

Gorgias, "On Non-Existence": Sextus Empiricus, "Against the Logicians" 1.65-87, Translated from the Greek Text in Hermann Diels's "Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker"

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Gorgias, *On Non-Existence*: Sextus Empiricus,  
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Vorsokratiker*\*

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Bruce McComiskey

Throughout *Against the Logicians*, Sextus Empiricus, a third century C.E. skeptical philosopher, describes selected texts by earlier sophists who refuted to *tês alêtheias kritêrion* ("the standard of truth"). The following selection summarizes Gorgias's attempt in *On Non-Existence* to abolish this "standard" which guides natural philosophy yet reduces rhetoric to the transparent representation of truth.

(65) In what is titled *On Non-Existence or On Nature*, Gorgias develops three sequential arguments: first and foremost, that nothing exists; second, that even if existence exists, it is inapprehensible to humans; and, third, that even if existence is apprehensible, nevertheless it is certainly not able to be communicated or interpreted for one's neighbors.

(66) And so Gorgias concludes that nothing exists in this manner: for if anything exists, either existence or non-existence exists alone, or existence and non-existence exist together. However, neither does existence exist alone, as Gorgias will suggest, nor does non-existence exist alone, as he will demonstrate, nor do existence and non-existence exist together, as he will also instruct. Therefore, nothing exists. (67) And so [to the first argument that] non-existence does not exist: if non-existence exists, then it will both exist and not exist simultaneously, for if it is apprehended as non-existence, then it will not exist, and yet if it is non-existence, then, on the contrary, it will exist. However, it would be utterly absurd for something to exist and not exist simultaneously; therefore, non-existence does not exist.

\* Professor McComiskey was not a member of the panel "Translating Gorgias: New Versions of 'On Not-Being'" that took place on 19 November 1995 during the 81st Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association in San Antonio, Texas. The panel is the source of the other contributions on Gorgias printed above. Professor McComiskey's manuscript reached us serendipitously.

—Ed.

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Moreover, if non-existence exists, then existence will not exist, for these two are opposed to each other; and if existence is a quality of non-existence, then non-existence will be a quality of existence. But it is absolutely not true that existence does not exist, and so nor again will non-existence exist. (68) And [so to the second argument that] existence does not exist: for if existence exists, then it is either eternal or created or simultaneously eternal and created. However, existence is neither eternal nor created nor both simultaneously, as we will demonstrate; therefore, existence does not exist. If existence is eternal (and one must begin from this point), then it does not have any origin, (69) for all that is created has some origin. But the uncreated eternal has no origin; and having no origin, it is infinite; and if it is infinite, then it is nowhere. For if existence occupies some finite space, then that which contains existence is something other than that same existence; and so existence will no longer be infinite if it is contained by something, for the container is greater than the contained. But nothing is greater than infinity; therefore, the infinite cannot exist anywhere. (70) Further, existence is not contained within itself, since then the container and that which is contained will be the same, and existence will become two contradictory things, position and body (position is the container and body the contained). But this is absurd. And so existence is not contained within itself. Therefore, if existence is eternal, then it is infinite; and if it is infinite, then it is nowhere; and if it is nowhere, then existence does not exist. Thus if existence is eternal, then existence has no origin. (71) And so existence cannot be created, for if existence has been created, then it has been created either out of existence or non-existence. But existence has not been created out of existence, for if it is *existence*, then it has not been created but already exists. Nor [has existence been created out of] non-existence, for non-existence is not able to create anything, since the creator of something must necessarily partake of what already exists. Therefore, existence is not created. (72) Similarly, this same existence is not both eternal and created simultaneously, for these two are mutually opposed; and if existence is eternal, then it has not been created, and if existence has been created, then it is not eternal. Thus if existence is neither eternal nor created nor both simultaneously, then existence would not exist. (73) Moreover, if existence exists, it is either one or many. But existence is neither one nor many, as will be shown; therefore, existence does not exist. For if existence is one, then it is either a certain mass or continuity or size

