Gorgias’ Περὶ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος and its Relation to Skepticism

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Abstract

The paper examines whether Gorgias’ On What Is Not should be considered an instance of skepticism. It begins with an analysis of the work as reported by the two sources, Sextus Empiricus and the anonymous author of On Melissus, Xenophanes and Gorgias. It is then argued that the Pyrrhonian skeptics did not regard On What Is Not as skeptical. Nonetheless, it is possible to read the work as offering counter-arguments to Parmenides, with a view to inducing suspension of judgment in Pyrrhonian fashion. However, it is also possible to regard it as skeptical in a sense current in modern philosophy: that is, as posing challenges to our understanding of things with a view to forcing philosophers to come up with better theories. In this light, it can be seen as an important stimulus to the philosophical breakthroughs apparent in Plato’s Sophist.

Keywords

Skepticism, Gorgias, Sextus Empiricus, Pyrrhonism, Parmenides

1. Introduction

The Greek Sophists of the later fifth century BCE have at least one thing in common with the ancient Greek skeptics: they are in the business of constructing opposing arguments on
the same subjects. Diogenes Laertius tells us that Protagoras “was the first to say that there are two arguments opposed to one another on every topic” (9.51), and his fellow Sophists clearly followed him in this. Elsewhere, Diogenes tells us that Arcesilaus, the head of the Academy who turned it in a skeptical direction, exploited “the oppositions of arguments” and “first undertook to argue on both sides” (4.28—that is, first among the Academics). And Sextus Empiricus calls skepticism itself “an ability to produce oppositions” (dunamis antithetikê, PH 1.8). It was no doubt a perception of this common ground that led someone to tack the Dissoi Logoi or “Double Arguments,” a work associated with the Sophistic movement\(^1\) and consisting mainly of opposing arguments on a series of issues, on to the text of Sextus Empiricus, to whose manuscripts it owes its survival.

Yet the Sophists and the skeptics surely differed in the purposes with which they engaged in this activity. In the Sophists’ case, the aim was to develop the ability to argue effectively for either side (or any side) of a given case. One way this was described was “making the weaker argument the stronger”—that is, bringing it about that the side of a debate that (on the merits, so to speak) one would expect to be defeated actually wins. Aristotle suggests that this was something Protagoras explicitly professed to do (Rhet. 1402a24–6); Aristotle also makes clear that it aroused opposition (rightly, in his view). And in fact, this description more often appears as a reason for suspicion, as in Plato’s Apology, where it features as part of the charge Socrates says is due to his “earlier accusers” (19b5–c1), and in Aristophanes’ Clouds, where the Stronger and the Weaker Argument actually appear as characters (and have an argument). In any case, the point of the Sophists’

\(^{1}\) On the clearly Sophistic content of the Dissoi Logoi, see Bett (2002: esp. sec. I); in favor of the traditional dating of the work around 400 BCE, see n. 8.
rhetorical teaching was to enable one to come out on top in argument. By contrast, the whole point of the skeptics’ construction of opposing arguments is that none of them is to come out on top; one suspends judgment because the considerations on each side strike one as equally forceful.

Despite this obvious and important difference, one may still retain the feeling that there is a certain kinship between the Sophists and the skeptics.² By contrast with Plato, Aristotle, or the Stoics, who aim to discover and articulate the truth about things,³ the Sophists and the skeptics seem to come across as spoilers, casting doubt on that very enterprise. Now, this may very well misrepresent the Sophists; we know that they had numerous significant theoretical interests, and the almost complete loss of their writings probably makes their rhetorical activities loom larger in our overall view of them than they should. Nevertheless, given the evidence on the Sophists that we do have, it is natural to feel that they inhabit a very different intellectual space from the “straight up” philosophers I just mentioned, and that in this respect they are much closer to the skeptics.

In this paper I want to consider one particular Sophistic work, Gorgias’ Peri Tou Mê Ontos or On What Is Not, with regard to this very issue. Among the many labels this work has received in the scholarship, “skeptical” is one of the most common.⁴ Is this label

² Aspects of this are explored in Striker (1996: esp. 18–21).

³ Some may hesitate to place Plato on this list; unlike the others, he does not simply tell us what he thinks and why. But it can hardly be doubted that his aspiration for philosophy itself is that it discover and articulate the truth, however far from that ideal condition he may take himself and his contemporaries to be.

⁴ As noted by Mazzara (1982: 264) (though Mazzara argues for a strongly metaphysical reading). The view of Gorgias as skeptical goes back at least to Zeller (e.g., 2000: 86). Some recent examples
justified, and if so, on what grounds? The answer, I think, is somewhat complicated. And, to the extent that one senses common ground between Sophists and skeptics, this may lead one to modify that attitude.

2. Outline of the Work

_Peri Tou Mé Ontos_ (hereafter, _PTMO_ for short) has not survived in Gorgias’ original wording. What we have, instead, are two summaries, clearly independent of one another: one in Sextus Empiricus (_M_ 7.65–87), the other in one of the smaller works in the Aristotelian corpus, _On Melissus, Xenophanes, and Gorgias_ (hereafter, _MXG_). No one today thinks the latter work was written by Aristotle, and estimates of its date have varied quite widely⁵; but its author is generally thought to be somewhat earlier than Sextus. Of course, an earlier date does not guarantee greater accuracy. However, the general consensus today seems to be that Sextus’ agenda and characteristic approach lead him to depart further from Gorgias’ original text, even if on some occasions he may preserve elements of the original that _MXG_ does not include.⁶ In terms of vocabulary, this is no doubt true; Sextus frequently uses language from post-classical philosophy. But in terms of the

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⁵ Ioli (2010: 24–25) neatly summarizes the range of proposed dates.

⁶ For this general view, see Mansfeld (1988: 240–241). For verdicts to this effect concerning each of the three parts of the work (on which more in a moment), see Kerferd (1981: 96), Caston (2002), and Mourelatos (1987)—and see further n. 8.
structure of the work, I shall suggest, this verdict may need at least some qualification. For my purposes it is not necessary to achieve a complete and settled view on this question; but if we are trying to reconstruct what Gorgias said, the question is obviously relevant. A further serious difficulty in that enterprise, however, is that the text of *MXG* is in a pretty dreadful state; the two main manuscripts often diverge, and often neither yields any recognizable sense. Jonathan Barnes once opined that “a judicious scholar might be tempted to set one obelus at the beginning and another at the end” (1983: 66)—in other words, simply declare the entire text a hopeless mess.

