

*Philosophical Rhetoric or
Rhetorical Philosophy?
The Strange Case of Isocrates*



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DESPITE HIS SUBSTANTIAL and acknowledged influence on the history of rhetoric, particularly on Cicero and (partly through Cicero) on Renaissance humanists, Isocrates in recent times has become one of the least keenly discussed figures in the rhetorical canon. Although some scholarly energy continues to be devoted to the reconstruction of his polemical relationship to Plato, Aristotle, and other contemporary thinkers, more general interest in his writings has not been widely sustained by intellectual historians. In part, this no doubt has much to do with features of Isocrates' work that strike a jaded modern palate as especially unprepossessing: a stylistic fullness that can easily be found cloying; a conservatism of mentality that is too often hospitable to platitudes; an outlook so seemingly static as to make it possible for the author, when justifying his career in the *Antidosis* of 353, to quote a passage from *Against the Sophists* (of almost forty years earlier) as evidence of his stable and persistent principles of education;² and, last but not least, consistent suspicion (and a correspondingly successful avoidance) of most kinds of intellectual subtlety. The purpose of this essay, I should say at once, certainly is not to be a general defense or rehabilitation of Isocrates against complaints of the kind just cited. One of my aims, in fact, will be to argue that beneath some of the faults mentioned, there lies a more disturbing weakness which goes to the very roots of his thinking. But those aspects of his writing that now may seem so unexciting do not, I believe, vindicate what is close to becoming a consensus about the clarity and comfortableness of Isocrates' place within the history of rhetoric. (It may well be, indeed, that the uniformity of his style and self-presentation actually impedes proper recognition of the ways

in which his guiding motivation eludes stable evaluation.) I shall be trying, in what follows, to develop an account of why Isocrates ought to be regarded as a much more problematic thinker than most historians of ideas currently take him to be.

If Isocrates' historical status can and should be found problematic, one reason for this is his paradoxical relationship to the categories of rhetoric and philosophy. There can be, however, no question of bringing these categories to bear on his work as given, ready-made divisions of intellectual activity or analysis. Concepts of rhetoric and philosophy were recent and still evolving developments in the culture of fourth-century Greece in which Isocrates practiced as a teacher and publicist. The term *rhētorikē* almost certainly was coined in Isocrates' own lifetime, probably close to the end of the fifth century B.C.E.³ This is no mere terminological detail but a reflection of the increasingly explicit and systematic spirit in which precepts and procedures of (oratorical) persuasion were being articulated in this period. Although the terms *philosophos* and *philosophia* were older, their use, too, was a matter of a good deal of debate, redefinition, and refinement at the time. These cultural circumstances form something much more than pieces of the background to Isocrates' own career; they provide, to a considerable extent, the very material out of which he chooses to forge his own identity as both thinker and teacher. It is, therefore, to the ongoing process of self-definition of both rhetoric and philosophy throughout Isocrates' lifetime that we must look for the primary historical perspective on his writings.

The development of rhetoric as a conscious and self-defining art of public speech or discourse in classical Greece is intimately related not only to the political conditions and ideologies of the cities in which this development took place but also to the emergence of philosophy as an intellectual discipline, or range of disciplines, with which rhetoric soon acquired, and was long to keep, a relationship of mutual and sometimes hostile rivalry. In the cultural setting of late fifth and fourth century B.C.E. Athens, where discussion of the nature and aspirations of both rhetoric and philosophy was brought to its sharpest focus, three individual figures now stand out as particularly important for their contributions to the debate about the potential antagonism between the two pursuits. Two of these three figures, Plato and Aristotle, erected frameworks of thought within which philosophy and rhetoric could be confidently defined and distinguished. In doing so, they laid substantial parts of the foundations for a configuration of intellectual history that has survived and indeed remained dominant in the Western tradition ever since, at any rate until the radical questioning of inherited categories pursued by various branches of poststructuralist criticism. One implication of this influence is that the demarcation of philosophy from rhetoric on which Plato and Aristotle broadly agreed has come virtually to erase the notably different views propounded by their contemporary and rival Isocrates—views that make

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the relationship of philosophy and rhetoric a very much less clear-cut and more ambiguous matter. In consequence, Isocrates himself has been assigned a securely acknowledged position in the history of rhetoric, yet he has been almost entirely written out of a history of philosophy that owes so much to Plato and Aristotle. Is this, as many have judged it, purely a triumph of definitional clarity and cogency over mediocre looseness of ideas? Is Isocrates no more than "a bundle of contradictions"?⁴ Or are there more telling things to be said about Isocrates' own deployment of the categories of rhetoric and philosophy?

At the *prima facie* level of his own claims, it is doubly paradoxical that Isocrates has come to be so readily regarded as a rhetorician and not a philosopher. Throughout his surviving writings, Isocrates uses the Greek word group *philosophia*, *philosophēin* (verb), and so on, to describe his own teaching program and his intellectual posture. At the same time, not only was he personally unable (because of physical weaknesses) to practice oratory in Athenian public life, but he frequently criticizes the ideas and methods of those who claimed unequivocally to be teachers of rhetoric. These paradoxes are matched by other anomalies within Isocrates' life and self-presentation. He was a professional educator who derided what he saw as the excessive pedagogical pretensions of several schools and schemes of education. He was an intellectual who, as we shall see, was well capable of identifying with the anti-intellectualist cynicism of some strains of popular opinion in Athens. And he was a believer in the essential importance for human communities of "political speech/argument" (*politikos logos*),⁵ even though many of his contributions to the political debates of Athens and of Greece as a whole were couched in the form of fictional enactments of public oratory and were thus at one remove from the practical.⁶ It will, I hope, be worth asking how deeply rooted these paradoxes lie in Isocrates' ways of thinking and whether they should be treated as anything more than the symptoms of an imperfectly clarified set of educational aims and cultural ideals.

