

## Religious, poetic and argumentative persuasion in the *Helen* of Gorgias

Emanuel Rutten  
VU University

*What is this special gift of the word? It almost seems to be something divine.* This is a quote from Socrates in Plato's dialog *Gorgias*. Here, Socrates connects the power of the word with the divine. And this happened more often in classical antiquity. Many believed that the magic of the word is not of this world. Yet, conversely, in the rhetoric tradition of classical antiquity, religion is rarely referred to and analysed as a rhetorical practice. One of the few classical rhetorical texts within which religious practice is viewed through a rhetorical lens is the oration *Helen* of Gorgias.

In what follows I discuss what Gorgias has to say about religious speech considered as a form of rhetorical speech directed at persuasion, or more precisely, what according to Gorgias rhetoric teaches us about the nature and origin of the persuasiveness of religious speech.

Now, to properly understand how, according to Gorgias, from a rhetorical perspective religious beliefs arise, I shall first deal with his conception of the connection between language, thinking and being. And for that I will consider his treatise *On the Non-Existent or On Nature* – after which I shall engage with his rhetorical interpretation of religious speech in the *Helen*. In this way it becomes clear wherein lies the power of religious speech and what it means for the way in which people are religiously convinced and come to religious faith.

Specific text fragments of Gorgias that have been handed down to us, make it highly plausible that as a student of Empedocles he first devoted himself to natural philosophy. Entirely in line with the predominant pre-Socratic thinking of his time, his natural philosophy is characterized by a strong naturalism. Natural phenomena should no longer be explained from transcendent supernatural causes, but must be subjected to critical examination in order to reduce them systematically to the workings of immanent natural principles and immanent natural primal elements.

At some point, however, he turned himself to more fundamental philosophical questions. For the earliest complete work of Gorgias that has been handed down to us, namely the aforementioned *On the Non-Existent or On Nature*, is a fundamental metaphysical treatise on the very nature of being, thinking, language and knowledge – including the various fundamental relationships between them.

In this text Gorgias argues, against Parmenides, yet by using typical Parmenidean or Eleatic methods of reasoning, that there is no human or mind independent intelligible being, and that, even if there were such a being, it would be unknowable to us, while even if it would be knowable to us, it would still be impossible for us to communicate such knowledge to others. By argumentatively establishing this conclusion, Gorgias effectively refuted the entire Eleatic metaphysics on which the pre-Socratic project of natural philosophy was premised.

So, on Gorgias, thinking and language are no longer naïvely understood as being nothing more or less than means to properly describe a human or mind independent reality. Instead, thinking and language became whole independent. Gorgias smashed the tight rigid coupling of both to an alleged human or mind independent reality. Thereby he liberated human thought and speech from the oppressive grip of the dominant Parmenidean philosophy of being. Human *logos* came to stand on its own. Human *logos* became its own lord and master. And the proper task of the philosopher now

becomes to examine and map the fundamental features of this new disclosed inner realm of the *logos*. Precisely this is the task that Gorgias subsequently must have set for himself as a philosopher.

\*\*\*

What did his analysis of the *logos* result in? Since there is no mind or human independent intelligible being that can be known, Gorgias re-orientes the *logos*. From now on, human *logos* will exclusively focus on the world of phenomena and appearances. According to Gorgias, the phenomena are constituted by the free interplay of primary impressions, such as impressions of colour or taste, and the human *logos*. The world of phenomena is brought into being by human *logos*. And what we call world or being is precisely this collection of phenomena and appearances. There's nothing beyond.

Any generally accepted view within the community can become part of this realm of phenomena and thus of being. This also applies to views that transcend the empirical, such as moral, political, metaphysical and religious judgments. So we as human beings do not orient the *logos* to an always already given independent being. It's exactly the other way around. Being is directed towards *logos*.

Because phenomenal being is constructed by our thinking and speaking, humankind and language are always already involved in it. Humankind, language and being thus form an inseparable unity, as Heidegger will proclaim centuries later. We inhabit an inherently linguistic reality. Moreover, the phenomenal world into which we are thrown is a spiritual world that we as linguistic, thinking and speaking beings always already produce in and through language, in and through the word.

In the absence of an absolute Archimedean reference point, nothing in the linguistically grounded phenomenal world can be known with certainty. Therefore, all our views are opinions or *doxa*. And an opinion always has a provisional status. As human beings we thus have no choice but to engage in uncertain views. By thinking and speaking, we form reasonable opinions. And by forming generally accepted opinions, we make things appear and thus come into being. Only in this way there exists for us an existentially meaningful and even spiritual world of phenomena and appearances.

So, according to Gorgias, there is truth, but what is called 'true' is always a generally accepted view within the community. That is to say, truths are always communal truths. They are intersubjectively accepted options by all members of the community. Truth is therefore confined to the phenomenal realm of experiences grounded in human *logos*. What we call 'world' or 'being' or 'reality' is realized and mediated by the human mind. And it is language through which the mind moves and creates our phenomenal world. Hence word and spirit are the foundational structures of all phenomenal being.

