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Isocrates' Ideal of Rhetoric: Criteria of Evaluation*

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In Isocrates' lifetime Athens became an arena for competing sophists who sought to attract pupils by displaying their rhetorical prowess and promising to make a competent speaker of anyone who hired their services.¹ Their claims did not go unopposed. Plato subjected the sophists to sharp criticism in his dialogues and concluded that they made no valid contribution toward rhetorical perfection because they lacked true knowledge of the soul and excelled only in technical expertise.² This was a philosopher's challenge—the layman had other qualms about the teachers of rhetoric. His misgivings are represented in the comedy which attacks the sophists' instruction for being morally irresponsible, removed from the needs of daily life and unsuitable for mature men.³ Midway between the philosopher's arguments and the layman's objections we find the views expressed by Isocrates, a professional teacher with philosophical aspirations, but also sharing the layman's bourgeois ethics and his taste for practicality.

Isocrates' rhetorical ideal is as complex as his creed. He denied that rhetoric was a science which followed strict rules; he expected the accomplished speaker to please as well as benefit his audience; he demanded from him a practical and worldwide handling of his subject, yet also insisted that he maintain a high level of integrity.⁴ His demands are a mixture of epistemological theories, literary preferences, moral principles and practical

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*Translations of longer passages are taken from the Loeb edition of Isocrates' works.

¹ Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 449B for this unqualified claim.

² Cf. *Phaedrus* 271A: "Anyone who seriously teaches the art of rhetoric will first describe the soul with perfect accuracy."

³ Strepsiades in Aristophanes' play goes to the sophists to learn how to defraud his creditors (*Clouds* 112f). The activities of the sophists were frequently described as *adoleschia* and *leptologia* (e.g. *Eupolis* fr. 352-3; *Alexis* fr. 180, *Aristophanes* fr. 490, *Hermippus* fr. 22). For the view that sophistic quibbling is a young man's fancy see *Aristophanes, Knights* 1373ff.

⁴ General accounts of Isocrates' views on rhetoric can be found in A. Burk, *Die Paedagogik des Isokrates* (Wuerzburg 1923); W. Steidle, "Redekunst und Bildung bei Isokrates," *Hermes* 80 (1952) 257-296; E. Mikkola, *Isokrates: Seine Anschauungen und Gedanken im Lichte seiner Schriften* (Helsinki 1954); G. Heilbrunn, *An examination of Isocrates' Rhetoric*, Diss. Chicago 1967, concentrates on Isocrates' style which he claims obfuscates content; H. Gillis, "The ethical Basis of Isocratean Rhetoric," *La Parola del Passato* 24 (1969) 321-348 emphasizes Isocrates' moral commitments.

considerations. The rationale behind this bewildering array of determinants becomes clear, however, if we follow the guidelines set by Isocrates himself.

Relativism determines the general direction of Isocrates' educational theory: he proceeds toward excellence on the basis of *doxa*. Operating on this premise he consistently uses three criteria to assess the merit of a rhetorical composition. He judges the value of a speech by its style, content and purpose. While his considerations for style are rooted in his love for ornate language, his views on content and purpose are ethically oriented. In fact, Isocrates' idea of rhetorical perfection is closely related to his concept of moral excellence. The perfect orator must therefore combine both ideals in his person.

The Basis: Relativism

If we consider Isocrates' aims and methods in rhetorical instruction we find that his approach is influenced by the epistemological scepticism made prominent by Protagoras and Gorgias.⁵ Like them Isocrates believed that human knowledge was limited and that knowing the right course of action in each case was "one of the impossibilities" of life.⁶ Advancing his views on this subject, he commented on the relationship between *episteme*, knowledge, and *doxa*, opinion:

"It is not in the nature of man to attain an *episteme* by the possession of which we can know positively what we should do or what we should say; in the next resort I hold that man to be wise who is able by his *doxais* to arrive in most cases at the best course."⁷

Applying this epistemology to rhetoric, Isocrates concluded that in this field as in all other human endeavours *kairos*, the feeling for the right word at the right time, was not a matter of *episteme*.⁸ He realized however that this view, taken to the extreme, would prevent judgment even in the smallest matters of daily life. He therefore retreated into conceding a certain value to informed opinion and allowing that man, by observing cause and effect relationships, could arrive at a reasonably accurate assessment of a given situation. Unlike Plato he therefore accepted and in fact established *doxa* as a criterion of judgment.

