

Kata Ton Orthotaton Logon: Correct Argument in the Sophists and Early Orators

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Like many of you, I'm sure, in my teaching I sometimes confront new standards of language use among my students. I was taught grammar as a matter of right and wrong. "Between you and me" was right; "between you and I" was simply wrong. Such rules, I understood, were absolute and non-negotiable. We all know, of course, that the rules change over time, and that the authority of grammatical rules waxes and wanes. Today in the US, the attitudes seems to be set by our President, whose ignorance of and lack of concern for correct speech actually appeals to a substantial segment of the population. And increasingly my students question how I can insist that a certain usage of theirs is wrong. I find myself beginning to feel sympathy for traditionalists in Greece who reacted with outrage at the questioning of common rules and assumptions about language by the new intellectuals in the second half of the fifth-century. Many who listened to the Older Sophists must have accepted without question, and probably without thinking, that certain ways of speaking were simply right, and others wrong. The sophists were out to change that.

As in so many other areas, the sophists were the first to offer an explicit challenge to traditional rules about *logos*. I want to look carefully at this challenge, and in particular, I want to see why they fastened on a standard of *orthotês*, or correctness, how they used that standard, and how others reacted to it. As we shall see, the standard of correctness sometimes found itself in competition -- as a rhetorical position, at least -- with a standard of truth, though the two could coexist in the orators. Let me begin, then, by considering the use of *orthos* among the sophists.

The various uses of *orthos* are well illustrated in a well-known scene in Plato's *Protagoras*. After an intermission midway through the dialogue, Protagoras resumes the discussion by questioning Socrates about poetry. He prefaces his questions by stating, "I think the greatest part of education for a man is to be clever about poems; by that I mean he is able to grasp which of a poet's lines are composed correctly (*orthôs*), and which are not, he knows how to distinguish them, and he can give a reason when questioned" (338e7-339a1). Protagoras then quotes the opening of a poem of Simonides and asks whether Socrates thinks it was composed "well and correctly" (*kalôs kai orthôs*). "Very well and correctly," answers Socrates. But Protagoras then cites lines from later in the poem which appear to contradict the earlier lines and concludes that either the opening of the poem or the later stanza must be incorrect (*ouk orthôs*). In desperation, Socrates asks Prodicus to find a correction (*epanorthôma*) using his special *mousikê* or talent with language. Prodicus' *mousikiê technê* is, of course, his ability to distinguish correctly between near synonyms. Moreover, when Prodicus' correction turns out to produce a worse error than the one that needed correcting in the first place, Socrates, in an obvious parody of Prodicus' special expertise, proposes that Simonides is criticizing Pittacus for distinguishing the meanings of words incorrectly (*ouk orthôs*, 341c). When this line of argument also fails, Socrates gives his final interpretation, which shows among other things that the word "truly" is in its correct place in the sentence.

This discussion illustrates some of the many ways in which the new intellectuals had begun to use the term *orthos* and its compounds in connection with language. Of course, Plato may be misrepresenting the arguments of Protagoras or Prodicus or Socrates, but the general historical accuracy of the arguments and positions represented in the scene is supported by other evidence that both Protagoras and Prodicus were interested in correct speech. Plato tells us elsewhere (*Crat.* 384b,

Euthyd. 277e), that Prodicus taught the correct use of words (*onomatôn orthotês*), and the speech that Plato puts in his mouth earlier in *Protagoras* 337a-c, distinguishing four pairs of close synonyms, would hardly have a point if the historical Prodicus had not done something of the sort.

Protagoras' interest in correct speech is also well attested elsewhere in Plato, for instance in *Cratylus* 391c where his interests are said to have included *orthotês* [i.e. *tôn onomatôn*] and in *Phaedrus* 267c where he is said to have written on *orthoepia*. We also have a report in Plutarch (*Pericles* 36.3), citing the fifth-century "historian" Stesimbrotus, that "When an athlete unintentionally struck Epitimus the Pharsalian with a javelin and killed him, Protagoras spent an entire day with Pericles puzzling over whether one should believe that the javelin or the javelin-thrower or those who arranged the contest were more to blame, according to the most correct account (*kata ton orthotaton logon*)." Interestingly, Antiphon treats what is apparently the same case in his Second Tetralogy. I'll come back to Antiphon later, but first I want to look more closely at the sophists' use of *orthos*: Why did Protagoras and Prodicus use this word to describe correct speech? And what does their use of the term reveal about their views on language and linguistic orthodoxy?

