

Rhetoric and Philosophy

A Chapter in Fourth-Century Literary Criticism*

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Theophrastos, the pupil and successor of Aristotle, is said to have made a distinction between two objects to which speech relates: its audience on one hand, and facts (πράγματα) on the other. Poetry and rhetoric are concerned with their relation to the audience; it is therefore the task of the poet and the orator to select the more dignified words, arrange them harmoniously, use the right qualities of style, decide on the length or brevity of the composition as occasion demands and thus (in the case of the orator), by pleasing and amazing his hearers, force them to be persuaded. On the other hand, the domain of the philosopher is the facts and his task is to refute the false and prove the true, deducing the truth or falseness of what is said by self-evident statements.¹ Thus the dichotomy between rhetoric and philosophy had been completed and Cicero could complain of the tradition which required special teachers of speaking and others to teach knowledge. Cicero knew very well that Socrates and Plato were the first to point out the basic differences between rhetoric and philosophy.² Plato's interest in rhetoric is evident in both the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedros*. In the *Phaedros* Plato shows a good knowledge of the history of rhetoric and of the theories about the composition of speeches;³ this and the orations which he puts into the mouth of Socrates prove his serious interest in rhetoric and the rhetorical schools of his time. The competition among the schools of rhetoric as well as the relations between Plato's Academy and its conception of philosophy, on one hand, and the Isocratean school and its conception of rhetoric on the other, have been an important topic in modern research. Plato's remarks about Isocrates towards the

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¹ W.W. Fortenbaugh, P.M. Huby, R.W. Sharples and D. Gutas, *Theophrastus of Eresus, Sources for his Life and Writings, Thoughts and Influence* (Leiden 1992), fig. 78.

² *De Or.* 3.16.59-61, cf. 35.142-143.

³ Plato, *Phaedros* 266D-268A. Only the page numbers will be quoted in the sequence.

end of the *Phaedros* (278E-279B) have been variously interpreted as ironic censure and praise.

It is the contention of this paper that Plato does not unequivocally praise Isocrates, but that he also does not wholly censure his rhetoric; although Isocrates may not have achieved the ideal philosophical (dialectical) rhetoric, he is nevertheless the best of the rhetoricians and orators of his time as far as the *techne* of his speeches is concerned. The rules of the *techne* may be gleaned from the long speeches of Socrates, their analysis, and the arguments used in the dialogue to elucidate the advantages of “dialectical” *logoi*. It is well-known that Plato’s verdict in the *Phaedros* was regarded in antiquity as straightforward praise of Isocrates: Cicero translated the *Phaedros* passage as proof of unqualified praise of Isocrates; Dionysios of Halicarnassos, quoting Plato, regarded Isocrates as superior to Lysias and all other orators so far as his treatment of subject-matter, the brilliance of his themes and his philosophic purpose were concerned.⁴ Though some scholars have interpreted the words of Socrates at the end of the *Phaedros* as praise, whether total or partial, none have thoroughly examined the exact extent of that praise and its meaning against the background of the differences between Lysias and Isocrates, notwithstanding the difference between the Isocratean and the Platonic conceptions of rhetoric.⁵

In order to be able to draw conclusions about Plato’s attitude to Isocrates in the *Phaedros*, an inquiry will be first made regarding the extent to which the three speeches, the first by Lysias and the other two by Socrates, form an expression of the common views in fourth-century rhetoric and to what extent they express Isocratean practice.

In his criticism of the speech of Lysias which Phaedros brought with him, Socrates shows his proficiency in rhetorical theory and praxis: in his criticism of the Lysianic speech he concentrates and deals with two points: the use of ὀνόματα, *expressions* or *diction*, and the distinction between εὔρεσις — *inventio* — and διάθεσις — *dispositio*. Socrates admits that he did not pay attention to the propriety of the definition of the subject of the speech, but noticed that, though Lysias spoke better and more copiously on the subject, the speech is full of repetitions and Lysias showed his skill in saying the same thing twice or three times, though in a variety of ways (234C - 235B).