Since Isocrates did not accept the idea of absolute knowledge, he attacked teachers who either claimed to have *episteme* or professed to impart such knowledge to students in the field of rhetoric. He criticized them for implying

⁵ On the relativism of the older sophists see W.K.C. Guthrie, *History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge 1969), vol. III, 164-175.

⁶ *Soph.* 2.

⁷ *Ant.* 271.

⁸ "We cannot grasp *kairoi* by means of knowledge—to determine them for each and every case is not a matter of science." (*Ant.* 184).

that rhetoric was a *tetagmene techné*, a science with definite rules for the composition of a speech.⁹ Such a simplistic approach to the subject required from the student only a mechanical reproduction of pre-cast notions and did not allow for imagination and creativity which Isocrates considered essential for the attainment of rhetorical excellence. Rehearsing topics which a student was likely to encounter in his career merely provided him with materials, not with the tools to handle them. Isocrates, for his part, placed emphasis on the development of skills and stressed the importance of judgment, taste and versatility. He explained that it was certainly necessary for the student of rhetoric to have a stock of phrases and to practise them, but that such exercises were only preliminaries, stepping-stones on the way to rhetorical perfection.¹⁰

Isocrates' description of the process of education is marked with the terminology of relativism. "Appropriate," "suitable" and "fitting" are epithets frequently used to describe his rhetorical ideal.¹¹ *Kairos*, right timing and choice of words, becomes the all-important catchphrase: "good rhetoric is difficult to learn because it requires imagination and awareness of *kairos*"; "one must aim at *kairos*" in one's speech; it takes much study and exercise until students are able to gauge their speeches according to *kairoi*.¹² Lists of topics and examples are useful to the orator but his skill is demonstrated in their suitable application. Facts and figures are a source common to all orators but the good craftsman will have "the ability to make use of them, *en kairo*" and to conceive the right sentiments about them.¹³

An examination of Isocrates' own treatment of "facts" will illustrate the significance of this statement: in the *Panegyricus* he recounts the story of Adrastus and Athens' intervention on his behalf, relating that the Athenians achieved their goal by military force. In the *Panathenaicus* he offers a variation on the same episode. This time the Athenians are said to have engaged in negotiations and to have arrived at a peaceful settlement with the Thebans.¹⁴ Isocrates considers his treatment of the topic exemplary and draws attention to the discrepancy in the two accounts ("let no one suppose that I fail to realize that I am giving a different version of the same events"). He invites the reader's praise for his discreet handling of the situation and concludes on a self-congratulatory note: "I know that on this topic I have written well and expediently."¹⁵

⁹ *Soph.* 12.

¹⁰ This criticism is set out in the *Sophists* 12-18.

¹¹ Consider the expressions used in *Soph.* 16: "appropriate elements," "suitable arrangement," "fitting thought"; compare *Ant.* 10: "not without reason or fitness, but with due appropriateness"; *Phil.* 110: "pertinent and in keeping with the context." On the significance of these terms for Isocrates' educational theory see H. Wersdoerfer, *Die philosophia des Isokrates im Spiegel ihrer Terminologie*, Diss. Bonn 1940, especially 18-33, 56-71.

¹² *Hel.* 11, *Panath.* 34, *Ant.* 184.

¹³ *Paneg.* 9.

¹⁴ *Paneg.* 55f, *Panath.* 168ff.

¹⁵ *Panath.* 172.

Isocrates' practice illustrates his belief that ideas and arguments are right if they are appropriate, that their value is relative to a given situation and that a rhetorical composition must be judged on this basis. Since these elements are not subject to rules, the teacher's role is limited to *epimelos epistatesai*—the success of the student will depend on his talent, industry and experience.¹⁶

Isocrates' de-emphasis of rules and his restraint in describing the effectiveness of rhetorical instruction in producing a competent speaker gives him a more professional image than the common breed of sophists who advertised their services in the manner of hawkers and towncriers and displayed their skills like jugglers in a circus. Yet neither party can lay claim to philosophical integrity. Isocrates used relativism to support his cautious nature and his feelings of ambivalence, the sophists employed it to dazzle the unskilled.