First, some background. From Homer on, *orthos* is the most common adjective for "straight." The adverb *ithy* is sometimes used in the sense of "straight forward, straight ahead," but if a person stands straight or a line or a path is straight, the word is *orthos*. By the fifth century, however, metaphorical uses of *orthos* have begun to predominate. For Pindar a messenger can be *orthos* -- "accurate" or "true" (*O.* 6.90); surgery can make a man's body *orthos*, or "sound" (*P.* 3.53); and a mind (*noos*) can be *orthos*, or "upright" (*P.* 10.68). Metaphorical uses are especially common in tragedy and Herodotus. The latter speaks of the Delphians being *orthos* ("correct") in their ascription of a vase to Theodorus of Samos (1.51) and Croesus being *ouk orthos* ("wrong") in blaming Apollo (1.91). The dative *orthôi logôi* means "in truth" -- as when Demaratus asks his mother, "who is my father *orthôi logôi*?" -- that is, "tell me straight who my father is" (6.68). In this sense, an *orthos logos* is a statement of fact that is correct, true, or accurate, and the standard of correctness or accuracy is for the most part objective. Herodotus implies that Demaratus' mother knows as a matter of objective fact who his father is. Note, however, that there is already a tendency here for *orthos* to refer to some kind of speech act -- a message, an ascription, blame, or information.

There is one passage in Herodotus where we can see even broader possibilities for expanding the meaning of *orthos*. This comes in the story of Deioces, the first king of the Medes. Before becoming king, Deioces devoted himself to justice (*dikaiosynê*) and gained a reputation as the best settler of disputes for the villagers in his area. He did this by judging *kata ton orthon* -- correctly, rightly, justly. From everything we know about Greek judicial procedure, it is clear that Deioces' superiority did not lie primarily in his ability to discern or state the true facts of a case or to quote laws accurately; rather, his talent lay in finding a fair or just resolution to a dispute, one that was perceived to be fair by the community. *Kata ton orthos* must then refer to Deioces' judgment -- his decisions were just or fair in that they were generally accepted or recognized as fair by the disputants and the rest of the community.

Now, there is a precedent for this use in the metaphorical use of *ithys* -- "straight-forward" in epic. The main example comes in the trial scene on the shield of Achilles in *Iliad* 18. Here two litigants plead before a group of elders and an award is given to the elder who "speaks his judgment most straightforwardly, most correctly" (*dikên ithyntata eipoi*, 18.508). Here too, just as with Deioces' judging *kata ton orthon*, settling a dispute *ithyntata* is a matter of fairness or correct judgment, not simply factual truth. In these legal contexts, both *orthos* and *ithys* designate a negotiable and problematic standard of justice that is to some extent subjectively determined by the community. At

the same time, both terms imply that this standard is also in some sense an objective standard of straightness or correctness.

Another indication that this standard of correctness must have an element of subjectivity is the fact that the Greeks spoke of some judgments as most correct (*ithyntata, orthotatos*). This suggests that in any given situation, a correct verdict was a relative concept: one verdict could be more correct than another, or could even be the most correct. Thus, in a legal context, correctness is a more complex standard than it is, say, in determining if truly Demaratus' father. We see then, that by the time of the sophists, *orthos* had already developed a broad range of meaning, from objective accuracy to subjective good judgment. And it was this broad range (I believe) that made the term particularly appealing to the sophists, and particularly to Protagoras.

It's not clear which sophist first applied the term to a linguistic matter, but my guess is that it was Prodicus. Even though he was a generation younger than Protagoras, linguistic concern's seem to play a larger role in Prodicus' work, and he seems to have adhered closely to an objective sense of *orthos*. In *On the Correctness of Names* he distinguished between near synonyms, and the examples of this skill reported by Plato's (*Protagoras* 337a-c) appear reasonably objective: impartially does differ from equally, debating from quarreling, esteem from praise, and enjoyment from pleasure in the ways Prodicus explains, and his judgment on these matters seems essentially objective. To be sure, Socrates later (341c) leads Prodicus to conclude that difficult (*chalepon*) means bad (*kakon*), which is patently absurd, but when challenged, Socrates quickly rescinds his proposal, calling it a joke. In the end, this false definition only reinforces the view that Prodicus' definitions accord with what "all of us know," as Protagoras puts it (341d). Thus, Prodicus' judgments were essentially objective, and the broader, problematic uses of *orthos* were the work of Protagoras.