or form. But whichever of these existence might be, it is not one, for mass will be divided and continuity will be cut apart; likewise, what is understood as having size will not be indivisible; and if existence happens to be a form, then it will be threefold, for it will have height, width, and depth. But it is absurd to suggest that existence is not any of these; therefore, existence is not one. (74) Further, existence is not many: if it is not one, nor is it many, for the many is a plurality of individual ones; and by confuting the one, the many is similarly confuted. For it is evident from these arguments that neither existence nor non-existence exists alone. (75) And it is easy to conclude [turning now to the third argument] that both existence and non-existence do not exist together. For even if non-existence exists and existence exists, then non-existence will be the same as existence insofar as it is opposed to existence, and because of this contradictory interdependence, neither one of the two exists. For it is agreed upon that non-existence does not exist, and existence has been proven to be the same thing as non-existence; therefore, this same existence will not exist. (76) And if indeed existence is the same thing as non-existence, then both can not exist together, for if both existence and non-existence exist together, then they must not be the same thing, and if they are the same thing, then they do not exist together. It follows, then, that nothing exists, for if neither non-existence exists nor existence exists nor both exist together, and if nothing is imaginable other than these, then nothing exists.

(77) And next Gorgias argues that even if anything exists, it is always unknowable and inconceivable to humans. For if things-being-thought do not exist, Gorgias says, then existence is not thought. And he continues the argument: for if the color white were a quality of things-being-thought, then being-thought would also be a quality of white things; and also if being-non-existent were a quality of things-being-thought, then not-being-thought would also necessarily be a quality of existence. (78) Therefore, the argument "if existent things-being-thought do not exist, then existence is not thought" is sound and follows logically in sequence. For existent things-being-thought do not exist (and we must begin with this point), as we will set forth; therefore, existence is not thought. And so it is evident that existent things-being-thought do not exist: (79) for if existent things-being-thought exist, then all things-being-thought exist, and in whatever way anyone thinks them, which is absurd. For if one thinks about some human taking flight or chariots riding swiftly under wa-

ter, neither does a human directly take flight nor do chariots ride swiftly under water; therefore, existent things-being-thought do not exist. (80) Likewise, if existent things-being-thought exist, then non-existence will not be thought, for antithetical things have qualities of their opposites, and non-existence is antithetical to existence. And [this point is demonstrated] especially through this: if being-thought is a quality of existence, then not-being-thought will be a quality of non-existence. But this is absurd, for Scylla and Chimaera and many other non-existent things are imagined; therefore, existence is not thought. (81) Just as objects of sight are said to be visible because they are seen and objects of hearing are said to be audible because they are heard, and we do not repudiate objects of sight because they are not heard nor reject objects of hearing because they are not seen (for everything ought to be discerned according to its own appropriate mode of perception and not according to some other mode), so things-being-thought will exist even if they should neither be seen through vision nor heard through hearing, since things-being-thought are perceived according to their own appropriate standard. (82) Thus if some man thinks that chariots ride swiftly under water, even if he does not see them, nevertheless he would still believe that chariots are riding swiftly under water. But this is absurd; therefore, existence is not thought or perceived.

(83) But even if existence should be perceived, nevertheless it could not be communicated to another person. For if existent things are visible and audible and generally perceivable—that is, as external substances—and of these things, the ones that are visible are apprehended by sight and the ones that are audible are apprehended by hearing (and not the other way around), then how could these external things possibly be communicated to another person? (84) For *logos* is the means by which we communicate, but *logos* is different from substances and existent things. Thus we do not communicate existent things to our neighbors; instead we communicate only *logos*, which is something other than material substances. Certainly, just as the visible would not become audible and vice versa, so external existence (as substances) would not become our *logos*; (85) and as something other than *logos*, external existence could not be revealed to another person. And indeed Gorgias says that *logos* is produced when realities (that is, perceivable objects) strike us from outside. For when we experience a flavor, we generate *logos* regarding that quality; and when we see a color, we generate *logos* regarding that color. But if

this is so, then logos is not a representation of the external, but the external becomes the signifier of logos. (86) And, of course, it is impossible to say that visible and audible things have substance in the same way that logos does, in which case logos would represent substantial and existent things by means of its own substance and existence. But Gorgias says that even if logos does have substance, still it is different from other substances, and visible shapes are to the greatest extent different from logos, for the visible is apprehended by a different mode of sense perception than logos. Thus logos does not reveal the many substances, just as these substances do not manifest each other's natural condition.

(87) Given these difficulties (insofar as they are valid), according to Gorgias, the standard of truth is itself destroyed, for if nature can neither exist nor be known nor be represented, then there would be no standard.

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