Criteria of Evaluation:

Purpose, Style and Content of the Ideal Speech

Epistemological scepticism forms the basis of Isocrates' approach to rhetoric. To evaluate the quality of a composition he employs three criteria: purpose, style and content. If we reduce his remarks to the essentials we can assign a pair of alternatives to each criterion. The purpose of a speech is either pleasure or profit; the style is unadorned or elaborate; the subject trifling or important. Isocrates combines these criteria in his definition of ideal rhetoric in the *Panegyricus*. The highest kind of oratory is that

"which is concerned with the greatest affairs and, while best displaying the ability of those who speak, brings most profit to those who hear it."¹⁷

The ideal speech therefore meets three demands: it is composed in a lofty style which will be a credit to the orator; it deals with a worthy subject; and it benefits the audience. This particular combination of criteria recurs in the *Antidosis* where Isocrates defends his profession and promotes his rhetorical ideal. Again he lists as determinants of a good composition purpose, style and content. First he expresses disapproval of certain forms of rhetoric "because they profit no one", next he demands that the subject be "great and honourable, devoted to the welfare of man and our common good", and finally he requires that the orator demonstrate his "dexterity and love of language".¹⁸

In the *Panathenaicus* he adopts a similar platform, urging his audience to develop a taste for speeches which are composed

¹⁶*Ant.* 186 and ff. For Isocrates' views on the respective roles of teacher and student in the educational process see E. Rummel, "The effective teacher and the successful student," *Classical News & Views* 21 (1977) 92-96.

¹⁷*Paneg.* 4.

¹⁸*Ant.* 269, 276, 296.

"for instruction and with finished style, to prefer them to others which are written for display or for the law-courts; . . . speeches that aim at the truth to those which seek to lead astray the opinions of the hearers; discourses which rebuke our faults and admonish us to those which are spoken for our pleasure and gratification."¹⁹

In this characterization of the good speech Isocrates touches on style, yet rejects the idea of *epideixis* as an aim in itself. The orator must have a higher purpose than the mere gratification of his listeners, he must aim at their improvement as well. The best kind of oratory is not concerned with private matters, but deals with the conduct of public affairs.

A student whose literary criticism Isocrates invites,²⁰ dutifully applies his master's criteria to the *Panathenaicus*. He praises it as being

"packed with history and philosophy (content); full of embellishments and fictions (style); not the kind which, used with evil intent, are wont to injure one's fellow citizens, but the kind which, used by cultivated minds, are able to benefit or delight one's audience (purpose)."²¹

This rather flattering description is related by Isocrates with more pride than modesty. Needless to say, he regarded his own speeches as models of rhetorical perfection, worthy in subject, pleasing in style and beneficial in content.

When we examine Isocrates' views on each of these criteria separately, we find a certain ranking among them. Generally, form is subordinated to content. Content is closely related to purpose, for only a worthy subject can profit the audience. How successful the orator is in fulfilling his purpose is measured in practical terms—his words ought to have an impact on his audience, his ideas should carry beyond the last applause. The profit which the good orator promises his readers is defined in moral terms and the equation of virtue with advantage is proclaimed with almost Socratic zeal.

Style

Isocrates expected the accomplished orator to be, among other things, a good craftsman and to offer his audience a carefully finished product. He himself took pride in "the hours he had devoted to his speech"²² and showed no appreciation for extempore speaking. In his opinion the good orator ought to smooth out and polish his speech until the arguments are well-ordered, the sentence structure harmonious and the phrases agreeable and melodious. Plain

¹⁹*Panath.* 271.

²⁰Compare *Phil.* 7 and 23. For the practice of soliciting criticism and conducting discussions on works in progress see R. Johnson, "Isocrates' methods of teaching," *AJP* 80 (1959) 31 f.

²¹*Panath.* 246.

²²*Paneg.* 14, compare *Panath.* 2.

language and a straightforward presentation of thought held no appeal for Isocrates who expected the ideal orator to present a sophisticated image and to offer an elaborate composition.²³

Style was important to Isocrates because he believed that it played a supportive role in persuading the audience, that rhythm and harmony had the power of *psychagogia*. Although rhythmic and melodious expressions are more typically associated with poetry, the orator too can make use of them and imitate the devices of the poets as far as his genre allows. The most effective speech is the one that is "poetic and imaginative", "similar to works composed in metre and set to music." The good orator therefore challenges the poet and enters into his domain:

"We must see if it is possible in prose to eulogize good men in no worse fashion than the encomiasts do who employ song and verse."²⁴