We do not know the contents of Protagoras' work on *Correct Speech (Orthoepeia)*, but it probably included discussion of the proper gender of nouns, which is parodied in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, and of the proper use of moods. Protagoras developed his views on these subjects through criticism of Homer. According to Aristotle (*Soph. Elench.* 173b), he said that "wrath" (*mênis* -- the first word of the *Iliad*) was masculine and that it was wrong to use a feminine adjective, *oulomenên*, to modify it, as Homer does in line 2 of the poem. According to Aristotle (*Poetics* 19), Protagoras also criticized Homer because in the same sentence he gives a command to the Muse ("Sing, Muse") when he thinks he is uttering a prayer. If, as is likely, Protagoras used *orthos* in criticizing Homeric usage, he probably wanted to suggest that grammatical issues like these are objective, factual matters. He was undoubtedly aware, however, that his assertions about correctness and incorrectness were not only not objective, but would provoke strong objections from many (if not most) in his audience. This raises the question how seriously he took these assertions about Homer, and what his purpose was in making them.

We find a broader sense of *orthos*, though still grounded in objectivity, when Protagoras criticizes Simonides' poem by arguing that two stanzas are contradictory, and therefore one of them must be incorrect. Objectively, a poet cannot truly make contradictory assertions. But since the points that are judged to be contradictory are concerned with human virtue and its attainment, the discussion also quickly moves to broader, moral issues that go beyond the specific question of logical contradiction. Using *orthos* for these issues too suggests that standards of moral judgment, which would normally be considered subjective, are in some sense reducible to objective rules of logic.

The broadest use of *orthos* we find in Protagoras is the report that he and Pericles spent a day arguing about who was responsible for the accidental death of someone hit by a javelin, "according to the most correct account" (*kata ton orthotaton logon*). This expression, used here in a quasi-judicial

Protagoras, on the other hand, clearly did want to draw attention to the construction of arguments. He taught how to argue different sides of a case and especially how to make a weaker *logos* stronger. When several *logoi* could be constructed for a case, one could then try to decide which was *orthotatos*. And the skill in speaking he promoted became perhaps the notorious aspect to the sophists' teaching. In Plato's *Protagoras*, the young Hippocrates, when pressed to say what he thought Protagoras, as a sophist, would teach him, answered, "the science of making a person clever at speaking" (312d). Thus, *orthos*, as a standard of skillful speech, became closely associated with the new intellectualism of the sophists, an association that the orators understandably wished to avoid.

That Protagoras developed a standard of correctness, not truth, is particularly interesting in light of the fact that like Antiphon, he also wrote a work entitled *Truth*, the opening sentence of which was his famous assertion that "man is the measure (*metron*) of all things." We will never know the precise meaning of this claim, or how Protagoras advised that things be measured, but the fact that there was a measure that could somehow be applied to things suggests that Protagoras envisaged a quasi-objective standard of truth, perhaps along the lines of the hedonistic calculus that Socrates develops in the last part of *Protagoras*. And the idea that things could be quantified and measured, and that *logos* could similarly be judged correct (as well as weak or strong) is reflected in the teachings offered to Strepsiades when he enters Socrates' *phrontistêrion* in the *Clouds*.

The figure of Socrates in the *Clouds* certainly has some attributes of the historical Socrates, but he also represents an amalgam of sophistic ideas and personal characteristics. In particular, the influence of Protagoras is evident throughout. The *phrontistêrion* teaches, among other things, how to measure very precisely -- the length of a flea's jump is one example -- and the correct genders of nouns, such as the nouns for rooster and hen. If we make allowance for the element of parody, the play clearly implies that the sophists' teachings emphasized objective and scientific measurement. Thus, Aristophanes is tapping into the popular conception of sophistic teaching, and especially Protagorean teaching, as a scientific measurement whose results (as he parodies them) range from trivial to absurd. And straightness or correctness was part of this public perception of sophistic teaching. The word *orthos* occurs eight times in the play, five times spoken by Socrates while he is teaching Strepsiades (228, 251, 659, 679, 742); once by the chorus of *Clouds* speaking to the audience in the *parabasis* (616), once by Pheidippides showing off his new learning (1186), and once by Strepsiades, ironically thanking Hermes of correct advice as he proceeds to burn down the *phrontistêrion*. Thus, *orthos* is always connected with the new learning. By contrast, *alêthês* is used five times, four times by Strepsiades when he is outside the context of the Thinking School, and once by the Chorus when they pledge to the audience that they will tell the truth at the beginning of the *parabasis*.