Answers to those questions need to start from a recognition of the (unsettled and contentious nature of many basic intellectual categories in the culture of fourth century B.C.E. Athens within which Isocrates, as well as Plato and Aristotle, worked. Isocrates' entire career is animated by a context of competition and controversy which frequently involved the definition of particular disciplines or arts." Far from being purely abstract, such conceptual issues impinged directly on the training of those who aspired to political activity and leadership: Isocrates himself educated a number of figures who became highly prominent in Greek politics, including the Athenian general-politician Timotheus, the orator Hyperides, and the Cypriot king Nicocles. Some idea of the contours of this context of intellectual controversy, as well as of Isocrates' entry into it as a formal educationalist, can be gathered from his early and now fragmentary work *Against the Sophists*, which was

probably written around 390 B.C.E. and within a year or two of the opening of his school at Athens. The work's function is an explicitly programmatic statement of the agenda of Isocrates' school, though this is realized, so far as the surviving sections go, by poetically negative means. While, like so many other Isocratean compositions, *Against the Sophists* is a written "pamphlet" circulated for reading,⁷ its tone deliberately borrows something from the ethos of personal animosity that played a recurrent part in so much contemporary Athenian oratory, both political and forensic. This reflects the more general fact that Isocrates' works embody in the written word a manner and tone that are consciously reminiscent of public speech. In many aspects of form, style, and "voice," Isocrates conspicuously adopts and adapts the postures of oratory, and that is a quality of his authorial persona intended to impress would-be students by its links with the rhetoric of political institutions. In this salient respect, as in many others, the impression created by an Isocratean pamphlet is very far from either a Platonic dialogue or an Aristotelian lecture-treatise. Yet *Against the Sophists* would have confronted its fourth century B.C.E. readers, and continues to confront us, with arguments and suggestions that leave it highly debatable in what sense its author can be regarded as a rhetorician.

Isocrates approaches his task of announcing and defining his own school of education by means of an attack on two other groups of teachers. It is significant that in doing so he assumes, at the outset (13.1, see 13.11), that "philosophy" is the aim of all (advanced) education: "If all those who undertake to educate were prepared to speak the truth, and not to make promises which outrun what they are likely to achieve, they would not have such a bad reputation with ordinary citizens. As it is, those with the temerity to boast so irresponsibly have made it appear that even people who choose an idle existence can make better deliberations than the students of philosophy." This is, in itself, no merely terminological quirk but a conceptually purposeful move which preserves a wide, open-ended, and perhaps partly popular status for a term that was beginning to be given a much tighter and more specific sense by various Greek thinkers. Isocrates' use of *philosophia*, here as in many other passages, is a calculated eschewal of any notion of philosophy as an esoteric discipline that requires admission into a special way of life or an exclusive domain of theory. It intimates the idea of a broad human understanding that cannot be readily circumscribed or technically demarcated—a capacity for insight or sagacity akin, perhaps, to traditional conceptions of *sophia*, "wisdom." Some such implication is developed by the double attack on two groups of rivals which Isocrates proceeds to launch, first (13.1–8) against those he calls dealers in "eristics" or "disputations," then (13.9–13) against teachers of public oratory. The former are criticized not simply for a (quasi-Socratic) method of argument that attends too fastidiously to verbal distinctions (13.7) but also and more importantly for laying claim to practical/ethical principles of conduct that arrogate the status of knowledge

and purport to guarantee happiness or well-being (*eudaimonia* [13.3]). The rhetoricians, too, are censured for professing a "knowledge" that they cannot validate—in their case, a knowledge of "speeches"/"arguments" (*logoi*) which they offer to transmit to their students, according to Isocrates, with a technical self-confidence that transcends both experience and individual ability.⁸

This critique of both eristic philosophers and formal rhetoricians is far from being a sustained argument. It is discursive, somewhat anecdotal, and carpingly ad hominem, though also oddly coy about identifying its opponents explicitly. But the work does nonetheless convey some essential aspects of the position Isocrates took up early in his career as an educator, which he was scarcely to modify during the rest of his long life. While the two sets of opponents are evidently envisaged as different kinds of people, Isocrates' disapproval of them depends on an effectively single point of view. In both cases, the allegation of unjustified pretensions to knowledge depends principally on considerations of contingency as a defining factor in human life. A sense of contingency was an old and deeply embedded constituent of traditional Greek patterns of thought; it was an idea important, in different ways, for religious feeling, for the historical outlook of Thucydides, and for Greek tragedy. Isocrates is clearly indebted here, as so often, to the wider traditions of Greek thought: he invokes contingency in the readily comprehensible form of human ignorance of the future, and he cites Homer as a witness to the point (13.2). But Isocrates makes distinctive use of the concept of contingency by building on it his rejection of what he sees as specious claims to knowledge by certain types of teachers. If the conditions of life are irredeemably contingent, then there is no possibility, according to Isocrates, of discerning practical or ethical principles that will have prior validity for all possible situations.⁹ And if that is so, then it follows that, among much else, there can be no substantially codifiable or wholly teachable rules of rhetoric, given rhetoric's need to guide deliberations about the actual and the feasible.¹⁰ The existence of contingency leads Isocrates, then, to rule out the attainability of either ethical knowledge or, in the strongest sense, rhetorical art.

