

Early Greek Political Thought from Homer to the Sophists, ed.
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Alcidamas

Alcidamas (from Elaea) was a pupil of Gorgias who taught in Athens in the late fifth and early fourth centuries. Although his writings are probably later than those of the other sophists, we include his writings in this anthology because he shows little or no influence from Socrates or Plato, his concerns are an extension of the fifth-century debates on several issues, and the works are not readily available in English. In addition to these, Alcidamas also wrote a work on Homer, a few papyrus fragments of which have recently been discovered. This was apparently the main source for a later work entitled The Contest of Homer and Hesiod.

1. (Scholiast on Aristotle, Rhetoric 1373b6)

God set all people free; nature has made no one a slave.

2. *On Those Who Write Speeches*,³⁰⁰ or *On Sophists*

This essay may be a response to Isocrates' Against the Sophists (Isoc. 13), written c. 391. Isocrates (436–338) was the leading teacher of rhetoric at Athens in the fourth century, but was a notoriously poor speaker himself. There may be a degree of irony in some of the arguments

³⁰⁰ *Logoi* (lit. "words") can designate (among other things) either an oral "speech" or a written "treatise"; the singular form is *logos*: "word, argument, reason, speech, etc." We have used "speech" throughout, since the written *logoi* in question take the form of speeches.

Alcidamas uses to attack writing – an attack that is itself (as he acknowledges) written.

[1] Some of those who are called sophists are not concerned with inquiry (*historia*) or general education (*paideia*), and they are just as inexperienced in the practice of speaking as ordinary men; but they are proud and boastful about their practice of writing speeches and displaying their own intelligence through their books. Though they possess only a small degree of rhetorical ability, they lay claim to the whole profession (*technē*). Therefore I shall undertake the following criticism of those who write speeches, [2] not because I consider their ability to be foreign to me, but because I have a higher regard for other pursuits and think one ought to practice writing only as an ancillary skill. I suspect that those who spend their life in this pursuit have failed in rhetoric and philosophy, and I think they would more rightly be called poets than sophists.

[3] In the first place, one would despise writing on the grounds that it is exposed to attack, and is an easy undertaking, available to anyone whatever natural ability he happens to have. Now, to speak appropriately, on the spot, on whatever topic is proposed, to be quick with an argument and ready with the right word, and to find just the right speech to match the current situation (*kairos*) and people's desires – all this is not within the natural ability of everyone nor the result of whatever education one happens to have had. [4] On the other hand, to write something over a long period of time, to revise it at one's leisure, to consult the works of earlier sophists and collect from many sources their arguments on the same topic, to imitate passages that happen to be expressed well, and then in some places to make further revisions on the advice of laymen and in others, after investigating the matter thoroughly by oneself, to delete everything and write it over again – all this is naturally easy even for those with no education. [5] But everything good and noble (*kalon*) is scarce and difficult and usually obtained only through hard work, whereas it is easy to possess things that are of low quality and little worth. Thus, since writing is easier for us than speaking, it is reasonable to conclude that the ability to write is of less value.

[6] Furthermore, no sensible person would doubt that those who are skillful (*deinos*) at speaking could write speeches reasonably well

with only a slight change in their mental state, but no one would believe that those who have practiced writing could use the same ability to be able to speak as well. For when those who accomplish difficult tasks turn their mind to easier things, they are likely to complete these tasks easily, whereas for those who train with easy exercises the pursuit of more difficult tasks presents a severe obstacle. This can be understood from the following examples. [7] Someone who can lift a heavy load would easily manage if he switched to a lighter load, whereas someone who applies his strength to the light weights would not be able to lift any of the heavier ones. In addition, a swift runner could easily keep up with slower runners, but the slow man could not run with faster runners. Besides, someone who is accurate with a javelin or a bow at long distance can also easily hit a nearby target, but if someone knows how to hit nearby targets, it is not yet clear whether he can also hit distant ones. [8] A similar argument holds for speeches: it is clear that someone who can make good use of them on the spot will, if he has some leisure time for writing, be a superior writer; but if someone who composes written treatises switches over to extemporaneous speeches, his mind will be full of uncertainty and rambling and confusion.

