

Anti-Eleatic Methods of Argument in the Sophists

The sophists are often considered to be somewhat separate from the mainstream history of the Presocratics (Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, etc.), which prepared the ground for Plato. There may be some truth to this view, but I will argue that with regard to their methods of argument, the sophists were squarely in the Presocratic tradition. I focus on Parmenides' assertion, "is" [or "it is"] and not "is not," and on elaborations of it by Melissus and Zeno. I argue that both Gorgias and Protagoras directly challenged this thesis, by using the same method of argument as Parmenides to produce an opposite conclusion. They also broadened this Eleatic method of argument for other uses.

In *On Not-Being* Gorgias directly answers Parmenides by asserting that nothing is, and then proving this by using a type of argument nearly identical to that of Melissus B1 (and also Zeno B4 – the arrow paradox): "Whatever-was always was and always will be. For if it came to be, before it came to be, it must have been nothing. But if it was nothing, in no way would anything come to be from nothing" (Melissus B1). The unstated in this argument are that if what-was came to be, it necessarily came to be either from what-is or from what-is-not; but if it came to be from what-is then it would already have existed and there would be no coming-to-be; thus, it cannot have come to be from what-is. Melissus's stated argument then shows that what-is cannot have come to be from what-is-not (as one might think it did). Gorgias uses exactly the same argument in *On Not-Being* to argue that because "is" cannot have come to be either from is or from is-not, then "is" cannot have come to be and thus cannot exist. This type of argument is called "apagogic": (1) if A, then either B or not-B; (2a) not B and (2b) not not-B; (3) therefore not A.

Gorgias also directly challenges Parmenides when he asserts (B26): "Being is unclear if it does not meet with opinion (*doxa*), and opinion is weak if it does not meet with being." For Parmenides, Being, which is the way of Truth, is separate from and opposed to the way of Opinion (*doxa*). Gorgias asserts to the contrary that not only do both these exist, they are

mutually dependent.

Protagoras' direct challenge to Parmenides is his assertion that "on every matter there are two *logoi* opposed to one another" (B6a). This can be seen as an echo of Parmenides' claim that there are two ways, truth and opinion, but for Parmenides, only one of these ways is true.

Protagoras, on the other hand, clearly means that both *logoi* are valid, and his urging people "to make the weaker *logos* stronger" (B6b) confirms this. Moreover, Protagoras' main work, entitled *Truth (Alētheia)* or *Overthrowing [Arguments] (Kataballontes)*, began with his famous assertion (B1): "man is the measure of all things, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not." The title *Truth* suggests that it was aimed at Parmenides and that *contra* Parmenides, truth includes both things that are and things that are not.

Gorgias and other sophists also expanded the apagogic method, which they took from the Eleatics. A strict apagogic argument is logically conclusive: if A requires either B or not-B, and if one can show both "not B" and "not not-B," then "not A" necessarily follows. A less strict example used by the sophists can be called the argument by practical elimination. Take, for example, the well-known argument of Gorgias' *Helen* concerning "... the likely reasons for Helen's journey to Troy. Either she did what she did because of the will of fortune and the plan of the gods and the decree of necessity, or she was seized by force, or persuaded by words, or captured by love" (5-6). Gorgias then refutes each possibility in turn, and concludes that Helen escapes blame entirely. The argument by practical elimination relies on likelihood (*eikos*) – these are the likely alternatives – and was commonly used, for example, by defendants in court to deny that they had a motive for the alleged crime: (e.g.) the likely motives are money, revenge, etc.; none of these applies to me; therefore, I am innocent. In this way, the Sophists took the very strict method of the Eleatics and made it more flexible for practical use.

Bibliography

Sophistic fragments are cited from Hermann Diels & Walter Kranz. 1951. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 6th ed. Berlin.