For this idea Isocrates is indebted to his teacher Gorgias who first introduced a poetic element into rhetorical prose and whose speeches were famous for their pompous and ornate diction. This trend is continued by Isocrates, though in a more moderate fashion. His euphony, rhythm and elaborate period structure are in the Gorgian tradition, but he approaches poetic diction without repeating the excesses of his master.²⁵

Despite his concern for the formal appearance of an oration, Isocrates was prepared to sacrifice form to content and to neglect stylistic principles if the context required it. Thus he justified a digression in the *Panathenaicus* in the following manner:

"I thought that I should be applauded by the most cultivated of my hearers if I could show that I was more concerned, when discoursing on the subject of virtue, about doing justice to the theme than about the symmetry of the speech."²⁶

It appears therefore that style, though an important aspect in judging the quality of a speech, occupied a lower rank in the hierarchy of Isocrates' criteria than content and subject matter.

Content

In the *Helen* Isocrates draws a general distinction between grand and lowly subjects. In the latter category he places epideictic speeches on trifling and insignificant topics such as "praise of bumblebees or salt", paradoxical

²³Cf. *Ant.* 47, *Panath.* 271f, *Soph.* 16. He singled out court oratory as being disagreeably plain—see *Panath.* 1, *Paneg.* 11.

²⁴*Ant.* 47, *Euag.* 11.

²⁵For Isocrates' indebtedness to Gorgias and the general characteristics of his style see G. Kennedy, *The Art of Persuasion in Greece* (Princeton 1963) 64ff., J.F. Dobson, *The Greek Orators* (New York 1967) 129ff.

²⁶*Panath.* 86.

subjects like eulogies of poverty and exile, philosophical speculation and eristic disputation.²⁷ Anyone, he contends, can lower himself to the level of these compositions, but it is doubtful if the orator who addresses himself to ignoble topics can also do justice to worthy themes such as the right course of action for a city or the right conduct for an individual, in short topics dealing with "great and noble themes".²⁸

Most of Isocrates' own speeches are indeed on subjects of general importance and deal with noble themes such as Athens' position in the Greek world, peaceful coexistence of city-states, the nature of education, the responsibilities of the ruler toward his subjects. Yet, Isocrates too may be accused of writing *peri tapeinon* in his encomia, in particular those in praise of Helen and Busiris. In fact he concedes that the *Busiris* is not "serious and does not call for a dignified style".²⁹ Nevertheless he strives to give even this oration a grave character: flaunting tradition he makes Busiris a moral hero, one of the "founders of noble pursuits," and snubs other authors for dwelling on the less edifying aspects of Busiris' career.³⁰

In the *Helen*, too, he expresses a specific interest in the moral potential of his topic. For instance, he dwells on Helen's physical beauty and divine parentage, but immediately puts these qualities in perspective contending that Paris chose Helen "not with a view to pleasure" but because he realized that he would gain a noble ancestor for his children.³¹ He also takes the opportunity to praise another suitor of Helen, Theseus, and to elaborate on his virtues, his excellence of mind, qualities of leadership, equitable disposition and sense of justice. He excuses this digression with the argument that no greater praise could be accorded to Helen than to show that she was admired by a man of excellence.³² This is, of course, only a formal justification—the true reason for Isocrates' digression is his preoccupation with ethics and his emphasis on the didactic element of a speech.

The eulogy of Euagoras has the same moralizing tone. Indeed Isocrates terms it a "protreptic speech" rather than an encomium and states specifically that he chose his topic so "that the younger generation might with greater emulation strive for virtue" and imitate the qualities portrayed in his discourse.³³ By giving his eulogy an ethical dimension Isocrates succeeds in adding a measure of dignity to an otherwise perfunctory composition.

²⁷*Hel.* 13; the whole section of *Hel.* 1-13 is concerned with the question of content.

²⁸*Panath.* 11.

²⁹*Bus.* 9.

³⁰Isocrates disregards traditional mythology and proclaims that the gods and their offsprings "are by nature endorsed with all the virtues and have become for all mankind guides and teachers of the most noble pursuits" (*Bus.* 41). He criticizes other authors who do not provide this kind of moral censorship (*Bus.* 38-43).

³¹*Hel.* 42. He also introduces a political motif, using his topic to support Panhellenism. For this element see G. Kennedy, "Isocrates' Encomium of Helen: A Panhellenic Document," *TAPA* 89 (1958) 77-83.

³²*Hel.* 22.