We need to ask, as his critics have so often done, where this leaves Isocrates' own program or principles of education. The question is awkward, not simply because of lacunae in our knowledge of his positive claims or methods but because there appears to be something intrinsic to Isocrates' position that militates against a definitive statement. In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates shows some self-consciousness about this point (13.22), and our understanding of his response to it is not helped by the fact that the text is cut off at just this juncture. But nonetheless we can see a number of factors that are germane to his stance. It is important, in the first place, to recognize that contingency is not randomness, and Isocrates' repudiation of excessive claims to ethical and rhetorical certainty does not commit him to anything like a radical relativism.¹¹ If knowledge is not available in many crucial

human contexts, then at least the possibility of better or worse "judgment" or "opinion" (*doxa*) remains: ordinary people sometimes must observe, according to Isocrates, that "those who use their judgment are more consistent and have greater success than those who profess to have knowledge."¹² This is one of a number of passages, in both *Against the Sophists* and elsewhere, where Isocrates allows his argument to converge with somewhat skeptical and even cynical popular attitudes toward philosophers and teachers. This is not simply, in the vulgar sense, a rhetorical ploy in the denigration of his rivals. It serves to underscore a point of view that implicitly relies on the broad acceptability of at least some prevailing cultural norms. In the present instance, the point has a double force: first, that standards of ethical and deliberative judgment (and therefore, in part, of rhetorical cogency) can be established, even though these realms do not allow of secure or permanent knowledge; second, that these standards are inextricable from publicly recognizable criteria of practical effectiveness. Throughout his work, Isocrates' reliance on criteria that he maintains to be grounded in widely shared values represents a conscious attempt to align his arguments with strong social currents of feeling: other teachers may "call their students to a type of virtue and intelligence which is unknown to other people, and disputed even by themselves; but I call mine to the type which is agreed on by all" (15.84).

Contingency; the principle that practical decisions and rhetorical persuasion can rest on good judgment but not on knowledge; and a willingness to appeal to popular notions of success in deliberation and action—these are all fundamental and recurrent markers of the position Isocrates attempts to stake out for himself as a teacher and a participant in political discourse. In *Against the Sophists*, this position is perhaps most strikingly encapsulated in the passage that denies the status of a "codified art" to rhetoric but ascribes to it that of a "productive/creative enterprise" (13.12): "something said by one person is not equally useful to the next speaker; the most artful impression is created by one who speaks in a way which befits the subject, and yet is able to find something different to say from the rest." Hence, as Isocrates argues, the vital importance in rhetoric of recognizing and adapting oneself to *kairos*—the "moment" or "opportunity" which is also the principle of "the right time." Contingency means that the past cannot provide an infallible guide to the future; every context is in some way new, and the success of rhetorical deliberation requires an ability and flexibility to respond aptly yet inventively to each situation. Isocrates maintains that experience is a crucial prerequisite for being able to recognize and meet the salient features of a fresh context; it is precisely because experience is, *ex hypothesi*, of the contingent, that it does not yield codifiable principles and therefore cannot be replaced by methodical teaching or doctrine. Experience, practicality, and contingency are interlocked: they provide the resolutely pragmatic Isocratean alternative to acceptance of any master art that can give access to an absolute framework of truth.

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Isocrates' pragmatic program, sketched out in *Against the Sophists*, rejects ethical and rhetorical systems. Yet it is itself implicitly concerned with both ethics and rhetorical persuasion: the first, because it aims, however vaguely, at fostering a sense of an apt human responsiveness, in the interests of a common good,¹³ to the conditions of social existence; the second, because it frames this responsiveness in terms of a capacity to use and deploy public and political speech(es). Isocrates sums up his educational philosophy as a "cultivation of political discourse(s)" (13.21); and while he suggests, if somewhat nervously (and perhaps self-defensively, given his own noninvolvement in practical politics), that its results may be more evident in ethical than in rhetorical qualities (13.21), his goal is one that makes the two things hard to separate. Another way of putting this point is to say that Isocrates' philosophy, his guiding insight, depends on conjoint concepts of *logos* and of a political life. The term *logos* has a semantic range that encompasses "speech," "reason," and "argument." Isocrates has a penchant for using it in the plural, in phrases such as *politikoi logoi*, to denote the discourse that finds expression either in the public speech of oratory on which most Greek political institutions depended or, in Isocrates' own case, on its written equivalent. But it will now repay us to take a slightly closer look at two particular passages which illustrate, in a suitably programmatic way, the breadth of connotations Isocrates tries to keep for the concept of *logos*.