[9] I also think that in human life speaking is always useful in every matter, whereas only occasionally does the ability to write prove opportune. For who does not know that public speakers and litigants in court and those engaged in private discussions must necessarily speak extemporaneously? Often events unexpectedly present opportunities, and at these times those who are silent will appear contemptible, whereas we observe that those who speak are held in honor by others for having a god-like intelligence. [10] For when one needs to admonish wrongdoers, or comfort the unfortunate, or calm those who are upset, or refute sudden accusations – on these occasions the ability to speak can help people in their need, whereas writing requires leisure and thus takes more time than the occasion allows. People require speedy assistance in their trials (*agōnes*), but writing produces speeches slowly, at one's leisure. Thus, what sensible person would crave this ability, which is so inadequate on such occasions? [11] And surely it would be ridiculous if, when the herald calls out, "what citizen wishes to

address the meeting?"³⁰¹ or when the water-clock is running in court,³⁰² the speaker should turn to his writing tablet, intending to compose and then memorize his speech! True, if we were tyrants of cities, we could convene courts and schedule deliberations about public affairs, so that whenever we wrote speeches, we could summon the rest of the citizens to hear them; but since others are in charge of these matters, would we not be foolish to practice speeches in some other way that is inconsistent with that?³⁰³ [12] In fact, when speeches are fashioned with verbal precision, resembling poems more than speeches, have lost spontaneity and verisimilitude, and appear to be constructed and composed with much preparation, they fill the minds of the listeners with distrust and resentment. [13] The best evidence for this is that people who write speeches for the lawcourts³⁰⁴ avoid great precision of expression and imitate instead the style of extemporaneous speakers; and their writing appears finest when they produce speeches least like those that are written. Now, if even speech-writers have this standard of excellence as their goal, that they imitate extemporaneous speakers, must we not honor most the kind of education that makes us adept at this kind of speech?

[14] I think we should also condemn written speeches because the lives of those who compose them are inconsistent. For it is by nature impossible to know written speeches about all matters; and thus if someone extemporizes some parts of his speech but carefully composes others, he will necessarily be criticized because of the inconsistency of the speech: some parts of it will closely resemble dramatic delivery and poetic recitation, while others will appear base and worthless when compared to the precision of the rest.

[15] It is strange that someone who lays claim to philosophy and undertakes to educate others is able to demonstrate his wisdom when he has a writing tablet or a book but is no better than an

³⁰¹ These words opened the proceedings in the Athenian Assembly.

³⁰² Time limits were imposed on speeches in court, and were measured by a water-clock, or jar filled with water that ran out slowly through a small hole at the bottom.

³⁰³ At the end of section 11 and at several points in section 12 the text is doubtful; for the most part we follow Blass.

³⁰⁴ In a legal case plaintiff and defendant had to deliver their own speeches, but they often had these speeches written for them by a "speech-writer" (*logographos*).

uneducated person when he has neither of these; or that he can produce a speech when he is given time but is more speechless than a layman when a topic is proposed for immediate discussion; or that he professes the skill (*technē*) of speeches but appears to have within him not the slightest ability to speak. Indeed, the practice of writing renders a person largely unable to speak. [16] For when someone is accustomed to crafting every detail of his speeches, and composing every phrase with precision and attention to rhythm, and perfecting his expression with slow and deliberate thought, it is inevitable that, when he turns to extemporaneous speeches and does the opposite of what he is accustomed to do, his mind will be filled with uncertainty and confusion, he will be annoyed at everything, he will speak like someone with an impairment, and will never regain the easy use of his native wit or speak with fluent and engaging speeches. [17] Rather, just as those who are freed from bonds after a long period of time are unable to walk like other people but are forced back to the same posture and movements they had to use when they were bound, in the same way writing slows down a person's mental processes and gives him training in habits opposite to those used in speaking; it thereby renders his mind helpless and fettered and blocks completely the easy flow of extemporaneous speech.

[18] I also think that learning written speeches is difficult, remembering them is laborious and forgetting them in trials is disgraceful. For all would agree that it is more difficult to learn and remember small things than large, and many things than few. In extemporaneous speaking you need to keep your mind fixed on the arguments alone and you can supply the right words as you proceed; but in written speeches in addition you must necessarily learn and remember very precisely the words and even the syllables. [19] Now, there are only a few arguments in speeches and they are important, but there are many words and phrases that are unimportant and differ only slightly from one another; moreover, each of the arguments is presented only once, whereas we are compelled to use the same words many times. Thus the arguments are easy to remember but the precise words are hard to remember or to keep in your mind when you have learned them. [20] Furthermore, if you forget something in an extemporaneous speech, your disgrace is not clear to others. For since the expression can be easily broken

up and the wording has not been precisely determined, if a speaker forgets one of the arguments, it is not difficult for him to skip over it and pick up the other arguments in order, thereby keeping the speech free of disgrace. Indeed, the argument you forgot can easily be presented later, if you remember it. [21] But if those who recite written speeches during a trial forget or alter even a small detail, they are inevitably beset by uncertainty and wandering and searching. Then there is a long pause and often complete silence takes hold of the speech. The speaker's helplessness is disgraceful, ridiculous, and hard to remedy.