The correct use of ὀνόματα is, in Socrates’ view, among the main ingredients of a successful speech.⁶ Isocrates distinguishes between the use of ὀνόματα suitable for poetry on the one hand and those suitable for speech on the other.⁷ Hence the conclusion that the ability to make proper use of the deeds of the past

⁴ Cic., *Orator* 13.41-42; Dion. Hal., *Isocrates* 12 (558) Us.-Rad.

⁵ See app.

⁶ Isocr. 13. 9-18, esp. 16.

⁷ *Idem* 9. 9-11.

— which are common ground for all speakers — at the appropriate time (ἐν καιρῷ), to use the right arguments (ἐνθυμήματα) in each instance and to arrange them well through the use of ὀνόματα — the proper arrangement of words — is what distinguishes those who think correctly.⁸

Challenged by Phaedros, Socrates clearly distinguishes between invention of arguments and their arrangement. Socrates admits that when the theme is prescribed, invention is limited and he cannot avoid the basic argument proffered by Lysias; but what is of greater importance is the arrangement in which Socrates proposes to excel in comparison with Lysias (235E-236A).⁹ Plato examined and criticised the speech of Lysias with the yardstick of the Isocratean theory of rhetoric. Plato knew and understood very well the basic tenets of rhetorical-literary criticism of the epideictic speech which were current in his time.

Socrates begins his first speech with a quest for a definition of love, specifically the nature and the power of love. The function of the definition is clearly practical; it would serve as a basis for reference in the discussion of whether love is beneficial or injurious (237C-D). Isocrates is not unaware of the need for such a practical definition “of the object to be accomplished by the discourse as a whole and by its parts”; only after this is determined can one decide on the rhetorical parts and elements (ἰδέαι) from which the speech will be composed and through which the aim will be achieved.¹⁰ Since Socrates admits (265D) that the main purpose of the definition is to achieve lucidity and consistency, this is in conformity with the Isocratean postulate for a definition.

In his search for the definition, Socrates distinguishes two ruling and leading principles in man: “one is the innate desire for pleasures, the other an acquired opinion (Hackforth: judgment) which strives for the best”.¹¹ *Doxa* here is not

⁸ *Idem*4.9: τοῖς ὀνόμασιν εὖ διαθέσθαι τῶν εὖ φρονούντων ἰδίον ἐστί. For the appreciation of Isocrates’ mastery in the use of ὀνόματα, see Dion. Hal., *Isocr.* 3; cf. *Dem.* 18. The notion of καιρός was introduced by Gorgias; still it should be stressed that there is basically no difference between the views of Isocrates on καιρός (13.16-17) and those of Plato (272 A). Though Socrates speaks of καιρός in connection with his postulate to understand the differences between the souls of men as the basis for rhetoric, the technical basis of rhetorical education contains the same basic elements.

⁹ See also T. Cole, *The Origins of Rhetoric in Ancient Greece* (Baltimore 1991), 12, 18-19. Isocrates’ claim in 10.15: παραλιπῶν ἅπαντα τὰ τοῖς ἄλλοις εἰρημένα does not include the basic thesis which is praise of Helen; see in the same speech 10.11-13, in which Isocrates considers both the invention and arrangement (εὐρίσκονται, εὐρεῖν, σύνθεσιν), *pace* R. L. Howland, *op. cit.* in app., 154.

¹⁰ *Isocr.*, *Ep.* 6 (To the children of Jason), 8; translation by Larue Van Hook, Loeb Classical Library.

¹¹ 237D: ἡ μὲν ἔμφυτος οὐσα ἐπιθυμία ἡδονῶν, ἄλλη δὲ ἐπίκτητος δόξα ἐφιεμένη τοῦ ἀρίστου (translation by H.N. Fowler, Loeb Classical Library).