³³*Euag.* 5. In *Euagoras* 76 Isocrates calls the oration a *paraklesis*; for his protreptic purpose see also J. Sykutris, "Isocrates' Euagoras," *Hermes* 62 (1927) 24-53.

The subject matter of an oration is closely related to its purpose, for arguments are proposed with a certain goal in mind and presented in a manner that will serve the ends of the author.

Purpose

Discussing the desired effects of a speech Isocrates praises the speaker who pursues a practical goal in his discourse. He contrasts him to the orator who simply wishes to impress his audience with his skills or please them with gratifying words. Rejecting *epideixis* as an aim in itself, Isocrates lauds the man "who wishes to accomplish something as well."³⁴ This remark occurs in the *Panegyricus*, a most unlikely platform for condemning epideictic speeches, since Panegyric orations were, by tradition, display pieces delivered on the occasion of public festivals. Isocrates' statement makes it clear that he is using an old theme for a new purpose. He fully expects his message to be translated into action and his words to be realized in deed. He therefore concludes this speech with another appeal to his audience to carry out his advice and an exhortation to fellow-orators to follow his example and to compose speeches with a view to making a practical impact. The orator's ideas ought to be such that "if carried out . . . they will be a credit to the speaker as a source of great blessings."³⁵ It is therefore important that an oration is timely and that the moment of action has not passed—in short, that the orator's words are not merely of academic interest but "foreshadow the future."³⁶

Isocrates' remarks on this subject are rooted in his ideal of the all-round man. He found this ideal realized in the person of his favourite pupil Timotheus who, having passed through Isocrates' school, became a prominent general and politician.³⁷ Homer's "speaker of words and doer of deeds" is also Isocrates' hero. He wants the good orator to be as effective as he is accomplished and mocks the onesidedness of rhetoricians who are versed in the art of discourse only—who can spot contradictions in argument, but not inconsistencies in deed.³⁸ He criticizes teachers who aim only at perfection in rhetoric. In his opinion the sophists ought not only to teach political theory, but also "give a practical demonstration of their knowledge."³⁹ Now, Isocrates could hardly lay claim to this achievement himself, as he shied away from public life and considered himself unsuitable for a political career,⁴⁰ yet he displayed an air of superiority. He argued that he had compensated for his shortcomings by urging on others and by having sought out a champion for

³⁴*Paneg.* 17, compare *Peace* 5.

³⁵*Paneg.* 189.

³⁶*Paneg.* 5, 171; compare *Phil.* 7.

³⁷See his eulogy of Timotheus in *Ant.* 107-138.

³⁸*Soph.* 7.

³⁹*Hel.* 9.

⁴⁰*Phil.* 81f., *Panath.* 9f.

his ideas "who was able to speak as well as act." He had therefore done his duty by proxy.⁴¹

The practical goal of every symbouleutic speech is the profit or advantage of the audience. Claims that the orator's proposals are advantageous therefore occur regularly in the *exordia* of political speeches and constitute an integral part of their argumentation.⁴² However, Isocrates differed from the majority of political advisors in his ethically oriented definition of advantage. He emphasized that it was by morally correct counsel that the orator benefited his audience most. He stressed this point in his own speeches, particularly in the *Peace* and the *Areopagiticus*⁴³ where he defended his proposals not only as being expedient, but also as representing the just course of action. He emphasized this aspect of his writings in the *Antidosis* where he reviewed his career as orator and claimed that "all his speeches tended toward virtue and justice."⁴⁴ In the same speech he defined the nature of advantage thus:

"Those are better off now and will receive the advantage in the future at the hands of the gods who are the most righteous and the most faithful in their devotions and those receive the better portion at the hands of men who are the most conscientious in their dealings with their associates."⁴⁵

Morally correct advice profits not only the orator's audience but also the speaker himself. Isocrates believes that the good orator derives personal benefits from his skills through the good impression which his *ethos* makes on his audience and the climate of goodwill which it creates.⁴⁶ Apart from this popularity and the practical advantages associated with it, the good orator is rewarded by fame. He is "held in high esteem in every society and at all times."⁴⁷ His work brings him immortality, an ambition which Isocrates himself expresses in the *Antidosis*:

"I hoped that this would serve as an image of my ideas . . . and that I would leave behind a monument after my death, more noble than statues of bronze."⁴⁸

At a time when the sophists were denounced as self-seeking and commercially minded, Isocrates could not propound the idea of self-interest without qualifications. He therefore compared moral with rhetorical

⁴¹*Phil.* 13. Disillusioned with Athenian politics ("to address a crowd is to address no one at all"—*Phil.* 12) Isocrates turned to Philip in whom he saw the strong leader needed at the time.