But things are not quite as bad as that. Despite the undeniable problems, there is enough in common between the two versions of *PTMO* that we can learn a fair amount about what Gorgias must have said. Both Sextus and *MXG* agree, first, on what Gorgias’ three main conclusions were: first, that nothing is (*ouden estin*); second, that even if anything is, it cannot be known; and third, that even if it can be known, it cannot be communicated to others (*M* 7.65, 979a12–13). There are some differences in their respective statements of the second and third conclusions, Sextus’ language being more characteristic of later philosophy and *MXG*’s more everyday and non-technical (already an example of *MXG*’s probably more original vocabulary); but it is easy to see that they are the same three conclusions, translatable into these simple English sentences. And this general form of argument—“not-A; but even if A, not-B; but even if B, not-C”, etc.—has a clear parallel in Gorgias’ surviving *Palamedes* (6–12), where the various alternatives all entail Palamedes’ innocence. In addition, there are many clear parallels in the forms of

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7 Rodríguez (2019) goes further than I do in seeing Sextus’ structure as a more reliable guide to the original. However, I have learned a lot from this article.
argument the two reports of *PTMO* attribute to Gorgias. This is particularly obvious in the first part (nothing is). I now offer a brief summary of the main lines of argument, as reported by our two sources, with special emphasis on the first part.8

After the initial statement of the three conclusions, both authors give a preview of the first part. According to Sextus, the argument is to come in three segments: it will be shown that there is neither (a) What Is Not, nor (b) What Is, nor (c) the combination, What Is and What Is Not (*M* 7.66)—which is precisely what then happens. In *MXG*, two parts are distinguished, primarily in terms of their sources rather than their sub-conclusions: there will be arguments borrowed from others, specifically Melissus and Zeno, and there will be Gorgias’ “own demonstration” (*idion apodeixin*, 979a23–4, cf. 979a33). The author introduces them in this order, outlining the borrowed arguments in some detail (979a13–24). But following this introduction, the arguments are actually delivered in the reverse order, and it is Gorgias “own” argument that parallels Sextus’ first segment, while the borrowed arguments parallel his second segment. Although *MXG* several times treats Gorgias’ “own” argument as directed simply at the general conclusion that nothing is—this is stated twice in the argument itself (979a30, 31–32), and also in a counter-argument to Gorgias that the author inserts immediately afterwards, which begins “But it does not follow from any of what he has said that nothing is” (979a34)—the conclusion of this argument is given in the preview as “it is not possible for it [anything?] to be or not to be”

8 I give less attention to the second and third parts not only because the parallels are less clear and less extensive, but also because each has already received excellent and detailed analysis: Caston (2002) for the second part and Mourelatos (1987) for the third. Kerferd (1984) is also helpful on the third part.
This seems to indicate, albeit somewhat vaguely, that the specific target of Gorgias’ “own” argument, unlike that of the borrowed arguments, had something to do with non-being. Now, as we shall see, the first stretch of argument in both texts does in fact explore what follows from positing such a thing as What Is Not. All this suggests, then, that both in the preview and in the argument itself, it is Sextus who, in distinguishing his first two segments as he does—with a clear focus first on What Is Not, then on What Is—reproduces more precisely the structure of Gorgias’ argument, and that MXG, while engaged with the same original material, is more confused on this score. As others have noted, Gorgias’ writings regularly work by ruling out each of a set of (purportedly) exhaustive alternatives, and this would be a clear example.

So the argument initially turns on what follows if we attribute some kind of being to What Is Not. In MXG the first point is that if we say that What Is Not is a non-being, while of course What Is is a being, it will follow that “things no more are than are not,” a result that is presumably deemed unacceptable (979a25–27). In Sextus the first point is that if we suppose that there is such a thing as What Is Not, this thing will both be and (since it

9 I leave aside for now Sextus’ third segment; more on this shortly.

10 Rodríguez (2019) documents this in detail.

11 Mansfeld (1988: 258) follows Kerferd (1955) in calling this a hopeless argument (and deletes it as a Pyrrhonizing interpolation by the MXG author). But on the suppositions being considered, non-being will be on a par with being, which could quite well be expressed by the concluding phrase. Note that this is not a Sextan use of ou mallon, expressing indecision, but an assertion that the two alternatives are on an equal footing.

12 With manuscript N, I read ἥει δὲ ἑστὶ τὸ μὲν ὀν, πάλιν ἑσταί. Other manuscripts (and other editors) do not include the to.
is, after all, What Is Not) not be, which is absurd (M 7.67, 1st half). As has often been observed, MXG’s argument seems to involve a fudge between predicative and non-predicative uses of “is”; I am inclined to think that this is more original—in Gorgias’ day everyone was still very confused about “is”\(^\text{13}\)—and that Sextus has reformulated the argument to avoid this feature. (Note also that Sextus avoids, while MXG includes, the Pyrrhonist-sounding phraseouden mallon, “no more”; I shall return to this point.) The second piece of argument, which is very similar in both, is that if What Is Not is, then What Is, being its opposite, will not be (M 7.67, 2nd half; 979a28–30).

MXG then offers an extra twist to this, namely that in this case nothing would be, unless being and not being were the same thing—but that even this would be no use, since it would mean that both What Is Not and What Is (being identical with it) would not be (979a30–33). Now this too has a parallel in Sextus, but not in the corresponding place. Instead, this point features as Sextus’ third segment, focused on the combination of both What Is and What Is Not (M 7.75–76); here too the argument revolves around the idea that the two are the same, and some of the reasoning (M 7.75) is very close to MXG’s. We have good reason, then, to regard this line of thinking as true to Gorgias himself. But here I suspect that MXG represents the original order. The argument fits quite naturally in the place where MXG gives it. And Sextus has a certain liking for considering two alternatives

\(^{13}\) As illustrated by, for example, the difficulties expressed in this period about the possibility of falsehood (“speaking what is not”) and the possibility of predication. Plato’s Theaetetus treats both these very seriously. The Sophist solves the puzzles, and it is possible that, by the time he wrote the Theaetetus, Plato saw his way to solutions; but the characters in the Theaetetus do not reach solutions, and so the issues come across as ones about which puzzlement is quite understandable. For an engaging treatment of these and related matters, see Denyer (1991).
and then considering a third possibility, that both of them apply—a pattern that, as far as I can see, we do not find in the remains of Gorgias; he could easily have seen the suggestion that What Is and What Is Not are the same as an opportunity to create such a third alternative, in keeping with this periodic preference of his.