“knowledge” in the Platonic sense, but a way of thinking which can be acquired by learning and which will lead to correct conclusions.¹² This meaning of *doxa* is not unlike that used by Isocrates; in the *Antidosis*, in which he sums up his activity, he says, while speaking of *sophia* and *philosophia*,¹³ “... since I hold that what some people call philosophy is not entitled to that name, [it is appropriate for me] to define and explain to you what philosophy, properly conceived, really is. My view of this question is, as it happens, very simple. For since it is not in the nature of man to attain a science (ἐπιστήμη) by the possession of which we can know positively what we should do or what we should say (ὄ τι πρακτέον ἢ λεκτέον ἐστίν), in the next resort I hold those men to be wise (σοφούς) who are able by their powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course (τοὺς ταῖς δόξαις ἐπιτυχάνειν ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ τοῦ βελτίστου δυναμένους), and I hold that man to be a philosopher who occupies himself with studies from which he will most quickly gain that kind of insight (φρόνησιν)”. Isocrates speaks of practical, political, public affairs of state, of men who are active politicians (πράττοντες καὶ λέγοντες) for whom *doxa* is the way, through practice and learning, to the right understanding and insight.¹⁴ Absolute good and justice are unattainable in the *polis* and therefore their exact knowledge, if possible, is of no practical value. Rhetoric is a practical art.

Plato applies the Isocratean concept of *doxa* to achieve an improvement of the Lysianic speech on love; Isocrates is thus regarded as the leading expert in the art.

The lack of a clear definition of the subject by Lysias has led him to further blunders. Socrates points out that Lysias not only began his speech from the end,

Hackforth’s translation points to the problem of the use of *doxa*: see also 238C: ἡ γὰρ ἄνευ λόγου δόξης ἐπὶ τὸ ὀρθὸν κρατήσασα ἐπιθυμία. See also R. Hackforth, *op. cit.* in app., 41-42; C.J. Rowe, *op. cit.* in app., 153-156; W. Trimpf, *op. cit.* in app., 20.

12 Socrates continues 237E - 238A: “These two sometimes agree within us and are sometimes in strife; and sometimes one, and sometimes the other has the greater power. Now when *doxa* leads through reason toward the best and is more powerful, that power is called self-restraint (σωφροσύνη), but when *epithumia* irrationally drags us toward pleasures and rules within us, its rule is called excess (ὑβρις)”. At 262C *doxa* is treated with reference to the second speech by Socrates and its new conception of love.

13 Isoc. 15.270; translation again by Larue Van Hook.

14 With Isocrates’ definition of good oratory as ψυχῆς ἀνδρικῆς καὶ δοξαστικῆς ἔργον (13.17), cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 463A and Isocr. 12.9. This is not intended to belittle the difference between Plato and Isocrates which is clearly expressed in the difference between *episteme* and *doxa*. Thus also in the comparison between 269D and Isocr. 13.14, 17. See also P. Shorey, “Φύσις, Μελέτη, Ἐπιστήμη”, *TAPA* 40 (1909), 185-201.

but parts of the speech had been thrown in helter-skelter and not in their proper order; moreover, some of the arguments had been interrupted in the middle and new arguments started. The speech should resemble a living being with a head and feet, the members fitting each other and the whole (264A-C). A similar view is expressed by Isocrates in the *techne* which he is reputed to have written; he demands that the arguments should be arranged in an orderly fashion.¹⁵ Socrates stresses that one who has acquired the knowledge of how to compose different parts of a speech cannot be deemed to be an accomplished orator; one who has learned how to compose various speeches and pitiful utterances is not a writer of tragedies; what is lacking is composition (σύστασις), without which there is no tragedy and no speech (268D, 269C). Isocrates also maintains that a speech cannot automatically be put together from different parts; therefore, the teaching of the composition of a speech is different from the application of the letters of the alphabet to the composition of words. The composition of a speech is a creative act: the subject, the order of the composition and the arguments should suit and correspond to the situation and the importance of the occasion.¹⁶

That Plato regarded Isocrates to be the representative of contemporary rhetoric who is worthy of preferment over all the other rhetoricians is also evidenced in the two verdicts which Socrates pronounced in the *Phaedros* on Lysias and on Isocrates. In the peroration of his second speech, Socrates appeals to the god of love and blames Lysias for anything that Phaedros and he may have said and which was offensive to the god. Eros should stop Lysias from continuing to make such speeches¹⁷ and turn him towards philosophy, to which his brother, Polemarchos, has already turned. This is direct criticism of a totally unacceptable oratory.

The message to Isocrates at the end of the dialogue (279A-B) is totally different. The superiority of Isocrates is stressed twice; Socrates points out that Isocrates surpasses Lysias in his natural endowment for composition of speeches¹⁸ and that as he progresses, the other rhetoricians will be as little children compared with him.¹⁹ This is the meaning of Socrates' expression that

¹⁵ L. Radermacher, *Artium Scriptores* (Vienna 1951), Isocrates B XXIV frg. 22; cf. Isocr. 13.16.

