis debate in the epoch of the Sophists. There were supporters on either side of the debate whose arguments were also equally cogent.

It then appears that when Gorgias, in the *Funeral Oration* maintains that "these men possessed a virtue that was divine, a mortality that was human" he assumed the intellectual background of the *nomos-physis* antithesis debate, and possibly preferred the audience to do the same.

To claim that these men were repositories of divine virtues is to lead us to associate them with the (divinity, nobility) gods, and consider their *aretai* as naturally endowed. However, in describing them as possessing, at the same time, "mortality that was human", Gorgias' audience was also led to view these heroes as human in other things like other persons. Incidentally, therefore, and in spite of Achilles' gallantry, his excessive wrath over a denied right brought hardship and misfortune to his compatriots. Similarly, Miltiades' tactical insight which facilitated the Athenian victory at Marathon and his bravery in the field of war, did not shield him from condemnation for deceit after the collapse of his Paros expedition. Themistocles' statesmanship notwithstanding, he was susceptible to bribes and his vanity betrayed him into committing public indiscretion. Even Pericles was accused of looking the other way, while Phidias, the sculptor, embezzled public funds entrusted in his care for the works on the Acropolis.

Hence, Gorgias' juxtaposition of the supposed divine and human qualities of those fallen men has a lot of implications; the audience is led to consider them as divine in the light of their achievements. Yet, they are supposed to be human in some other things and in these ways, as the examples above suggest, exhibit the frailty of their human nature. This provokes a question: what is the basis of nobility, efficiency at one's job/assignment, moral strength, or character? This is a pertinent question given the fact that at this time "noble and good", "base-born and bad",

were no longer inter-changeable terms. Second, with sophistic dexterity in argumentation, this question can be considered according to the principle of the two-opposed *logoi* on each side of a question, which is congruent with the *nomos-physis* antithesis debate.

Regarding these opposed *logoi*, and the conclusions drawn from them, there were no absolute positions. Thus, if one argues that Themistocles was divine because of his noble qualities as a statesman, and another person counters that he was ignoble given his public indiscretions, both arguers would be *correct* according to the principle of the two-opposed *logoi* and *equipollence* of arguments. In consequence, there could then be a question mark in the minds of the audience as to how these evaluative terms should be applied to persons.

Consequently, by applying antithetical clauses reminiscent of the confusion and obscurity of the terms that were associated with the debate on, and application of the "noble-commoner" distinction of persons in the Greek Society, Gorgias succeeds wittingly or otherwise in reminding the audience of the uncertainty associated with the application of these terms, and thus raises scepticism as to the appropriateness of the appellations.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show Gorgias' prowess in oratory as he introduced new techniques in epideictic rhetoric just as Aeschylus did in drama. One of these techniques was his antithetical deployment of *periods* in his oratory as seen in *The Funeral Oration*. It was also shown that *periods* are bearers of meaning or sense, following Aristotle's explication of their nature.

Furthermore, it was highlighted that in the *Funeral Oration*, the first major sentence consists of *periods* antithetically arranged and modified. When this antithetical arrangement is considered in the context of the *nomos-physis* antithesis debate of the fifth century B.C., scepticism is then cast on the basis or origin of the virtues of the fallen heroes in particular, and by extension, that of the distinction between noble and commoner in Greek Society of Gorgias' epoch.

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Victor S Alumona
Department of Philosophy
Obafemi Awolowo University
Ile-Ife
Nigeria
onuegbe2002@yahoo.com