In the *Panegyricus*, the first major statement of combined pleas for Greek unity and a Panhellenic war against Persia that were to remain central to his political stance, Isocrates argues for an Athenian entitlement to hegemony which is based on Athens's outstanding historical contribution to the civilization and culture of the Greek world. After surveying something of the range of Athens's achievement, in terms that embrace religion, law, economics, festivals, and "contests of speeches and intelligence" (4.45), Isocrates contends that the unifying factor and creative force behind all these things was "philosophy." Athens has revealed philosophy to the world, and for the same reasons has "honored speeches [*logoi*], which all men desire though they feel resentment toward those adept at them."¹⁴ Isocrates' account of Athenian culture is thus not only tinged with considerable chauvinism; it also has, tacitly but unmistakably, a self-referential element. The *Panegyricus* itself is explicitly presented as a display of philosophical intelligence, expressed through command of *logoi* (4.6, 10). But 4.47–50 makes it clear that Isocrates intends the significance of *logoi* to be much freer than that of "speeches" in a strictly oratorical sense. Indeed, it is striking that he allows a kind of elision to occur between the oratorical and the wider senses of the word. The ability to use *logoi* is "the one natural endowment which distinguishes us from all animals" (48), which indicates that Isocrates is referring to a compound capacity for *logos* as reason and as language: hence the close conjunction he makes between intelligence (*phronein*) and speech (*legein*). Given the stress

on contingency that elsewhere, as we have seen, leads Isocrates to reject any idea of systematic deliberative knowledge, it is significant that he here holds up *logos*, and the rational intelligence it embodies, as a partial human protection against contingency. Chance may make success or failure often utterly unstable in other areas, but the link between intelligence or practical wisdom and effective *logoi* is something that cannot, he suggests, be broken (4.48–9). If contingency removes any possibility of grounding deliberation or persuasion on firm knowledge, it also makes the need for the secure rationality of deliberation all the greater.

A further point of importance for Isocrates' intellectual position is that this passage of the *Panegyricus* displays faith in a philosophy whose roots can be regarded as potentially universalist. Neither here nor anywhere else does Isocrates present *logos* as anything other than a fundamental human endowment, albeit one that requires appropriate social and educational conditions for its nurturing and development. It is precisely the achievement of Athens, on his account, to have created such conditions to an exceptional and paradigmatic degree. But as a result, so Isocrates claims in a very famous passage, there has arisen a set of cultural forms that more truly define the possibility of a common "Greek" identity than do racial factors: "Our city has so far outstripped all mankind in intelligence [*phronein*] and speech [*legein*] that its pupils have become the teachers of others, and it has made the name of "Greeks" no longer belong to a race but to a way of thinking, so that the name is sooner given to those who share our education than to those who have the same [ethnic] nature" (4.50). The passage is heavily marked by chauvinistic hyperbole, and part of its purpose may well be an implicit denigration of Athens's traditional political enmity, Sparta.¹⁵ But this statement of cultural Hellenism nevertheless attests to a universalist tendency present in Isocrates' ideal of a nonspecialized prudence that stems from the exercise of a common human *logos*.

This tendency can be similarly discerned in another much-noted statement on the nature of *logos* which occurs first in the *Nicoles* of the mid-360s B.C.E. (3.5–9; the speaker is, fictionally, Nicoles himself) and is subsequently reused in the *Antidosis* of 354/3 (15.253–7). Here *logos* is once more perceived not as a technical discipline or specialized accomplishment but as a faculty inherent in human nature; and it is glossed as the capacity "to persuade one another and to communicate our meanings to one another on whatever matters we wish" (3.6; 15.254). It need not immediately concern us that Isocrates writes here, as often, with highly generalizing sentiments; the level of generalization is entirely of a piece with the spirit of the claims he implicitly makes for his own teaching: "It is this [*logos*] which decreed laws about justice and injustice, about honor and shame; without order in these things, we would be unable to live with one another . . . Through this we educate the ignorant and esteem the prudent: for we regard the ability to speak [*legein*] appropriately

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as the most reliable sign of fine intelligence" (3.7; 15.255). *Logos*, then, is the foundation of political communities, not only because it has made progress possible but also because it is the basis of ethical and legal standards. Yet the practical and the ethical seem here, as elsewhere in Isocrates, to be virtually indissoluble; ethical values are but an expression of the deliberative intelligence that allows communities to prosper. Moreover, as I noted in commenting on *Panegyricus* 47–50, Isocrates is ready—and his Greek terminology allows him—to elide the distinction between *logos* as a ratiocinative and deliberative faculty and its use in public speaking (*legein*). This assimilation accentuates his refusal to treat rhetoric as a technically demarcated discipline rather than as a heightened development of a human faculty whose basic operations are prior to, and independent of, formal oratory. *Logos*, as rational and ethical intelligence, underlies the arguments of public discourse; but we lose Isocrates' deliberate play on the wide resonance of the term if we flatten its significance into that of "speech" as such.¹⁶ Nothing makes this clearer than the statement at 3.8 (15.256) that "we use the same convictions [*pisteis*] when deliberating [on our own behalf] as we do when persuading others by our speech, and while we call rhetoricians those with the ability to speak before the multitude, we count as prudent all those who debate excellently with themselves on practical matters." There is continuity, and indeed identity (in a sense) of *logos*, between private and public deliberations. This means that Isocratean education concerns itself indistinguishably with personal and with political prudence, as confirmed by passages such as 12.30–32. It is an education that aspires to the integrated cultivation of rationality and persuasiveness.