¹⁶ Isocr. 13.12, 16-17. It should be pointed out that ποιητικὸν πρᾶγμα in Socrates is different from the ποιητής by which Lysias is characterized by Socrates at 234E, 236D. See also S. Jäkel, *Sprachtheorie und Mythenrezeption bei Isocrates*, in *Literatur und Philosophie der Antike* (Turku 1986), 65-79, esp. 67-68 and R. Burger, *op. cit.* in app., 120-121.

¹⁷ 257B: παῦε τῶν τοιούτων λόγων ...

¹⁸ ἀμείνων ἢ κατὰ τοὺς περὶ Λυσίου εἶναι λόγους τὰ τῆς φύσεως.

¹⁹ ὥστε οὐδὲν ἄν γένοιτο θαυμαστὸν ... εἰ περὶ αὐτοῦς τε τοὺς λόγους, οἷς νῦν ἐπιχειρεῖ, πλέον ἢ παιδῶν διενέγκοι τῶν πώποτε ἀψαμένων λόγων.

“there is something of philosophy inborn in Isocrates’ mind”.²⁰ Isocrates should not give up writing speeches as Lysias is required to do. Plato probably knew that no rhetoricians of his time had attained or were likely to attain philosophic and dialectic rhetoric. There is no irony or any underhand criticism of Isocrates, though the differences between the two conceptions of rhetoric have already been stated. Perhaps the rivalry between the Academy and the Isocratean school of rhetoric was not so bad-tempered and abusive as it is often portrayed in modern research.

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APPENDIX

Regarding the date of the *Phaedros*, I accept the basic fact that it appeared when Isocrates was already at the height of his rhetorical activity; on the difficulty of dating the dialogue, see F.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* IV (Cambridge 1975), 396-397. R. Clavaud (see below) dates the *Phaedros* to about 370 B.C.

Even a list of the vast literature on the *Phaedros* and Platonic rhetoric would by far exceed the length of this article. I shall thus confine myself to a select list which will adequately represent the main trends in modern research: a) those who regard the end of the *Phaedros* to be a total attack on Isocrates; b) those who express an ambivalent attitude and c) those who see in it unqualified praise. I wish to point out that those who see in Socrates’ words praise only, do so for very different reasons from those proffered here.

The interpretation of the passage as a most radical condemnation of Isocrates can be found in R.L. Howland, “The Attack on Isocrates in the *Phaedros*”, *CQ* 31 (1937), 151-159. This is followed by V. Buchheit, *Untersuchungen zur Theorie des Genos Epideiktikon von Gorgias bis Aristoteles* (Munich 1960), 232-233; J.A. Coulter, “The Praise of Isocrates”, *GRBS* 8 (1967), 225-236 regards Plato’s verdict as a pitiless attack on Isocrates; the author also draws on Alcidas and Antisthenes, the contemporary adversaries of Isocrates. In two articles (*Mnemosyne* 6 [1953], 34-45; *Mnemosyne* 24 [1971], 387-390 [the second answer to H. Erbse, see below]), J. de Vries contends that Plato totally condemns the rhetoric of Isocrates. This is followed by M. Brown and J. Coulter, “The Middle Speech in Plato’s *Phaedros*”, *The Journal of History of Philosophy* 6 (1968), 217-231 = K.V. Erickson, ed., *Plato: True and Sophistic Rhetoric* (Amsterdam 1979), 239-264 who see in the middle speech (the first speech by Socrates) an example of sophistic, un-Platonic rhetoric, the representative of which is first and foremost Isocrates. Finally, M. Laplace, “L’Hommage de

²⁰ φύσει γάρ, ὧ φίλε, ἔνεστί τις φιλοσοφία τῇ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς διανοίᾳ.