This connection with the new learning would explain why Antiphon is wary of *orthos* language. Not that he avoids it entirely. In fact, in the Tetralogies *orthos* is slightly more common than *alêthês* (15 occurrences versus 13). These works contain a good bit of what I have called metadiscourse -- discussion of the nature and validity of various arguments and of the verdict, which is commonly characterized as correct or not. But in Antiphon's three court speeches there are only 21 occurrences of *orthos* (which is proportionally fewer than in the much shorter Tetralogies), and a large majority of these come at the beginning and end of the speeches. In Antiphon 5, for example, *orthos* occurs twelve times -- twice in the prologue (1-7), six times in the epilogue (85-96) and only four times in the body of the speech. By comparison, *alêthês* occurs thirty-five times in this speech, mostly in the central arguments, and is common in Antiphon 1 and 6 too. Finally, in all the works, *orthos* most often qualifies speech, sometimes the verdict and occasionally a plan or a law. But twice it is used of acting correctly (*orthôs pratein*), both times when correct action is being contrasted with correct speech (5.5,

5.75). The pattern in Andocides is similar. *Orthos* occurs seven times in the three genuine speeches, always in the realm of *logos*, whereas *alêthês* occurs nineteen times, all but one of them in his speech *On the Mysteries*. In both orators, moreover, and in other texts of the period, to assert that an argument is correct normally implies that its content is true, and vice versa. But the connotations of the two standards remained different. The orators had to be sensitive to these, and so they used *orthos* only sparingly.

Protagoras, on the other hand, made *orthotês* the primary standard for many different areas of inquiry concerning *logos*. We have already seen his use of *orthos* in discussions of gender and syntax, poetic criticism, and legal argumentation. It is also quite possible that he contributed to (or perhaps even originated) the fifth-century debate about the origin of names -- whether words have a natural origin or a conventional origin -- and that *orthotês* had a place in this discussion too. As the debate is presented in Plato's *Cratylus*, it clearly has Protagorean roots, since Hermogenes' position that names are conventional contains clear echoes of Protagoras and is explicitly connected with Protagoras' man-measure declaration. This is not to say that Protagoras ever argued that "whatever each person says is the name of something, for him, that is its name," as Plato reports Hermogenes saying in *Cratylus* 385d (a clear echo of Protagoras), but he may perhaps have proposed something along the lines that the meanings of words have their origin in the community that uses them and whatever meaning a community gives to a word is that word's correct meaning.

But the most reliable sources for Protagoras' work in these areas suggest that he was best known for making highly provocative observations, aimed at stimulating others to question traditional views. Assertions such as that Homer made grammatical mistakes, that Simonides contradicted himself, or that the javelin itself could have been responsible for someone's accidental death, may have been in large part heuristic, intended to lead to further thinking about correctness in these and related areas. It is possible, therefore, that Protagoras did not develop his own views on any of these matters, and that whatever he said about the origin of names took the form of provocative observations, for example that different people use different words for the same thing or the same word for different things, to which he may have added comments on correctness, for example that Homer was wrong to call something X because its true name is Y.

Barring the discovery of Protagoras' actual works, we will never be able to ascertain whether he developed positive views on correct *logos*, but we can be quite certain that he raised the question of correctness in these areas, and was the first to discuss explicitly the issue of rules or standards in language. And by choosing *orthos* as the primary descriptive for correct *logos*, and by exploiting the broad range of objective and subjective meanings of this word, he established a basis for the scientific study of both grammar and rhetoric. For by posing questions about the correct rules of argument in the same terms as he questioned the correct rules of gender, Protagoras suggested that both areas were subjects for similar intellectual discussion and scientific study. In raising these issues, Protagoras directed his audience's attention not to what is really the case, but rather to what is correctly said or thought to be the case. This shift allowed him to adopt a subjective position but give it the appearance of objectivity that was probably very effective in stimulating debate. The orators, not surprisingly, were wary of relying on this slippery notion of correctness and put greater emphasis on truth as the standard of judging the facts of the case.