As noted earlier, MXG interrupts the summary to offer a refutation of what it called Gorgias’ own argument (979a34–b19). There follows the portion that the author said was indebted to Melissus and Zeno, which corresponds to Sextus’ second segment, focused on the (non-)being of What Is. In both MXG and Sextus, the argument is that if anything is, it is either ungenerated (in Sextus, “eternal,” *aidion*) or generated (M 7.68–71, 979b20–34; again Sextus adds a third option—both eternal and ungenerated (M 7.72)—but this is probably an additional flourish of his own); and that if anything is, it is either one or many (M 7.73–74, 979b35–980a1). Each of these options is then ruled out, yielding the negation of the antecedent.

Against its being ungenerated, we are first told that this means that it is unlimited (*apeiron*). For this result, MXG simply appeals to Melissus (979b21–22), while Sextus offers a little reasoning that does indeed look traceable to Melissus (M 7.68–69, cf. Melissus, LM 21D3–5). The next move is that if it is unlimited, it is nowhere; the reason (elaborated on by Sextus (M 7.69–70), but more or less barely stated by MXG (979b22–25)) is that, if it is anywhere, the unlimited is either in itself or in something else, but either

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14 For another case where two opposite alternatives are considered, but then the combination of both is considered for good measure (and also neither), see M 8.32, *PH* 2.86. For further cases involving two alternatives plus some combination of the two, see M 7.343, 7.388–389, 8.17, 8.40, some of these also having parallels in *PH*. 
option involves an unacceptable duplication. Sextus then simply concludes that if it is nowhere, it is not anything at all (M 7.70), while MXG appeals in support of this conclusion to an (unstated) argument of Zeno about place (979b25–26). Presumably the reference is to a premise in Zeno’s one recorded argument about place, LM 20D13: anything that is must be in a place, or in something. As for the possibility that What Is was generated, this is ruled out via the thought that it would have to be generated either from What Is or from What Is Not; the first seems not to be a case of generation at all, and the impossibility of the second is axiomatic from Parmenides on (M 7.71, 979b26–33).

When it comes to the one-many pair, the text of MXG is, as Laks and Most (2016) put it (LM 32D26a13), “hopelessly corrupt”; Ioli and Graham provide texts with a great many supplements, which at least yield intelligible Greek, but the more sensible course

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15 Thanks to Stephen Menn for setting me straight on this. (I give the two, slightly different formulations of Aristotle and Simplicius respectively—both in Laks and Most 2016. Here and elsewhere, passages in this work are cited with the abbreviation LM).

16 This is how Sextus puts it. MXG’s version is slightly different: the idea is that generation would involve change, in which case the thing generated would no longer be What Is. But the underlying thought in both cases is that the thing generated must be something other than what it is generated from.

17 At the start of the second option in MXG, LM (32D26a11) print the manuscripts’ οὐδὲ μὴν οὐδ’ ἐξ οὐτος ἀν γενέσθαι, “nor would it come into being out of what is, either.” But the text at this point must be introducing the “out of what is not” option, as the next sentence—“for if What Is Not is not, nothing could come into being out of nothing”—makes clear. Ioli’s text οὐδὲ μὴν οὐδ’ ἐκ ἢ ἱν οὐτος ἀν γενέσθαι, following numerous earlier editors, is as good a conjecture as any.
seems to me to give up, along with Laks and Most and the many editors that Ioli cites as having called this passage a *locum desperatum*. Sextus gives us some argument on this score, mostly to the effect that anything we posit as one will turn out to be in various ways multiple; the “many” option is then eliminated by saying that the many is just a combination of ones (*M* 7.73–74). Following the “hopelessly corrupt” passage, *MXG* adds an argument for the conclusion that What Is cannot move (980a1–8), which has no counterpart in Sextus. Some have thought that there must have been another portion arguing that it cannot be at rest either, to match the previous pairs of opposing (and presumably exhaustive) possibilities. But one could also regard the argument against motion as an additional element in the case against its being either one or many.

So much for the first major part of the work. The parallels in the second and third parts are somewhat less far-reaching. But concerning the second conclusion—that even if anything is, it cannot be known—both Sextus and *MXG* cite an obviously false thought, that there are chariots racing in the sea (that is, on the surface of the ocean), to show that thought does not necessarily track the truth (*M* 7.79, 980a11–12); and both appeal to a distinction between thinking and seeing or hearing (*M* 7.81, 980a12–17). As for the third part—that even if it can be known, it cannot be communicated—*MXG* clearly states two lines of thought in closing: “because things are not words, and because no one has in mind

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18 E.g., Newiger (1973: 75–107), Mansfeld (1985: 245; 1988: 262); earlier adherents of this point of view are cited in Ioli (2010: 46).

19 This is plausibly argued by Ioli (2010: 46–50).

20 Sextus gives an additional argument to similar effect, exploiting the fact that we can think of non-existent beings such as Scylla or the Chimaera (*M* 7.80). Caston (2002: 223–224) proposes that this may be a genuinely Gorgianic piece of argument that *MXG* has not preserved.
the same thing as someone else” (980b18–19). On the first point, both versions exploit an analogy with the difference between colors and sounds; just as these are quite distinct kinds of things, so too words are quite distinct kinds of entities from the things to which they allegedly refer—which makes it mysterious how they could be about these things (M 7.83–84, 980a21–b8).22 The second point is ignored by Sextus; in MXG (980b8–17) the thought seems to be that communication presupposes some common understanding between speaker and listener—but that two people cannot possibly have this requisite common understanding. On strictly numerical grounds, they cannot have the same thing in mind; if they are two different people, then the things in their minds are not identical. But

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21 Mourelatos (1987: 137) is right to emphasize that this is an analogy. The fact that words are themselves a species of sounds is not to the point (though Sextus seems to have been misled into thinking so—see esp. M 7.86); rather, the point is that words and things, just like colors and sounds, are different categories of entities.