It follows that the word has an immense influence. Language creates realities. Words matter. Hence Gorgias' analysis of *logos* results in a powerful meta-rhetoric grounded in the creative power of the word. Because this power, the power to produce realities, plays such a vital role in rhetoric, rhetoric indeed refers to the divine. For it is God that creates the world through the word. As *John 1:3-4* has it: "Through the word all things were made; without the word nothing was made that has been made. In the word was life, and that life was the light of all mankind." So, word is light. Word is life.

\*\*\*

In light of this, Gorgias' rhetorical theory is in fact all-encompassing. Poetry, religion, philosophy, and science are all ultimately understood as rhetorical practices. Rhetorically, they are all specific forms of verbal persuasion. Now, in the *Helen* Gorgias clarifies how religion compares to other rhetorical practices. Gorgias wrote this oration for rhetorical education. In it, he wants to exonerate Helen, the beautiful wife of the Spartan king Menelaus, from the accusation of being responsible for the war with Troy. Gorgias begins his argument with a list of plausible causes for Helen leaving Sparta.

Here Gorgias makes a distinction between two categories of causes. First, external causes on which man has no influence, namely the will of the gods, metaphysical necessity or brute coincidence. This first category of causes is properly referred to as *fatum* or fate. Second, there are various causes that concern the interpersonal social world of human action, which are violence or physical force, verbal persuasion and love or being seduced. These three causes are all examples of being overwhelmed.

Gorgias then argues that Helen is not to blame in the case of *fatum*. Since mankind isn't able to resist divine intervention, metaphysical necessity or brute chance, Helen is innocent when the cause is related to fate. Then he argues that Helen is also innocent in case of being overwhelmed.

Indeed, if she is overwhelmed by violent force, then surely she is not to blame. And Helen is not responsible either for the war with Troy if she was overwhelmed by love. For if *eros* is a god with divine power, how could Helen resist love? And if *eros* is a madness of the human soul, then Helen is simply seized by madness, so there is no free conscious intent and therefore there is no guilt.

Finally, if she has been overwhelmed by verbal persuasion, then she isn't to blame either. For, as Gorgias has it, *the word is a mighty ruler*. Words can vigorously stir the human soul and therefore strongly transform our mood and emotions. To substantiate that verbal persuasion, like physical power and seductive love, is indeed a quite forceful form of overwhelming, Gorgias identifies and explores three categories of verbal persuasion: poetry, religion and argumentative reasoning.

About the first category of verbal persuasion, namely poetry, Gorgias writes the following:

I both deem and define all poetry as language in meter. Fearful shuddering and tearful pity and grievous longing come upon its hearers, and at the actions and physical sufferings of others in good fortunes and in evil fortunes, through the agency of words, the soul experiences a suffering of its own.

Poetry can have a decisive influence on the temper and feelings of those to whom the word is firmly addressed. One is carried away and transformed by its power and strength. The listener is verbally being overwhelmed by poetic language and becomes captivated by it. Being enchanted by poetic words leads to persuasion. Gorgias attributes a quite similar effect to the second category of verbal persuasion, namely religious speech. I quote:

Sacred incantations sung with words are bearers of pleasure and banishers of pain, for, merging with opinion in the soul, the power of the incantation beguiles it and persuades it and alters it by sorcery. There have been discovered two arts of sorcery and magic: one consists of errors of soul and the other of deceptions of opinion.

Apparently the religious word is also capable of touching the listener emotionally. It invokes feelings of delight and rapture at a deep level. Here religion is broadly understood as a realm that includes divine revelation, magic, sorcery and oracle spells. They all strongly move the soul and this results in verbal persuasion. The emotional effect of religious speech moves and thus motivates the listener. So religious persuasion is primarily grounded in a physiological-psychological movement of the soul.

Yet, as opposed to poetic verbal persuasion, Gorgias connects religious verbal persuasion not only to the soul or *psyche*, being the seat of affections and feelings, but also to the seat of the cognitive or opinion. Where he connects poetry with the soul and religion with both soul and opinion, Gorgias connects the third category of verbal persuasion, namely argumentative reasoning, with opinion alone. He distinguishes three types of argumentative reasoning: science, rhetoric and philosophy.

Gorgias explains that we have no choice but to apply our argumentative reasoning to fallible and thus uncertain opinions. But this uncertainty is also a precondition for the power of the word, that is to say, for the very possibility of overwhelming others by verbal persuasion. The power of the word that captivates us therefore also dominates the cognitive realm of argumentative reasoning. We are persuaded because we fall under the spell of words that move us towards accepting the conclusion.