⁴²Cf. Anaximenes 29.4, Aristotle *Rhet.* 1451b 13; on the common nature of this claim see J. Martin, *Antike Rhetorik* (Munich 1974) 171ff.

⁴³Cf. *Peace* 136-171; for a picture of the just society see *Areop.* 31-35.

⁴⁴*Ant.* 67.

⁴⁵*Ant.* 282.

⁴⁶Cf. *Ant.* 122; good character earns *eunoia*; also compare *Peace* 139f. where justice is said to produce *eunoia* in one's associates.

⁴⁷*Ant.* 48.

⁴⁸*Ant.* 7, compare *Euag.* 73. This idea is of course a commonplace in poetry through the ages.

excellence, explaining that they engendered similar benefits and that it would be strange if the public "blamed men who were ambitious to speak well, but applauded men who desired to act rightly." There was no reason to reject any practical advantages connected with either pursuit or to condemn "any means by which one may gain advantage without losing sight of virtue."⁴⁹ And since Isocrates defined advantage as being in accord with virtue, he did not consider self-interest an ignoble aim in rhetoric.

The Equation of Rhetorical Excellence with Moral Goodness

Isocrates frequently suggests a proximity of the ideals of moral and rhetorical excellence. We find this view rooted in his ideas on the effect of words on the soul. Isocrates assigned a double role to speech, contending that it affected not only the hearer but also the speaker himself, shaping the views of the audience by persuasion and moulding the orator's character by habituation.

Isocrates' ideas on this subject represent a psychological theory of literature which was being formulated at the time.⁵⁰ An awareness of the interaction between *logos* and *psyche* had of course existed before and the image of words as charms or drugs has a long tradition in Greek literature. The effect of words was perceived either as negative, beguiling the soul and leading it astray, or as therapeutic, curing the soul of its ills and correcting its faults.⁵¹

Isocrates employs the positive notion of words as drugs, healing the soul and freeing it from evil. He expresses this idea in the *Peace* asserting that "there exists no better *pharmakon* for souls when they are ignorant of the truth and filled with base desires than *logos* to boldly rebuke its sins."⁵² He uses a similar idea elsewhere, likening education to medicine and comparing its effects on the soul to that of *pharmaka* on the body.⁵³

The healing and corrective power of the word does not only affect the audience who listens to the orator's counsel, but also the orator himself. Isocrates believed that the man who dwelt on morally correct advice became accustomed to the ideals which he proclaimed and would therefore practise them in his own life. Consequently he advised Nicocles to speak of noble and

⁴⁹Nic. 2.

⁵⁰On this development see Ch. Segal, "Gorgias and the Psychology of the Logos," *HSPH* 66 (1962) 99-155.

⁵¹The quasi-magical effects of words were already acknowledged by Homer who called them *thelkterion* (Od. 1.337, compare Pindar, *Pyth.* 4.217, Gorgias *Hel.* 8-10 etc.). Hesiod (*Theog.* 27f.) emphasized the deceptive quality of the word, but words were also likened to drugs. Thus the sophist Antiphon set up a "clinic" in Athens to heal "depressed people by means of words"! (fr. A6 D.-K.) On the whole motif in literature see L. P. Entralgo, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven 1970); J. de Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge 1975).

⁵²*Peace* 39f.

⁵³*Bus.* 22.

honourable topics "that your thoughts may through habit become to be like your words."⁵⁴ He repeated this idea in the *Antidosis* where he claimed that the orator who spoke on edifying subjects and praised great men "habituated himself to contemplate and appraise such examples." A discourse therefore not only directed the views of the audience but also influenced the orator's life. Approached with "a love of wisdom and a love of honour" the art of rhetoric would teach the acolyte both "how to think right and how to speak well."⁵⁵

The mental connection between rhetorical and moral excellence is carried over into Isocrates' language and vocabulary, so that he shows a preference for terms which can operate equally well in either sphere of reference.⁵⁶ A passage in his address to Nicocles affords a particularly striking example of this fusion of ideas. Its terminology is equally meaningful in ethics as in literary criticism.