22 Again (cf. n. 20) Sextus adds an argument not mentioned in MXG, about the function of experiences in eliciting speech (M 7.85); and again, it has been proposed that this may go back to the original—see Mourelatos (1987: sec. VI). If so, it would seem to be intended as yet another nail in the coffin of communication, at least if that is understood to involve conveying information; speech cannot be about anything, because speech is not directed towards things, but is, rather, a sort of by-product of our encounters with things. Consistently with this, Mourelatos takes the passage as advocating what he calls a behavioral conception of meaning, akin to emotivism in ethics, which he connects with certain points in the Helen—a reading extended by Bermúdez (2017). But this is hard to square with the Helen’s frequent talk of speech as shaping opinion (including philosophical opinion, 13). For a critique of both Mourelatos and Bermúdez on this issue, see Di Iulio (2019), and see further n. 35.
even if we ignore this, the same thing can very well appear dissimilar to different people, given their different perspectives. An analogous point even extends to what a single individual has in mind at different times. Communication, then, is impossible; the alleged participants could not possibly have the common ground required for communication to take place.

Here, then, is a brief outline of the contents of On What Is Not. An obvious question now is, what is the purpose of this exercise? Neither Sextus nor MXG gives us any help with that question. And I suspect Gorgias’ original text would not have been any more informative. The Helen speech is scarcely less outrageous in its conclusions: not only is Helen blameless, but if the reasons given for this are accepted, there is really no such thing as human agency, and all of us are as helpless in the face of words as we are when on drugs. Yet all Gorgias tells us about his aims is that he wished to give an encomium of Helen and have some fun for himself (21). I am not so foolhardy as to think I can give a complete and satisfying answer to the question in the case of On What Is Not. What I do wish to address is how far, or in what ways, it might be considered skeptical.

3. Does Any Ancient Skeptic See Gorgias as a Kindred Spirit?

It is sometimes supposed that Sextus regards the work as somehow congenial to his own goals. Nothing could be further from the truth. We should note, first, that Gorgias does not figure among the proponents of what Sextus calls the “neighboring philosophies” to

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23 Mansfeld 1988 (267–268), Hays (1990: 329). LM also suggest this view by printing the conclusion of Sextus’ summary (M 7.87) as a separate text with the heading “Sextus Empiricus’ Skeptical Conclusion about Gorgias” (32R26).
skepticism (*PH 1.5, 1.209, 1.241*), which he discusses at the close of book I of *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. Even if he did, this would not indicate that Sextus saw Gorgias as an ally, since his position concerning all these “neighboring philosophies” is that they are in fact clearly distinct from skepticism—so that the label is not really appropriate.\(^{24}\) But it apparently does not even occur to him, or to anyone else whose views he considered worth discussing, that Gorgias might be seen as engaged in a project akin to his own.

Gorgias attracts Sextus’ attention for a different reason: he is one of many philosophers whose views can be seen as bearing on the question whether there is a criterion of truth (and if so, what it is). The first book of *Against the Logicians* (*M 7*) is almost entirely on this subject; and the first half of the book, after a general introduction about logic and its place in philosophy, is a long survey of previous philosophers’ views on the topic (46–260). Gorgias’ *On What Is Not* features as one of several positions holding that there is no criterion of truth. As with several of the other early thinkers Sextus

\(^{24}\) In introducing this topic, he simply calls them “the neighboring philosophies” (*PH 1.5, 209*)—a label used by others, I suspect. But in closing the topic he undercuts this label by saying, “Having gone through this much ground concerning those who are thought to be close to the skeptical approach, …” (*PH 1.241*). Sextus does allow two partial exceptions to this verdict: Arcesilaus (*PH 1.232-4*) and the Methodic doctors (*PH 1.236-41*). But, to the limited extent that he is treated as skeptical, Arcesilaus is presented as an outlier among the Academics, his target in this chapter; and the Methodic school of medicine is not really treated as a philosophical outlook at all – the parallel with skepticism lies simply in its practice of following the appearances. (The allegedly “neighboring philosophy” he is discussing at this point is the Empiric school, which he quickly dismisses as a form of negative dogmatism.) I have discussed this portion of *Outlines* book I in Bett 2019b.
discusses here, it is somewhat forced to treat Gorgias as having addressed this question, which did not surface as an explicit concern in philosophy until the Hellenistic period. But Sextus does seem on firm ground when he claims at the close of his account (M 7.87) that if one accepts Gorgias’ three conclusions, a criterion of truth is effectively ruled out.

Now, the second half of this book (261–445) is indeed devoted to arguments against the existence of a criterion of truth, arguments largely devised by the skeptics themselves and designed to cast doubt on the idea that a criterion of truth does exist. But it would be a mistake to think that Sextus’ goal is to show that the believers in a criterion are wrong (which would put him, in some sense, in agreement with Gorgias as he construes him). At the end of the book he is very clear that, as usual, his goal is to furnish a case that is equal in strength to the positive case on the other side, with suspension of judgment on the question as the intended outcome (M 7.443–444). On the criterion of truth, he says, the negative case is the less intuitive one, and that is why he concentrates his attention on that. Quite apart from all the philosophers who have proposed criteria of truth, as summarized earlier, the positive case seems like simple common sense; and this means that, in order to get equally powerful cases on both sides, more work needs to be done on the negative side. This is very different from saying that one wishes to endorse the negative side. But that is what, earlier in the book, he reads Gorgias and several other philosophers as doing.

Some confusion is perhaps caused by a peculiarity in Sextus’ procedure in this book. His review of previous positions on the criterion of truth includes both negative positions, among them Gorgias’ (M 7.48–88), and (at much greater length), positive ones (M 7.89–260). All of these, positive and negative, are referred to as dogmatic views about the criterion (M 7.46); Gorgias, then, is ascribed the definite view that there is no criterion of truth. At the end of this summary of previous views, Sextus then says the following:
“Since pretty much the entire disagreement about the criterion now lies in view, it would be a suitable moment to get our hands on the counter-argument and set sail against the criterion” (M 7.261). The first half of this sentence, mentioning a disagreement, is most easily understood as referring to the entire summary, including both the positive and the negative positions on the criterion, though one might understand it as referring more narrowly to the disagreement among the positive positions about what the criterion of truth is. But either way, the second half of the sentence seems to shift focus. The mention of an upcoming counter-argument against the criterion makes it sound as if what has preceded has been exclusively a case for the existence of a criterion of truth; and the emphasis is on that general view rather than on any disagreements among its proponents.