It is instructive to regard Isocrates as having responded in his own way to a division of thought that Cicero was later to characterize, in a famous (and highly Isocratean) passage of *De Oratore*, as part of the legacy of Socratic philosophy:¹⁷ a division between wisdom and eloquence, between "tongue and mind," which introduced a fissure into what had supposedly once been a unified and harmonious form of culture. Isocrates certainly can be deemed to have fought against what he implicitly saw as the separation of "wisdom" (*sophia*) from the eloquence that was definable in terms of mastery of public discourse. In striving to preserve the ideal of philosophy, the pursuit of wisdom, for his own composite educational agenda, he tried harder than anyone else to resist its restriction to specially refined types of thought and argument which were, at the very least, inimical to quasi-oratorical modes of presentation. In terms I have explored above, we could say that Isocrates' resistance focused on the concept of *logos* and amounted to an attempt to maintain a conjunction of *logos* as rationality and *logos* as public speech.

But his resistance was in vain. The separation of philosophy and rhetoric did indeed become an institutionalized fact in the Greek world, with immense and lasting consequences for educational practice and the demarcation of

intellectual activity. The history of that separation has generated the near-unanimous conclusion that Isocrates' rightful status can be unambiguously judged to lie on the rhetorical side of the division. This conclusion, with its paradoxical contradiction of Isocrates' own ostensible claims to the contrary, has been partly sustained by philosophical upholders of the division who—on the basis of conceptions of the subject stemming from Plato and Aristotle—can find no appropriate place for Isocrates within the domain of philosophy. It will be worthwhile to rehearse, with extreme brevity, three possible reasons for this exclusion of Isocrates from the (self-defining) history of philosophy.¹⁸

The first is Isocrates' explicitly stated antipathy to anything like a general, let alone comprehensive, interpretation of reality. Although he repudiates the charge, leveled against him during his own lifetime, of spurning all forms of philosophy other than his own (12.19), his insistence on a tightly practical test of the value of philosophy has obvious implications for a conception of the subject. Put most stringently, nothing merits the name of philosophy, on Isocrates' premises, that does not bear directly on speech or action in the present (15.266). This principle clearly devalues the entire pursuit of physics or natural philosophy (*phusiologia*) in the Greek tradition, and still more precludes the validity of metaphysical arguments.¹⁹ But however severely narrow such a conception of philosophy may be thought to be, and however hostile to both pre-Socratic inquiry and the thinking of Plato and Aristotle, it is not without partial parallels in the later history of the subject, above all in certain aspects of positivism and linguistic philosophy. It is, in any case, obscure why an exclusive focus on philosophy as a force for the shaping of practical living should count as no philosophy at all. Equally inconclusive, and on related grounds, would be the suggestion that Isocrates disqualifies himself as genuinely philosophical by virtue of his opposition to systematic theorizing. That he is so opposed is undoubtedly true, as we saw earlier. But his opposition falls well within the bounds of positions that have been, and still are, occupied in philosophy, especially by pragmatist and conventionalist points of view.

In short, Isocrates cannot be denied the rank of philosopher purely by reference to his views on the limits of the legitimate subject matter or the authentic aspirations of philosophy. This leaves us, I believe, with only one substantive reason for the well-entrenched exclusion of him from the history of philosophy; but it is, I shall maintain, a decisive and compelling reason. We can state it perhaps most simply by saying that while Isocrates' working principles and general intellectual commitments are philosophically conceivable and arguably defensible, he himself neither mounts a real defense of them nor even, more troublingly, sees any need for their defense. Put from a slightly different angle, this amounts to the claim that Isocratean *logos*—whether construed as speech, argument, or rationality—operates only within the construction of specific pieces of deliberation, the application of ethical and

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political principles to particular situations, and, at most, the highly generalized statement of those principles. But this conception of *logos* does not, except in the most cosmetic manner, undertake to provide any analysis, still less a critical justification, of its own workings. It is not merely that Isocrates dismisses one particular kind of analysis or method of inquiry—the kind he denotes as “eristic” and which he may well have meant to include all forms of quasi-Socratic dialectic. He recognizes no special or distinctive method or any style of argument that has a peculiarly philosophical status. And this appears to leave him without either the inclination or the equipment to engage in anything more than first-order discourse—or, as it would be more apt to say, the “common discourse,” the practical employment of *logos*, which he himself perceives as the essential constituent and medium of culture.

The principal difficulty,²⁰ then, in giving Isocrates more than tangential and anomalous recognition within the history of philosophy stems not from his antipathy either to systematic theorizing or to the search for an overarching account of reality, nor even from his effective conviction that the *logos* that truly matters is the *logos* of common discourse. It stems, rather, from his self-imposed refusal to subject this conviction to any critical questioning, any internal investigation, at all. Even so, it is important to see that providing reasons for the philosophical inadequacy of Isocratean “philosophy” does not warrant the automatic inference that the status of his program of political discourse is, in any uncontroversial sense, rhetorical. In fact, it is sometimes philosophers who reach unsustainably clear-cut and historically misleading verdicts on this point. Terence Irwin, for example, has written that in classical Greece, “rhetoricians concerned themselves primarily with techniques of persuasion, and not with the general moral and political education promised by the sophists”; yet he has no hesitation in calling Isocrates “one of the most influential rhetoricians among Plato's contemporaries.”²¹ This judgment effectively inverts the claims made by Isocrates himself in his surviving writings, where practically no reference to “techniques of persuasion” is to be found, where, moreover, the possibility of treating rhetoric as a technically precise discipline (*technē*) is explicitly denied (13.12), and where the concept of effective public discourse (and hence of Isocratean education) is inescapably “moral and political” in its implications.²²