"Try to be *asteios* as well as *semnos* . . . yet no admonition is so difficult to carry out as this; for you will find that for the most part those who affect dignity are *psychros* while those who desire to be urbane are *tapeinos*. But you should try to combine both *ideais* and avoid the danger that attaches to each."⁵⁷

The passage refers to conduct, but if read out of context may well be taken as pertaining to style. The young king is being counselled to be neither vulgar nor aloof (*tapeinos, psychros*), for it is easy to fall into these extremes when one attempts to be urbane and dignified (*asteios, semnos*). The adjectives *psychros, tapeinos* and *semnos*⁵⁸ are commonly used to characterize style and the term *idea* (in this passage: life style) is familiar in the meaning of "elements of speech."⁵⁹

Isocrates' preference for words with a double meaning suggests that in his mind he equated the good orator with the good man. And the use of words which are equally applicable to moral advice and to literary criticism prompts such an association in the reader's mind. A similar effect is produced by a juxtaposition of the two ideals in context.

In the *Sophists*, for instance, Isocrates states that the education which he proposes leads to an improvement in both areas. In fact, his instruction will direct the student "toward probity more often than toward rhetorical skill."⁶⁰ In the *Antidosis* a similar interchange of themes takes place. Isocrates asserts that speech helps us to distinguish between "good and bad, just and unjust"

⁵⁴*Ad Nic.* 38.

⁵⁵*Ant.* 277, compare Aristotle *E.N.* 1103 a 17, Anon. *Iamb.* 5.2.

⁵⁶This has also been observed by Wersdoerfer, *op. cit.* 127.

⁵⁷*Ad Nic.* 34.

⁵⁸*Psychros*: Aristotle *Rhet.* 1406a 18; *tapeinos*: *ibid.* 1408a 19; *asteios*: Anaximenes 2.2.

⁵⁹*Idea* is used in the sense of "element of a speech" by Aristotle *Rhet.* 1379a 13, Anaximenes 2.1, 3.8.

⁶⁰*Soph.* 21.

and that to speak well is a sign of *psyche agathe*.⁶¹ In other words, speech can function as the basis of judgment. Isocrates states specifically that the power of judgment acquired through rhetorical practice rests on "a principle applicable to all other matter," in particular to human conduct and the questions "what kind of reputation you should set your heart on and which kind of honour you should be content with."⁶² Of course it does not automatically follow that the good orator is also a good man, but at least he has been given the tools to work with. Isocrates concedes that the study of rhetoric cannot "implant sobriety and justice in depraved souls" but he assures his readers that it "can help more than any other discipline to stimulate and form these qualities."⁶³ Interweaving these topics Isocrates manages to obscure the dividing line between moral and rhetorical ideals and invites the reader to accept his claim that *eu phronein* and *eu legein* are both products of rhetorical instruction.⁶⁴

The central position of this idea in Isocrates' theories determines the ranking among the criteria by which he judges the merits of a speech. We have seen that rules of composition must yield to ethical considerations, that the subject of a speech is ennobled or debased depending on its moral direction. Motivation therefore becomes the predominant factor in evaluating an orator's performance. Thus Isocrates' ideal, though many-faceted is yet clearly structured: given that any judgment must be based on *doxa*, the ideal speech is characterized by a moral purpose, a subject which can suitably convey this purpose and act as its carrier, and by a style that lends support to the arguments by giving them esthetic appeal.

In his definition of rhetorical excellence Isocrates emerges as an eclectic who takes from the sophistic movement his epistemological scepticism, from Gorgias his notion of poetic style, from tradition his staid morality, from the common man his emphasis on practical success. What raises Isocrates above the crowd of unscrupulous teachers of rhetoric is his willingness to assume moral responsibility and to consider the ethics of persuasion. His conscientious approach to rhetoric and his understanding of the powers as well as the limitations of the instructor also make him a respectable figure among the sophists of his time. It is perhaps this element of moral concern that earned him a place among the *hetairoi* of Socrates and prompted Plato to concede him a *philosophia tis*.⁶⁵

⁶¹*Ant.* 254f., compare *ibid.* 271.

⁶²*Ep.* 6.8-9.

⁶³*Soph.* 21, compare *Ant.* 274f.

⁶⁴See above note 55.

⁶⁵*Phaedrus* 279 A-B. Although the remark carries the notion of an unfulfilled prophesy and speaks of potential rather than realization it does at any rate concede special status to Isocrates among the speech-writers.