

# Isocrates Free from Plato's Shadow

## Isócrates libre de la sombra de Platón

Marie-Noëlle Ribas<sup>1</sup>

Université Paris I, Panthéon Sorbonne (Francia)

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### Abstract

Isocrates is commonly remembered as a logographer or as a distinguished professor of oratory, but never as a philosopher, although he persists in styling himself as such. No doubt this is largely due to Plato's criticism, which has significant influence on the way Isocrates is still considered. According to Plato, Isocrates who promotes a kind of philosophy with no regard to truth but only to opinion, does not deserve to be seen as an accomplished philosopher. Despite his claims, Isocrates would fail to set himself apart from other sophists, with whom he does not wish to be confused. In this article, I want to free Isocrates from Plato's disparaging view by showing what kind of philosophy Isocrates claimed to teach.

**Key-words:** Isocrates, Plato, Sophists, Philosophy.

### Resumen

Isócrates es comúnmente recordado como logógrafo o como un distinguido maestro de oratoria, pero nunca como filósofo, si bien persista en presentarse como tal. Sin duda, esto se debe en gran parte a las críticas de Platón, que que influyeron significativamente en la forma en que aún lo juzgamos. Según Platón, Isócrates, que promueve un tipo de filosofía sin consideración a la verdad sino solo a la opinión, no merece ser visto

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<sup>1</sup> (marienoelle.ribas@gmail.com) Marie-Noëlle Ribas received her PhD is associate researcher at the University of Paris I-Pantheon Sorbonne. She is the author of *La Querelle de l'expérience, Aristote, Platon, Isocrate* (Classiques Garnier, 2019). She has also written articles in Greek philosophy, including "Le courage à l'épreuve de l'expérience" (*Revue de philosophie ancienne*, 2019) and "Aristote, père de l'astrophysique scientifique" (*Revue d'histoire des sciences*, 2018).

como un genuino filósofo. A pesar de sus afirmaciones, Isócrates no se distinguiría de otros sofistas, con quienes no desearía se le confundiese. En este artículo quiero liberar a Isócrates de la visión despectiva de Platón, al mostrar qué tipo de filosofía afirmaba enseñar Isócrates.

**Palabras-clave:** Isócrates, Platón, sofistas, filosofía.

Isocrates is commonly known as a logographer and one of the most influent educator of his time. In the closing years of the Peloponnesian War, he lost his inherited fortune and began to earn money by writing speeches for others to use in court. But instead of becoming himself an orator as logographers usually did, he turned to education with great success. Because Isocrates lacked both the voice and the selfconfidence necessary for a public speaker, he chose to prepare for public life those who could afford to pay for his heavy fees, while publishing a series of speeches on the state of Athens and of Greece. Among his most famous pupils, one could mention Timotheus, the Athenian general, prominent in Athens' history between 378 and 355, Nicocles, the ruler of Salamis in Cyprus and the two greatest Greek historians of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Ephorus, who wrote a universal history, and Theopompus, who wrote the history of Philip II of Macedon. But was he only this well-known rhetorician and political educator ? Isocrates would likely have not been satisfied by the manner one remembered him. In *Against the Sophists*, he calls himself a philosopher, in order to recall us he pretends not to be a rhetorician. What kind of philosopher Isocrates claimed to be and why did he fail to be remembered as such ?

## An innovative educational programme

In his speech *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates underlines his originality by criticising the false promises made in the field of education:

If all who are engaged in the profession of education were willing to state the facts instead of making greater promises than they can possibly fulfil, they would not be in such bad repute with the lay-public<sup>2</sup>.

Isocrates distinguishes his teaching from those proposed by heirs of a certain oratory tradition, namely “those who profess to teach political discourse” (τοῖς τοῦς πολιτικούς λόγους ὑπισχνουμένοις<sup>3</sup>) and those who write the so-called arts of oratory. He criticises the first ones, because those experts

<sup>2</sup> Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 1-1-6.

<sup>3</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 9, 1-2.

in deliberative speeches teach a “rigidly fixed technique” (τεταγμένην τέχνην, 12, 1-2), instead of a creative art. They forget that discourses require not only convenience to the subject but also novelty. He attacks the second ones on the ground that they reduce rhetoric to its judicial aspects by focusing on plea<sup>4</sup>. As master of political discourses of a new kind, Isocrates does not transmit an oratory technique (*technè logôn*). He proposes nothing less than a “paideia logôn<sup>5</sup>”, that is to say an education of the whole individual based on speeches.