Now, on Gorgias, religion, rhetorically considered as being a form of verbal persuasion, is in fact the proper mean between poetry and argumentative reasoning. For religious persuasion includes both the somatic-psychological element of poetic persuasion and the cognitive element of persuasion by argumentative reasoning. Where poetry solely addresses the psychosomatic level of the soul, and argumentative reasoning solely addresses the cognitive level of the mind, it is religion and religion alone that addresses both levels and therefore the entire human being.

In the *Helen* Gorgias also makes a distinction between good and bad forms of verbal persuasion. Verbal persuasion becomes deeply problematic if it is not sincere, not reasonably substantiated and not grounded in generally accepted communal truths. So there is good and bad science, good and bad philosophy, good and bad poetry, and good and bad religion. Hence truth matters. Speakers are not to be insincere because without truth-oriented speech disorder and thus chaos will arise in the city. Although the power of the word is magical, only good speech employs this magic responsibly and puts it into practice to serve society. Good forms of verbal persuasion do not deceive, but let everything shine, appear and thus be. And this is virtuous. Hence good forms of verbal persuasion, are entirely ethical and are a vital part of a properly functioning cultural community.

That's why the word is compared by Gorgias with a medicine that can either heal or make sick. All this applies thus also to religious speech. Good religious words appeal to the soul as well as to the mind and deploy the power of the word sincerely and responsibly.

So, after having explored the three categories of verbal persuasion, Gorgias again concludes that also in the case of verbal persuasion, Helen just couldn't resist the overwhelming speech of Paris. She is not guilty because she was overpowered by his mighty words. And while Gorgias concludes his argument, the judges listening to his oration personally experience exactly the power of the word about which Gorgias speaks. The effect of his oration thus perfectly fits its argumentative content.

\*\*\*

But if words persuade us by moving us inwardly, then the question arises as to which feature of words is the ultimate cause of such persuasive inner movement? What is the ultimate origin of this almost divine power of the word? Now, just as he did for his natural philosophy, Gorgias must have searched for a naturalistic explanation of this apparently divine phenomenon. But then, if this inner movement is primarily a natural phenomenon, it is likely largely a physiological and psychological phenomenon, and to a lesser extent a cognitive phenomenon. From this it plausibly follows that what moves us inwardly is mainly a matter of the pleasant and enjoyable – and therefore mainly a matter of elegant stylistic care and attractive engaging style. Indeed, on Gorgias, graceful appealing poetic style is ultimately the main reason or cause of being persuasively affected inwardly by words.

And indeed, if words in such different fields as poetry, religion, philosophy, and science have the power to persuade, then this power must be grounded into something that is essentially a property of the words themselves, that is, a property of the words qua words, rather than a specific content attached to the words. Now, what else could this property be if not the way in which the words are used, that is, the manner of expression? But then, whether or not the inner being of a human being

is moved depends primarily on the form or style, that is to say, on how the words are used. It thus follows that good style is indeed the main cause of inner motion and hence of verbal persuasion.

In addition, according to Gorgias, the art of poetry is the paradigmatic or exemplary example of the power and magic of the word. And it is precisely in poetry that we experience clearly how the word is capable of touching and moving people inwardly and thereby convincing the listeners. But surely, the most characteristic feature of poetry as a practise is style. But then it follows again that stylistic formation is the main source of verbal persuasion. That's why Gorgias advocates a deep connection between feelings or *pathos* and style. Appealing and attractive figures of speech are core means to fascinate, amaze, carry along, animate, transform, and thus convince an audience.

Finally, if primarily the content of what is spoken dictates whether or not the audience is convinced, there would not be so many people who hold totally opposite views. Sheer content is therefore not a decisive determinant of becoming convinced. But then once again, following Gorgias' rhetorical line of reasoning, form or style presents itself as the main causal factor of persuasiveness.

So the apparent divine or transcendent power of the word is indeed understood by Gorgias wholly immanently as being a natural phenomenon. Verbal persuasion is caused by poetic prose capable of deeply affecting and transforming the public inwardly due to aptly chosen figures of speech. In this way the public becomes persuaded of what the power of the word makes appear and thus be. When Heidegger argues that the language of poetry gives us access to being by making everything appear, the voice of Gorgias echoes unmistakably.

But what does all this mean for the way in which people come to religious faith? From a rhetorical perspective the answer seems obvious. Engaging poetic style also matters in religious speech. It is not accidental or optional, but constitutes an essential core element of persuasive religious words.

As we read in *John 1*: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Here, the Bible speaks clearly about the Word and not about the Idea or the Content. Because words matter. Would the Bible have been just as convincing if all its contents would have been communicated without any sense for style, that is, without any sense for word choice and word arrangement? To pose the question is to answer it. That the mode of expression is essential for poetry is obvious. But with Gorgias we have to say that the mode of expression is also essential for religious language. Style is religiously relevant. Hence not only religious content, but also style has intrinsic religious value. The Greek word *logos* affirms that word, content and spirit coexist and form a unity. But then indeed also for religion style is vital and not secondary, even when it comes down to the actual persuasiveness of the content of the faith.