The review of previous positions on the criterion of truth seems, then, to serve two rather different functions. One the one hand, it is a collection of views in disagreement with one another; there are both positive and negative views on the criterion, and further disagreements among the positive views. One might expect this to yield suspension of judgment right away—or at least, relatively quickly, after some familiar discussion of the difficulty of adjudicating among competing views. But instead, Sextus immediately pivots and concentrates exclusively on the positive positions, and on what they have in common rather than on what divides them, treating them as one side of an opposition that must then be completed by supplying a “counter-argument,” as he proceeds to do—a counter-argument that, incidentally, makes no reference to the negative positions earlier summarized. I have elsewhere described this as a kind of strategic trickery on Sextus’ part, where he keeps the reader in some doubt about his intentions (Bett 2019a: 21–22). Whether or not this is so, the effect is that the negative positions on the criterion, including Gorgias’, are first accommodated and then ignored. However, none of this alters the fact that Sextus
treats Gorgias as a dogmatic denier of the existence of any criterion. He is interested enough in the position to summarize it in some detail (maybe just because he likes extreme or crazy-sounding ideas); it gets a much longer treatment than any of the other negative positions on the criterion, and in some places, as I have suggested, he may make what he sees as improvements in its presentation. But it is not a position with which he himself has any wish to be associated.

There is another point about Sextus’ account of Gorgias that may provide further confirmation of this. I noted that early in the first part, \textit{MXG} includes the phrase \textit{ouden mallon} and Sextus does not. Something similar occurs in the second part, where \textit{MXG} has the phrase \textit{ouden mallon} at least once (980a14–15); twice, according to many editors who have added \textit{<ouden>} or \textit{<ou>} in the immediately following clause (980a15). The conclusion of this line of argument, comparing things that we see or think, is that “which of them are true is unclear [\textit{adêlon},]” where \textit{adêlon} is again an extremely common term in Sextus’ version of Pyrrhonism. None of these terms appears in Sextus’ version. Indeed, the entire line of thinking laid out in \textit{MXG} towards the end of the second part, which seems to appeal to a conflict between perceptions and thoughts and the difficulty of choosing between them (980a13–19), is barely touched on by Sextus, who instead repeats the point about our ability to think obviously false things such as a chariot race in mid-ocean (\textit{M} 7.82). Finally, the argument in \textit{MXG}’s version of the third part, about the non-identity of different people’s perceptions, or of the same person’s perceptions at different times, might

\footnote{In developing this line of thinking I am indebted to Ioli (2010: esp. 62, 74–75).}

\footnote{Some editors even include a third \textit{ouden} (or \textit{outhen} \textit{mallon} in this sentence (980a17). See the text and app. crit. \textit{ad loc.} in Ioli (2010).}
well remind one of some of the Ten Modes attributed to Aenesidemus; but Sextus, as we saw, has no mention of this point.

These differences seem to suggest that Sextus is taking some care not to make Gorgias look like a Pyrrhonist. It is not that the similarities with Pyrrhonism are particularly far-reaching; most obviously, both Sextus and MXG represent Gorgias as arguing for three interconnected definite conclusions. But Sextus seems to be deliberately avoiding anything that might suggest a similarity. One might explain this by supposing that the Pyrrhonist-sounding language and argumentative moves in MXG were present in Gorgias’ original text, and that MXG has preserved them while Sextus has ironed them out. In the case of the argumentative moves, I certainly hope this is the case; if not, then MXG has simply made them up, which makes the author a highly unreliable witness to Gorgias’ thoughts. But as regards the choice of language, one might alternatively suppose that, without misrepresenting Gorgias’ ideas, the author of MXG has chosen terms with a Pyrrhonist flavor, while Sextus has not made such a choice; in that case, one could still say that Sextus is avoiding language that, though not unsuitable for paraphrasing Gorgias, has the disadvantage that it could make Gorgias look like one of his own.

But if Sextus does not see any affinity with Gorgias, this latter possibility might make one wonder whether the author of MXG has Pyrrhonist inclinations and perhaps finds Gorgias of interest because of this. Jaap Mansfeld (1988) in particular has advocated this interpretation. As regards the aims and methods of the author of MXG, the case has some merit. We have seen that the author offers a counter-argument to Gorgias’ first argument, the one referred to as Gorgias’ own; and the same is true of arguments from Melissus and Xenophanes that are summarized earlier in the work. These counter-arguments seem to follow a consistent pattern: instead of being designed to demonstrate conclusions
incompatible with those advocated by the philosopher in question, they seem designed to show that one could just as well argue the opposite, leaving us with no way of choosing between the original conclusions and those promoted in the counter-arguments. In other words, they seem to conform rather well to the Pyrrhonist agenda, where suspension of judgment rather than outright refutation is the aim; and Mansfeld draws attention to numerous more specific parallels with certain of the Agrippan Modes. Although there are also parallels with an Aristotelian style of critique, it does look as if the author’s approach has a distinctively Pyrrhonist twist to it—which is somewhat surprising for a work in the Aristotelian corpus.\(^\text{27}\)

But Mansfeld pushes the case further than it can plausibly go. Observing that the author gives a counter-argument only against Gorgias’ opening argument, and not against either the arguments in the first part about generated vs. ungenerated and one vs. many, or the arguments in the second and third parts, he tries to maintain that these arguments would be quite congenial to a Pyrrhonist—which in turn would have the effect of enlisting Gorgias himself, and not only MXG’s author, as something akin to a Pyrrhonist. He treats the arguments against the idea that What Is is either generated or ungenerated, and that it is either one or many, as arguments from disagreement, and hence even claims Gorgias as the inventor of this style of argument, later much exploited by the Pyrrhonists (Mansfeld 1988: 262–263). But this is a misreading. The point of these arguments is not that one can just as well argue that What Is is generated as that it is ungenerated, or that it is one as that it is many. The point is that What Is (supposing there is any such thing) is \textit{neither} generated \textit{nor} ungenerated, and \textit{neither} one \textit{nor} many—and that since these choices are exhaustive,