[22] I also think extemporaneous speakers satisfy the audience's desires better than those who deliver written speeches. For the latter take great trouble over their composition before a trial, but sometimes miss the opportunity (*kairos*): either they irritate the audience by speaking longer than they desire, or they cut short their speech when people still want to hear more. [23] For it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, for human foresight to reach into the future and know precisely what attitude the audience will have toward the length of the speech. In extemporaneous speeches, however, the speaker can note the effect of his words and control them, cutting short some lengthy remarks or extending the presentation of short topics.

[24] Apart from these considerations, we see that both groups cannot make the same use of arguments supplied by the trial itself. If those who speak without a written text take an argument from the opposing litigant or through their own mental effort come up with an idea themselves, they can easily fit it into the order of their speech, since by choosing the words for their exposition on the spot, they produce a speech without any unevenness or roughness, even when they speak longer than they had planned. [25] However, if those who enter such trials with written speeches are given an argument other than what they have prepared, they have difficulty fitting it in harmoniously; for the perfect precision of their diction does not allow for spontaneous additions. Rather, either the speaker must make no use of the arguments provided by chance or, if he uses them, he must break up and destroy the entire edifice of words: by speaking precisely in some places but carelessly in others he will fashion a confused and discordant presentation. [26] But what sensible person would accept a pursuit

like this, that prevents one from using advantages that suddenly present themselves, and at times is less helpful to speakers than simple good luck? Other professions (*technai*) generally improve human life, but this one impedes even those advantages that come spontaneously.

[27] I do not even think it is right to call written texts "speeches" (*logoi*): rather, they are like images or outlines or representations (*mimēmata*)³⁰⁵ of speeches, and it would be reasonable to view them in the same way as bronze statues or stone sculptures or pictures of animals. Just as these are representations of real bodies – they are a joy to look at but of no real use in people's lives – [28] in the same way a written speech, which has just one form and arrangement, may have some striking effects when viewed in a book, but for a particular occasion is of no help to those who have it because it cannot change. And just as real bodies are less attractive in appearance than beautiful statues, but for practical purposes are many times more helpful, so too a speech spoken extemporaneously from one's own mind is animated and alive and corresponds to actual events, just like a real body, whereas a written text by nature resembles the image of a speech and is totally ineffective.

[29] Perhaps someone might say it is illogical (*a-logos*) that I criticize the ability to write while I present my case by this very means, and that I cast aspersions on that very activity through which one procures a good reputation among the Greeks – and further, that although I do much work in philosophy, I praise extemporaneous speeches and consider luck more important than forethought and speeches spoken offhand more intelligent than those written with care. [30] Let me first say that I have uttered this speech not because I do entirely reject the ability to write but I consider it inferior to the ability to speak extemporaneously and think one should give most of one's attention to being able to speak. Second, I use writing not because I am especially proud of my accomplishment but in order to demonstrate to those who pride themselves on this ability that with little trouble we can overshadow and destroy their speeches. [31] In addition, I also use writing to prepare display pieces for delivery before a large audience. For I urge those who regularly converse with me to test me in that

³⁰⁵ Cf. Plato's criticism of poetry as *mimēsis* in *Republic* 595a–603c.

way, whenever we can speak opportunely and gracefully about any proposed topic; but I try to demonstrate something written for those who have only lately come to hear me speak and have never encountered me before. For they are accustomed to hearing written speeches from others, and if they heard me speak extemporaneously, they might perhaps have a lower opinion of me than I deserve. [32] Aside from these considerations, in written speeches one can most clearly see signs of the probable improvement in someone's thinking. It is not easy to judge whether we are better now at extemporaneous speaking than before, for it is difficult to remember speeches spoken earlier; but by looking at something written one can easily view (as if in a mirror) the improvement of someone's mind. Finally, I try my hand at writing speeches because I am eager to leave behind a memorial of myself and wish to gratify this ambition.

[33] On the other hand, rest assured that in valuing the ability to speak extemporaneously above that of writing I am not recommending that one speak offhandedly. I think public speakers should choose in advance their arguments and overall organization, but the actual words should be supplied at the time of speaking. For the precision obtainable in written speeches gives less benefit than the appropriateness allowed in an extemporaneous display of speech. [34] Thus, whoever desires to become a skillful (*deinos*) public speaker and not just an adequate maker (*poiētēs*) of speeches, and wishes to make best use of his opportunities rather than speak with verbal precision, and is eager to procure the goodwill of the audience on his side rather than its resentful opposition, and who further wishes that his mind be relaxed, his memory quick, his forgetfulness hidden, and is eager to achieve an ability with speeches commensurate with the needs of his life – it would be reasonable for him to practice extemporaneous speaking on every possible occasion. If he practices writing only for amusement³⁰⁶ and as an ancillary skill, those with good sense will judge him a sensible man.

3. *Odysseus*

Palamedes was known for his intelligence and inventiveness. When the Greeks were gathering their forces for the Trojan expedition, Odysseus

³⁰⁶ Cf. the last word of Gorgias' *Helen* (fr. 1).