The question of whether or how far Isocrates deserves to count as a rhetorician can be explored appropriately by a reading of his avowed educational principles in the light of both Plato's and Aristotle's views on rhetoric. Only the bare bones of such a comparative exercise can be sketched here, but a fuller examination of details would confirm, I believe, that the results are hardly straightforward. Between Isocrates' denial of the possibility of ethical knowledge and the Platonic insistence that rhetoric must be subordinated to, and ideally informed by, the higher-order principles of a philosophical “science of politics” (*politikē*), there is evidently an unbridgeable gulf. But

Isocrates' conception of *logos* is nonetheless far from a paradigmatic case of the kind of rhetoric that Plato has in his sights in the *Gorgias*, the *Phaedrus*, and elsewhere. As we have seen, Isocrates does not, in the first place, accept the view of rhetoric as an "art" (*techné*), a body of rationally coordinated principles, which comes particularly under attack in the *Gorgias*. Accordingly, he does not espouse anything like a purely formal notion of rhetoric—one that makes it a subject-neutral and value-free capacity to speak on any and every subject.²³ There may be some obscurity attaching to the Isocratean goal of an educated experience which allows a speaker to match his "judgment" (*doxa*) to the needs of circumstance and "occasion" (*kairos*),²⁴ but it is indubitably a rather different goal from the standard rhetorical aim of cultivating an ability to speak with equal effect on either side of any question. Isocrates fails to give any space in his program to such thinking, and that is because of his commitment to an ideal of *logos* in which argument and practical ethics are intertwined. An educator who asserts, however cautiously, that his teaching is more likely to result in moral decency than in verbal facility (13.21) adopts a stance that is ostensibly inhospitable to the technical aims advertised by many Greek proponents of rhetoric.²⁵ It is no surprise, therefore, to find Isocrates specifically disowning the Protagorean principle of a rhetoric that can "make the weaker argument into the stronger" (15.15).

If Isocrates does not affiliate himself to a purely formal and value-free conception of rhetoric, neither does he ever voice ideas comparable to Gorgias's imagery of the druglike, magical power of persuasion over the mind.²⁶ The only general thesis about the force or nature of persuasion to be found in his work occurs in one of the accounts of *logos* I cited earlier. The human capacity "to persuade one another"—that is, to persuade and *be* persuaded—is picked out as an entailment of the shared possession of *logos*, the *logos* of both reason and speech (3.6; 15.254). Viewed in this light, persuasion is not a malignly manipulative instrument, and being persuaded need not involve submitting to irrational pressures, whether from without or within. In this respect, too, therefore, Isocrates' canon of "speaking well" (e.g., 15.275) does not simply correspond to the kinds of rhetoric against which Plato's critique was chiefly directed. While it is far from satisfying Plato's positive requirements for a rhetoric that can be responsive to philosophical standards of truth and goodness, it nonetheless sets itself decisively apart both from technical amorality and from seductive irrationalism.

When we turn to a comparison of Isocrates' views with Aristotle's conception of rhetoric, the absence of outright antipathy turns, arguably, into a fair degree of common ground. Both thinkers accept the essentially rational potential of public persuasion. The availability to it of types of argument that are reasonable, respectable, and reliable is something with which much of Aristotle's treatise on rhetoric is concerned, and it is underlined by his principle that rhetoric is an offshoot of dialectic (i.e., a general facility in

forms of argumentation).²⁷ Isocrates' rejection of a systematized rhetorical art and his treatment of "forms of discourse" as mere rudiments of a capacity for speaking well open up a serious difference of method between himself and Aristotle, but this does not erase their shared acceptance of a rhetoric that is properly rational in its capacity to engage with, rather than merely playing upon, the beliefs of audiences. Moreover, both men regard rhetoric as chiefly (or most importantly) concerned with matters of ethical and political deliberation: Aristotle counts rhetoric as an offshoot of *politiké*, as well as of dialectic; Isocrates builds his own program around the use of *politikoi logoi*, "political discourses." This represents, on both sides, not only a perception of symbouleutic oratory as the highest of the three canonical kinds, but a broader recognition of the function of public speech as a force for both the shaping and the expression of attitudes that have major structural significance within a culture. Aristotle, unlike Plato, is able to converge with Isocrates' position in this respect, because he regards the domain of common discourse as a legitimate medium for the working out of ethical beliefs and values.²⁸