\(^{27}\) For reservations about Mansfeld’s claims see, however, Ioli (2010: 25–27).
nothing is. This is quite explicit at the end of the argument about generated and ungenerated (979b33–34). The argument about one and many is, as we saw, too damaged to allow a clear idea of the details; but in the author’s preview to this argument at the beginning, it is quite clear that both these arguments have this same form (979a18–23). The two alternatives are not each left in play; instead, each is eliminated—and since these are the only two possibilities, the antecedent “something is” is shown to be false. Unless some other, opposing conclusion is in the offing to balance this one—something never suggested in *MXG*—this is not Pyrrhonism; it is what contemporary scholarship calls negative dogmatism. The same is also true of the conclusions of the second and third parts: that even if anything is, it cannot be known, and that even if it can be known, it cannot be communicated. These are not, as Mansfeld suggests, “perfectly acceptable to a Pyrrhonist” (1988: 263). A Pyrrhonist might mount arguments for these conclusions, but these would be placed in opposition to arguments for the opposite. Again, *MXG* gives no indication that Gorgias did that; it presents him as simply arguing for the negative conclusions.

One might still maintain that the author’s choice of targets reveals an interest in philosophers who in some way appealed to Pyrrhonists (Mansfeld 1988: 267–268). Again, there may be something to this. Diogenes Laertius includes both Xenophanes and Melissus in book 9 of his *Lives of the Philosophers*, a book that culminates in the lives of Pyrrho and his disciple Timon and that seems to be populated largely by figures of a broadly skeptical disposition. In his life of Pyrrho, Diogenes also includes Xenophanes on a list of people widely regarded as forerunners of skepticism (9.72)28; and in his *Silloi* ("Lampoons")

28 This is often taken as a list of people regarded as forerunners by the Pyrrhonists themselves. This may be correct, but I do not think it can be established; see Bett (2019b: sec. I).
Timon puts Xenophanes at center stage as his “Virgil,” who guides him through the underworld to see a whole series of philosophers. Timon clearly sees Xenophanes as closer to the right track than almost anyone else before Pyrrho; and the same is true of Melissus, whom he describes as “above many illusions and yielding to few” (DL 9.25). Where the argument fails, however, is with Gorgias, the case we are really interested in. No surviving fragment of Timon says a word about Gorgias; Diogenes’ list of proto-skeptics does not include him, and he does not get a life in Diogenes, in book 9 or anywhere else; and the only consideration Mansfeld offers in favor of viewing Gorgias in this way is that Sextus’ treatment of him occurs in his “discussion of the views of those of whom it had been claimed that they had abolished the criterion and thus were to be counted among the ancestors of Pyrrhonism” (1988: 267, cf. 268). The crucial italicized phrase (my italics) is simply false; it commits precisely the error to which I drew attention in the first part of this section.

4. Gorgias as Pyrrhonist: One More Attempt

The upshot is that there is no reason to believe that any ancient Pyrrhonist thought of Gorgias as a skeptic in their own mold. But before we follow them and altogether dismiss this way of thinking about him, it is worth considering his relation to Parmenides. I said that Gorgias comes across as a negative dogmatist unless we suppose that he has in mind some other arguments that his own arguments are to be set against; perhaps these other arguments are those of Parmenides.

29 For more on Timon’s relation to both Xenophanes and the Eleatics, see Bett (2000: 140–149).
It is obvious that Gorgias’ *PTMO* is in some sense a response to Parmenides. This is not just in the first part, where the Parmenidean language of What Is (*to on*) and What Is Not (*to mê on*) is most prevalent, and where the topics of generation (or its absence), oneness and (if we trust *MXG*) motion—all central to Parmenides’ picture—play an important role. One of Parmenides’ central contentions was that we cannot *speak* or *think* of What Is Not. We can readily construe the third part of Gorgias’ work as responding to the point about speaking, and much of the argument in the second part turns on considerations about thinking. Thus, it is by no means far-fetched to posit the following kind of dialectic: (1) while Parmenides accepts the reality of What Is (and it alone), and gives an account of its characteristics, Gorgias argues that nothing is; (2) while Parmenides argues that we cannot think of What Is Not, Gorgias responds that we can easily think of unreal or non-existent things, and that this creates intractable problems for our ability to know what is true; and (3) while Parmenides argues that we cannot speak of What Is Not—but we can speak of What Is—Gorgias responds that we cannot speak at all, at least in a manner that communicates anything to others. And, if one asks what the point of this dialectic might be, from Gorgias’ perspective, one possible answer would be that it is to show that one might just as well argue for his conclusions as for Parmenides’—in other words, to bring us to Pyrrhonian-style suspension of judgment about Parmenides’ ideas by the production of equally powerful arguments in opposition. Even if, as we observed,

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30 The repeated use of the verb *phronein* for “think,” in both versions, probably goes back to Gorgias himself; it is relatively rare in Sextus, who normally uses *noein* and cognates (and several of the other cases occur in the special idiom *mega phronein*, “think highly of oneself”—*PH* 1.180, 2.194, 205). Thanks to Tad Brennan for pointing this out.
Gorgias did not himself give pairs of opposing arguments, he might have meant his arguments to be juxtaposed with those of Parmenides, just as Sextus frequently supplies negative arguments to balance the theories of the dogmatists.\footnote{If I understand her right, this is the reading of Striker (1996).}

In the absence of any explicit evidence of Gorgias’ intentions, I do not see that we can disprove this interpretation. Thus a certain sort of proto-Pyrrhonist reaction to Parmenides may have been one of the things Gorgias was after with \textit{PTMO}, even if the Pyrrhonists themselves (including, let us agree to suppose, the author of \textit{MXG}) did not credit him with this. But it is by no means clear that this is the only way to read it. First, there may be other ways to understand \textit{PTMO}’s relation to Parmenides. Second, I doubt that it was meant to be of interest, or of concern, only to those of a Parmenidean cast of mind.