Platon à Isocrate dans le *Phèdre*", *Rev. Phil.* 62 (1988), 273-281 (in contrast to the view of Clavaud, see below), regards the tribute to Isocrates to be false and anachronistic; though Socrates regards Isocrates as superior to Lysias, the *Panegyricos* of Isocrates is also far inferior to a *panegyricos* composed by a rhetor with divine inspiration. This argument is strengthened by the discussion of Hermogenes who regards the Platonic dialogue as the most beautiful panegyric. Among those who consider the Platonic verdict as irony is K. Ries, *Isokrates und Platon im Ringen um die Philosophie* (Munich 1959); see also C.J. Rowe, *Plato: Phaedros* (Warminster 1986), in his commentary *ad loc.*

Among those who consider the end of the *Phaedros* as an expression of ambivalence is first and foremost Chr. Eucken, *Isokrates, Seine Auseinandersetzung mit den zeitgenössischen Philosophen* (Berlin-N.Y. 1983) esp. 273-275. The evaluation by S. Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy, Plato's Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Chicago 1991), 192, is itself worthy of Socratic irony: "Socrates' measured praise of Isocrates seems designed to test our ability to judge how well on the basis of his writings Isocrates sustained his philosophic impulse".

Among those who regard Plato's verdict as praise is first and foremost G. Grote, *Plato and the Companions of Sokrates* I² (London 1867), 520-526; II², 241-244, who points out that although Plato regards Isocrates as occupying a place between politics and philosophy, he nevertheless praises him straightforwardly; but the reason put forward for it is that Plato did not want to incur the enmity of all the rhetoricians of the time; F. Blass, *Die Attische Beredsamkeit* I.2³ (Leipzig 1892, repr. Hildesheim 1962), rejects (esp. p. 31) the notion of any adverse attitude on the part of Plato towards Isocrates. He is followed by W. Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* III (Engl. transl. Oxford 1945), 46-70.

Special mention should perhaps be made of H.W. Hudson-Williams, *Three Systems of Education, Some Reflections on the Implication of Plato's Phaedrus. Inaugural Lecture 1953* (Oxford 1954), who regards the *Phaedros* as an expression of criticism, but not a frontal or total attack on Isocrates. He also stresses the difference between Lysias and Isocrates as expressed in the *Phaedros*, but distinguishes the three speeches, the first as representative of Lysias, the second as representative of Isocrates and the third as Platonic. The Isocratean speech is preferable to the Lysianic as an expression of humanistic rhetoric, in contrast to the rhetoric which is based on scientific truth (ἐπιστήμη). A year earlier R. Hackforth, *Plato's Phaedrus* (Cambridge 1952), 11-12 rejected the view expressed by R.L. Howland, *op. cit.*, and stated his own view that the passage in the *Phaedros* represents full and unqualified praise of Isocrates. The same view is expressed by T.B.L. Webster, *Art and Literature in Fourth Century Athens* (London 1956), 58, 60-61. H.E. Erbse, "Platons Urteil über Isokrates", *Hermes* 99 (1971), 183-197, also maintains that Plato regarded Isocrates as far above the

other rhetoricians of his time; the author contends that Isocrates was the only one who, if he so desired, was able to attain dialectic rhetoric, but did not desire to do so. The view that Isocrates is to be preferred to the “unphilosophic” Lysias, though without any specific argumentation, is expressed by V. Tejera, “Irony and Allegory in the *Phaedros*”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 8 (1975), 71-78 = K.V. Erickson, *op. cit.*, 281-297. R. Burger, *Plato's Phaedrus, A Defense of a Philosophic Art of Writing* (The University of Alabama Press 1980), esp. 115-126, points to some analogies between the discussion of rhetoric in the *Phaedros* and the conception of rhetoric as expressed in the speeches of Isocrates, but he mainly concentrates on the divergence between oral composition and written speeches. R. Clavaud, *Le Ménexène de Platon et La Rhétorique de son Temps* (Paris 1980), 100, 297-302 maintains that Socrates regarded Isocrates as superior to Lysias and that the statement at the end of the *Phaedros* is unequivocal praise; the main argument adduced by Clavaud is that the evaluation is *post eventum* because it is later than the praise of philosophy by Isocrates in the *Panegyricus*; moreover, none of the Platonic dialogues ends in enmity; the *Phaedros* also ends in reconciliation. Finally, W. Trimpi, *Muses of one Mind, The Literary Analysis of Experience and its Continuity* (Princeton 1983), 11-17 also sees in the Platonic passage praise of Isocrates in comparison with Lysias and other rhetoricians.