(But the convergence is incomplete) and the reasons for this are foundational for both thinkers. Aristotelian *politiké* is not, in short, coterminous with Isocrates' political discourse(s). In the *Nicomachean Ethics* (10.10, 1181a12–15), Aristotle complains of "sophists" who erroneously regard *politiké* and rhetoric as one and the same thing. He may not have had Isocrates in mind, and it is certain that Isocrates does not describe his own commitments by either term, rhetoric or *politiké*. But the Isocratean position nonetheless amounts to a collapsing of any such distinction, since it presents the practiced use of persuasive discourse as the only medium in which ethico-political understanding can express itself. Aristotelian philosophy, by contrast, though it aims to keep *politiké* in touch with the goals of ethical practice, nonetheless conceives of it as a distinct theoretical discipline, and one whose pursuit involves analytical, critical, and at least partly systematic methods of reasoning. The complexity of this Aristotelian enterprise is not my immediate concern.²⁹ What matters here is that it can help to accentuate what is absent, and designedly absent, from Isocrates' own program. Aristotle believes that only a philosophical inquiry, not rhetoric, can achieve a grasp of "first principles" of ethics and politics.³⁰ Isocrates does not accept that there are such things as first principles to be worked back to, or reasoned down from, in a theoretical and systematic manner, since his entire project eschews a commitment to either theory or system. For Aristotle, as for Plato, philosophy represents an ultimate framework of truth and a mode of understanding to which all other human pursuits, including rhetoric, are subordinate. For Isocrates, philosophy is the most finely articulated level of thought that human wisdom can achieve, but this is not to be sharply distinguished from the direct application of reason and speech, through the medium of persuasive discourse, to the ordering

allegiances. If, then, a case is to be made for the continuing inclusion of Isocrates in anything that might merit the description of a rhetorical canon, it can do no better than start from the suggestion that the study of his works could fruitfully, if obliquely, contribute to a history of rhetoric that cultivates self-criticism as an indispensable virtue.

Notes

1. The fullest modern discussion of Isocrates' relationship to his contemporaries is C. Eucken, *Isokrates: Seine Positionen in der Auseinandersetzung mit den zeitgenössischen Philosophen* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1983). As with some nineteenth-century treatments of the same material, Eucken's conclusions often have a speculative confidence that outruns the nature of the evidence. My own approach in this essay places no reliance on the discernment of implicit references to one another by Isocrates and his intellectual rivals or on secondary evidence for personal hostility between them.
2. See 15.193–5, quoting 13.14–18: Isocrates himself, of course, makes a virtue out of the consistency he claims between the beginning and end of his career. (Note that all my textual references to Isocrates' works use their standard modern numbers; the Loeb edition gives these numbers only in square brackets in its list of contents: on this system, 3 = *Nicoles*, 4 = *Panegyricus*, 5 = *Philip*, 10 = *Helen*, 12 = *Panathenaicus*, 13 = *Against the Sophists*, 15 = *Antidosis*. All translations are my own.)
3. Plato, *Gorgias*, 448d9 (where Socrates refers to "so-called *rhētorikē*"), whether or not it is the earliest surviving occurrence of the term, shows that it was a newish coinage in the early fourth century B.C.E. See N. O'Sullivan, "Plato and Kaloumene—Rhetorike (Comments on Recent Works by Schiappa and Cole)," *Mnemosyne* 46 (1993): 87–89. Isocrates himself uses the adjective *rhētorikos* at 3.8 (15.256), but he nowhere applies any member of the word family to his own program.
4. N. H. Baynes, "Isocrates," in *Byzantine Studies and Other Essays* (London: University of London, Athlone Press, 1955), 160. Baynes's polemical piece was a reaction to the excessive estimate of Isocrates' intellectual stature in W. Jaeger, *Paideia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), 3: chapters 2–6.
5. Isocrates normally uses the phrase in the plural; see, e.g., 13.21, 15.46, 260. On the concept of *logos* see p. 113.
6. In the *Panegyricus*, which is a paradigmatic case of a work with a fictionalized setting (a Panhellenic gathering at the Olympic games), Isocrates describes himself as one of those who have "kept back from [practical] politics" (4.171); see, e.g., 5.81, 12.10, 15.34, 144–45.
7. See 15.193 for a reference to the "publication" of this work, that is, its release, by means we cannot fully reconstruct to interested readers.
8. The forthright rejection of any concept of rhetoric as an "ordered/codified art [*technē*]" at 13.12 represents Isocrates' fundamental position; see 15.184, 271. The element of rhetorical *technē* implied in passages such as 4.48, 9.73, and 15.205–6 must be construed in a weaker or more limited sense; see below.
9. The argument, if it is to hold, requires what Isocrates anyhow took for granted:

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- a very close connection between the ethical and the feasible. Isocratean thought leaves no room for an idealistic ethics that might be partly unfulfillable in practical terms.
10. Isocrates does, however, allow that some parts of rhetoric may have stable principles: he refers, at 13.16, to certain "forms of discourse" (e.g., 10.11, 12.2, 15.183) that are of general validity and apparently teachable. There has been debate about the nature of these forms, but all that matters for my case is that Isocrates evidently regards them as mere rudiments, not sufficient principles, for speaking or reasoning well.
 11. Two details help to reinforce this point: one is Isocrates' willingness to invoke the notion of truth in many contexts (e.g., 10.4, 13.9, 15.11); the other is his attack on philosophers who deny the possibility of falsehood or contradiction (10.1). See p. 120.
 12. 13.8; for the sentiment, see 10.5, 12.9, 15.184. It is unfortunate that George Norlin, in the Loeb edition of Isocrates' works, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 2:291, should have translated *doxa* highly misleadingly as "theory"; this serious error is reproduced without correction by Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 150.
 13. For this specific avowal, see, e.g., 4.1.
 14. 4.47: "adept" translates Isocrates' use of the verb *epistamai* ("know how to"), which occurs in similar contexts at, e.g., 4.10, 186; see the cognate noun at 15.187. Such passages seem to contradict the insistence elsewhere that rhetoric is not a knowledge-based discipline, but they are to be understood as implying a looser claim of expertise—a consistent knack rather than a grasp of propositional principles. This is particularly clear in the transition from 15.184–87.
 15. See J. Jüthner, "Isokrates und die Menschheitsidee," *Wiener Studien* 47 (1929): 26–31 (reprinted in F. Seck, ed., *Isokrates* [Darmstadt, 1976], 122–27), who contests the view that Isocrates genuinely proclaimed a dissemination of Hellenism.
 16. Norlin's Loeb translation has a strong tendency to do this. When, for example, he translates the adverb *alogos* ("without *logos*," hence "irrationally") as "without the help of speech" (2: 329), he produces a peculiar statement that blunts Isocrates' concept of practical wisdom.
 17. *De Oratore*, 3.54–61; the division is described at 60–61.
 18. Not all historians of philosophy would defend the exclusion. Alexander Nehamas, "Eristic, Antilogic, Sophistic, Dialectic: Plato's Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 7 (1990): 3–16, argues that it is not possible to adjudicate between rival conceptions of philosophy and concludes, with ironic generosity, that "philosophy can include even the garrulous Isocrates: one can always count against him his garrulity, that is, his dialectical incompetence" (14).
 19. Isocrates allows the "preparatory" function of such things as geometry, astronomy, and dialectic at 12.26, 15.261–65 (see 11.23); these are usually taken to be slightly compromising references to studies pursued in Plato's Academy. His disdain for pre-Socratic "physics" is abundantly clear at 15.268–69.
 20. At the level, of course, of conceptual definition. I take it for granted that most philosophers would be dismissive of Isocrates' philosophical status on grounds

- of, from their point of view; the poor quality of his thinking; but being a bad philosopher is a different matter from not being a philosopher at all.
21. T. Irwin, "Plato: The Intellectual Background," in R. Kraut, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 66. Irwin's distinction between rhetoricians and sophists is questionable on wider grounds which are not directly pertinent to my argument.
 22. Irwin, *ibid.*, 68, perhaps tries to cover this last point with his statement that Isocrates "presented rhetoric as a sufficient moral education"; even this could mislead, if it obscured the fact that Isocrates erases any distinction between speaking well and being morally educated.
 23. Gorgias is shown to make such a claim at Plato, *Gorgias*, 457a5-6, though the dialogue suggests that he also wishes to lay claim to ethico-political knowledge; for the tension here, see Stephen Halliwell, "Philosophy and Rhetoric," in I. Worthington, ed., *Persuasion: Greek Rhetoric in Action* (London: Routledge, 1994), 228-29.
 24. E.g., 15.184.
 25. The nearest Isocrates comes to proclaiming such technical facility is probably at 4.8, but this passage is treated too readily as an admission of sophistry by Baynes, "Isocrates," 147-48, who also cites 15.15 in a way that is itself rhetorical. Baynes's larger imputations of bad faith against Isocrates may or may not be justified (I suspect they are partially so), but their concern with his sincerity and consistency of practice is distinct from my own analysis of his explicit pronouncements on the principles of rhetoric.
 26. Gorgias, *Helen* (fragment, 11, 10-14).
 27. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1.2, 1356a25-27.
 28. In Aristotle's terms, it is in common discourse that many "reputable" moral views (*endoxa*) come into being and can consequently be discerned.
 29. I have tried to suggest some tensions within it in "Popular Morality, Philosophical Ethics, and the *Rhetoric*," in D. Furley and A. Nehamas, eds., *Aristotle's Rhetoric: Philosophical Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 211-30, reprinted in slightly abridged form as "The Challenge of Rhetoric to Political and Ethical Theory in Aristotle," in A. O. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Rhetoric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 175-90.
 30. See especially the idea that if rhetoric does reach first principles, it will cease to be rhetoric (*Rhetoric*, 1.2, 1358a25-26).
 31. A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 86.
 32. Irwin, "Plato," 68, likewise links Isocratean rhetoric to "nonrational manipulation."
 33. He ascribes views of this sort to a number of fifth century B.C.E. thinkers, including his own reported teacher, Gorgias, and at least one other figure, Protagoras, now standardly classed as a sophist.
 34. The criticism of those who deny "that we have any [of the virtues] by nature" (10.1) implies that Isocrates takes morality to be partly natural; the same seems to be entailed by such general reflections as at, e.g., 13.14.
 35. Isocrates' relationship to Socrates is an obscure and vexed subject which cannot be discussed here. But it is necessary to say that there is no evidence in Isocrates'

- own writings to support the claim of (e.g.) George Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 179, that he "regarded himself as a follower of Socrates." The only reference to Socrates occurs at 11.4-6.
36. The contrast is a matter of structural commitments within entire modes of thought and argument; its validity is not undermined by the flawed execution of those commitments in particular instances.
 37. Isocrates' influence should not, however, be exaggerated. The attempt of M. I. Finley, "The Heritage of Isocrates," in *The Use and Abuse of History* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1975), 193-214, to connect him with the failings of liberal arts education on the broadest scale, is misguided. Of the three main factors in Finley's "ancient heritage" (202), the idea of "training the mind" and the aim of a "fundamentally literary education" are hardly integral to Isocrates' program, while the notion of "high culture" for an elite owes little to him. It is ironic, moreover, that Finley should link the ancient heritage with excessive educational specialization (203)—something utterly unisocratean.

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