Isocrates, whom several authors say studied with Gorgias (LM 32P7, P8, P10), apparently regards him as seriously maintaining something on a par with Parmenides, and with several others—as holding a view concerning “the number of beings” (\textit{to plêthos tôn onton}); there is someone who holds that this number is infinite (not named, but presumably Anaxagoras), and then there is Empedocles (four), Ion (three), Alcmaeon (two), Parmenides and Melissus (one), and Gorgias (none) (\textit{Antidosis} 268). Clearly this makes Gorgias a rival to Parmenides. But there is no suggestion here that Gorgias offered his proposal merely as a way to induce suspension of judgment about Parmenides; it sounds like another competing view, seriously proposed, on the same subject. Elsewhere Isocrates speaks of Gorgias as “having dared to say that none of the things that are, are” (\textit{Helen} 3). In both places Isocrates is highly dismissive of the kind of thinking that produces such
theories, because it has nothing to do with what Isocrates himself considers serious philosophy, directed to matters of ethical and political importance. But in this respect Gorgias is in the same boat as all the others mentioned in the first text, and as (among others) Plato and Socrates—or at least, Plato’s Socrates—in the second, where the unity of virtue and the claim that virtue is knowledge are cited as examples of the same kind of intellectual frivolity (*Helen* 1). Thus, the fact that Isocrates thinks Gorgias’ first main claim is preposterous tells us nothing about what Gorgias himself thought of it; indeed, his grouping of Gorgias with these other thinkers suggests that he thinks Gorgias meant at least the first main conclusion of *PTMO* seriously and at face value. Of course, he might be wrong; but we are hardly going to find a witness closer to the source than him. This need not be “nihilism,” as many scholars traditionally thought; it could be that Gorgias simply wanted to deny that there was any fixed and permanent being underlying, or above and beyond, things as we experience them, as Parmenides and others had held, and as Plato would go on to hold in a somewhat different way. This could be a perfectly serious philosophical position (so Graham 2010: 784).

It is possible, then, to read Gorgias as making Pyrrhonian moves against Parmenides. But it is also possible to read him, at least in the first part of *PTMO*, as offering his own rival position in competition with Parmenides (and others). The picture of Gorgias as a skeptic of the ancient Greek variety is not ruled out; but it is hardly secure, and it is not sanctioned by the skeptics themselves. Besides, there is more to be said about the second and third parts, perhaps about the first part too. And there are more varieties of skepticism than are dreamt of by the Pyrrhonists.

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32 For a review and (appropriately) quick dismissal of this option, see Caston (2002: 205).
5. Another Model of Gorgianic Skepticism

The term ‘skeptical’ is sometimes used broadly to denote any position of a vaguely negative flavor, or that seems to undermine widely held opinions. In this loose sense, Gorgias’ conclusions could no doubt be described as skeptical. More interestingly, philosophical skepticism in the modern period is most commonly understood as consisting in a claim to the effect that we lack knowledge, or at least in a serious challenge to the possibility of our having knowledge, in some domain. On this account Gorgias’ second conclusion would certainly seem to qualify as skepticism. And the same might reasonably be said about the third conclusion, in so far as it shuts off the possibility of our acquiring knowledge from one another—that is, the possibility of testimonial knowledge, which has been the subject of much recent epistemology. Perhaps, then, PTMO is closer to skepticism as understood in modern philosophy than to ancient Pyrrhonian skepticism.

To this it may be objected that Gorgias cannot possibly have meant his conclusions as serious theses. Now, I have already indicated something that he might have meant seriously by his first conclusion. But I concede that at least the third conclusion, that communication is impossible, is not something Gorgias—a professional rhetorician, who moreover in the Helen (8–15) advances an extraordinarily strong view of the power of logos to shape opinion—can have seriously entertained. However, that this rules it out as a form of skepticism is a further step that I would resist; I would also resist a comparable inference in the case of the second conclusion, supposing we decide that Gorgias did not

33 See, e.g., Striker (1996: 13), who rejects the label “skepticism” (in the modern sense) for the second conclusion on this basis.
seriously endorse this either (which is a little less obvious\textsuperscript{34}). Arguments for extraordinary or unbelievable conclusions can have a serious philosophical point. And this point could be one that we might quite reasonably wish to call skeptical.

I have already alluded in footnotes to a pair of papers in recent decades, by Victor Caston and Alexander Mourelatos (cf. n. 8); these give rigorous and careful analyses of the second and third parts of \textit{PTMO} respectively, arguing that they raise deep and difficult questions about how knowledge, and how linguistic communication, are possible. In the second part, we need not suppose that the goal is to prove that there is \textit{no such thing} as knowledge, or that it really is impossible, quite generally, to tell which of our thoughts connect with reality. After all, the example of the chariots in the ocean does its work in the argument only if we retain a clear sense that this is a thought that does \textit{not} connect with reality. A better way to understand Gorgias’ purpose is that he wishes to put the problem in sharp focus. We seem to be able to distinguish, most of the time, between thoughts that connect with reality and thoughts that do not. But \textit{how} do we do this? And what are the types of cases in which we \textit{cannot} in fact do so—and are there in fact more such types than we might have suspected? As Caston (2002: 229) says, this can be thought of as an early statement of what later came to be known as the problem of the criterion. And even if Parmenides was the original impetus for Gorgias’ arguments, the challenge that this argument embodies is much more general: how is knowledge possible? Similarly, the third part leads to an impasse as to how communication is possible. What is needed to get us out

\textsuperscript{34} Graham (2010: 784), for example, seems to read it as seriously meant—but perhaps as targeting only a very high-flying kind of knowledge sought by philosophers, which could leave intact “a more humble kind of cognitive success we might also call knowledge.”
of this impasse is a theory of meaning, including an account of the relations needed between speaker and listener in order for meaning to be transmitted between them. Of course, nothing like that was available in this period, which is why these arguments could seem challenging and worth propounding.\footnote{Mourelatos proposes that the targets of Gorgias’ arguments in this section are what he calls the referential and the ideational conceptions of meaning—that is, the idea that meaning is constituted by reference to an object, and the idea that meanings are fixed through association with some kind of thoughts or mental images. In place of these, Mourelatos suggests that Gorgias is promoting what he calls a behavioral conception of meaning; this is to be found, he suggests, in a section of Sextus’ summary of the third part that is not paralleled in \textit{MXG} (cf. n. 22). However, I find all this hard to believe, fundamentally because we are dealing here with a stage in the history of thought in which the very idea of a conception of meaning is anachronistic. \textit{We} may pick out various pieces of the text as presupposing certain conceptions of meaning (as we may for parts of Parmenides, for example), but no one in this period was in a position to \textit{articulate} any such conception. Gorgias’ target is something much more basic: the very notion that people can speak to each other at all. He knows very well that people do in fact speak to each other; but the question is, how are we to explain how this takes place? There is no reason not to think of \textit{this} question as perfectly serious. But this belongs to the \textit{pre}-history of the theory of meaning, not to any episode \textit{within} its history.}

And in both cases, this can quite reasonably be regarded as a \textit{skeptical} exercise—again, in the usage of the term ‘skepticism’ that has been standard in \textit{modern} philosophy. We do not have to think of skepticism as the sincere avowal of a philosophical position. Skepticism can just as well be understood as the construction of arguments (primarily on questions concerning our ability to know things) whose conclusions are plainly unacceptable, but difficult to see how to avoid, with the purpose of challenging
philosophers to devise theories or accounts that will succeed in doing precisely that. The skepticism in Descartes’ *Meditations*, surely a seminal work in setting the image of skepticism in modern philosophy, seems to be invoked in just this kind of spirit. Descartes, of course, is not a skeptic; indeed, very few philosophers in modern western philosophy would identify themselves as skeptics. Skepticism instead functions primarily as a stimulus to good philosophy, or a reminder of what good philosophy on a certain topic needs to accomplish. Duncan Pritchard’s recent *Scepticism: A Very Short Introduction* (2019) makes much of the idea that skepticism may often better be regarded as a paradox than as a position. If so, the second and third parts of *PTMO* might very well be considered instances of skepticism.

This kind of approach may also be apparent elsewhere in Gorgias’ oeuvre. As I mentioned earlier, the Helen speech mounts arguments that do not simply absolve Helen from blame—already an outrageous enough result—but that seem to rule out ever holding anyone responsible for anything. Can we suppose that Gorgias, whose rhetorical techniques were expected to be put to use in judicial contexts among others, seriously wished to convince us of this? I doubt it. Rachel Barney has very plausibly argued that this is another instance of what she calls “philosophy as provocation and challenge” (2017: 24), explicitly comparing *Helen* with *PTMO* in this respect. In this case, the challenge is to come up with a picture of human responsibility that does not fall victim to the challenge. We may be less inclined to call this skepticism, simply because the term ‘skepticism’ seems to be reserved mainly for epistemological questions. But the intellectual structure seems to be very similar to that of the cases from *PTMO*.

Finally, I think it is at least possible for us to understand the *first* part of *PTMO* along analogous lines. Relying in part on Isocrates’ reports, I suggested at the end of the
previous section that Gorgias could be understood as denying that there was any such thing as a Parmenidean What Is. But this too might be read not so much as a thesis, but as a challenge; to those preoccupied with the nature of What Is, Gorgias could be saying, “I don’t see how there can be any such thing; if you believe in it, you need to do better at explaining its nature.”

We may find this issue rather more alien than those addressed in the second and third parts of PTMO. But it is clear from Plato’s Sophist that at least some people took it very seriously, and found it very difficult; after several worries about how to think or speak of What Is Not (237b–241c), we are treated in the Sophist to a series of worries (of about twice the length) concerning What Is (242c–250e), with the explicit admission that the latter is just as puzzling as the former (243c, 250e). And it is these puzzles that the rest of the dialogue is then devoted to getting us beyond. The Eleatic Visitor explicitly claims to be improving on Parmenides—hence the only half-joking worry about “patricide” (241d); but it is likely that Gorgias is in the background as well, especially since, as scholars have observed, Plato seems clearly to have PTMO in mind in some parts of his Parmenides, which is in many ways a companion to the Sophist.  

We can, then, think of Gorgias, in the first part of PTMO, as arguing that “nothing is” with a view to challenging people (again, not just Parmenides, who was probably no longer alive) to explain in a coherent and satisfactory way how we are to understand being

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36 Given his generally dismissive attitude, Isocrates might well have seen no important difference between these two readings.

37 See especially Mansfeld (1985: 258–265); also Striker (1996: 14).
and not-being—a project at which Gorgias clearly takes Parmenides to have failed, but which has obviously been on many people’s agenda ever since Parmenides put it at the center of his thinking. If so, then the goal (or one goal) of the first part of *PTMO* was similar to that of the second and third parts (and of a central strand in the *Helen*), a goal that I have identified as broadly skeptical in character. And if so, we can see Plato in the *Sophist* as responding to the skeptical challenge contained in the first part.

The *Sophist* also makes at least a stab at the third part, and perhaps even the second, when it tackles the specific question how it is possible to *speak* and to *think* of What Is Not (or, in other words, speak or think falsehoods, 261c–264d). At the heart of this account is the first explicit articulation in Greek philosophy of, roughly, the distinction between noun and verb, or between subject and predicate. This is one of the most unambiguous examples of philosophical progress I know of. In light of the *Sophist*’s significance, Mansfeld has maintained that Gorgias’ *PTMO* “deserves no more than a niche” (1985: 265). But I am not so sure. If one of the aims of skepticism is to force philosophers to devise better theories, then if *PTMO* had some role in pushing Plato towards the ideas expounded in the *Sophist*, it was a spectacular success.

6. Conclusion

Since the linguistic turn, it is natural for us to conceive such questions as being fundamentally about how ‘is’ and ‘is not’ function in language (and therefore, for many of us, less fraught with philosophical significance). But while Plato in the *Sophist* does address the question how we are to *speak* of what is not—more on this in a moment—he clearly conceives this as an additional task, once the character of What Is and What Is Not, and the relations between them, have been clarified; the transition between the two topics is marked at 260b–261c.
As will surely have become clear, I am not attempting to pin down a single definitive reading of PTMO. Even if we had Gorgias’ original words, I am pretty sure we would still see it as the kind of work that invites multiple valid readings. Some kinds of philosophy, especially the more playful kinds, are like that. But if there is anything to these reflections, we need not be shy about claiming Gorgias, on the basis of PTMO and perhaps also the Helen, as (no doubt among other things) a figure in the history of skepticism. Attempts to connect him with Pyrrhonian skepticism are largely, though perhaps not entirely, misguided. But there are many other varieties of skepticism than that, as readers of this journal know very well. And it does not seem strained to connect Gorgias’ procedure in PTMO, on at least one plausible reading, with a familiar approach in modern philosophy, an approach that we can fairly call skeptical.39

References


39 I led a discussion of PTMO at a (virtual) meeting of the New York Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy in May 2020; I thank the participants for their many helpful comments.