Moreover, unlike “those who devote themselves to disputation” (τῶν περὶ τὰς ἔριδας διατριβόντων, §1, 8), which includes Socratics like Antisthenes and Plato, Isocrates asserts that speculative search for truth is useless. In *Against the Sophists*, he expounds the contradictions made by those men who watch for contradictions in others' speeches. Fraud is obvious, because they pretend to search for truth (οἱ προσποιοῦνται μὲν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ζητεῖν, §1, 8-9), when they lie about the benefice brought by their education programme. These professors have gone so far in their lack of scruple that they promise impossible things. For example, they persuade young men that only if they study under them, they will acquire an exact knowledge of what ought to be done in life (ἄ πρακτέον, §3, 4), through which they will become happy and prosperous (τῆς ἐπιστήμης εὐδαίμονες γενήσονται, §3, 4-5). For Isocrates, this is only boasting, as is shown by the gap which exists between the pledges made and what pupils really obtain, but also by their financial strategy. How could we not be astonished when we see them sell off what they consider to be the greater goods? Why are they demanding only a small fee for their students, three or four mines, if they really are able to teach them justice (τὴν δικαιοσύνην, 5, 3-4), virtue and temperance (τὴν ἀρετὴν καὶ τὴν σωφροσύνην, 6, 4-5)? Isocrates' criticism is harsh:

When, therefore, the layman puts all these things together and observes that the teachers of wisdom and dispensers of happiness are themselves in great want but exact only a small fee from their students, that they are on the watch for contradictions in words but are blind to inconsistencies in deeds, and that, furthermore, they pretend to have knowledge of the future but are incapable either of saying anything pertinent or of giving any counsel regarding the present, and when he observes that those who follow their judgements are more consistent and more successful than those who profess to have exact knowledge (καὶ πλείω κατορθοῦντας τοὺς ταῖς δόξαις χρωμένους ἢ τοὺς τὴν ἐπιστήμην ἔχειν), then he has, I think, good reason to condemn such studies and regard them as chitchat and narrowness, and not as a nurture of the soul<sup>6</sup>.

Against those studies who fail to nurture the soul (τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπιμέλειαν, 8, 6) and that laymen rightly consider as “chitchat and narrowness” (ἄδολεσχίαν καὶ

<sup>4</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Isoc., *Antidosis*, 180.

<sup>6</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 7-8.

μικρολογία, 8, 5-6), Isocrates extols the virtues of the study of political discourse (τὴν τῶν λόγων τῶν πολιτικῶν ἐπιμέλειαν, 21, 8-9). Rejecting the idea that virtue can be taught<sup>7</sup>, he underlines the natural dispositions to wisdom and justice his teaching can stimulate and facilitate:

For I hold that to obtain a knowledge of the elements out of which we make and compose all discourses (τῶν μὲν ἰδεῶν, ἐξ ὧν τοὺς λόγους ἅπαντας καὶ λέγομεν καὶ συντίθεμεν) is not so very difficult if anyone entrusts himself, not to those who make rash promises, but to those who have some knowledge of these things. But to choose from these elements those which should be employed for each subject, to join them together, to arrange them properly, and also, not to miss what the occasion demands but appropriately to adorn the whole speech with striking thoughts and to clothe it in flowing and melodious phrase (these things, I hold, require much study and are the task of a vigorous and imaginative mind: for this, the student must not only have the requisite aptitude but he must learn the different kinds of discourse and practise himself in their use; and the teacher, for his part, must so expound the principles of the art with the utmost possible exactness as to leave out nothing can be taught, and, for the rest, he must in himself set such an example of oratory that the students who have taken form under his instruction and are able to pattern after him will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm which is not found in others. When all of these requisites are found together, then the devotees of philosophy will achieve complete success; but according as any one of the things which I have mentioned is lacking, to this extent must their disciples of necessity fall below the mark<sup>8</sup>.

For Isocrates, and for Plato as well, the true politician cannot be any man who acquires rhetorical skills for a fee: he has to be trained in philosophy. Isocrates clearly refers to his educational programme as *philosophia*<sup>9</sup>. He diverges, however, on how to conceive this philosophy capable of helping students to participate actively in political life. Isocrates considers that philosophy does not rely on theoretical knowledge of *ideai*, which are, in the platonic sense, those intelligible realities whose knowledge is necessary to whom wants to know and to act well. What he calls and teaches as *ideai* are oratory elements, such as common forms present in speeches<sup>10</sup>, like proofs (*pisteis*), examples, enthymemes, parts of speeches like *prooimion*, narrative parts, *epilogos*<sup>11</sup>, but also the various kinds of speeches or general forms of

<sup>7</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 16, 3-18.

<sup>9</sup> Isoc., *Panegyricus*, 10, 47; *Evagoras*, 8, 81; *Panathenaicus*, 9; *Against the Sophists*, 1, 11-18, 21; *Antidosis*, 30, 42-50, 162, 176, 181- 92, 304. Of Isocrates' eighty-seven uses of philosophy, thirty-six occurs in the *Antidosis*, a late defense of his educational system. On this point, see TIMMERMAN, SCHIAPPA [2010], p.52-59

<sup>10</sup> Isoc., *Busiris*, §33; *Helen*, §§ 11, 15, 54, 58.

<sup>11</sup> For a long time, one considered that the word "idea" belongs to Isocrates' oratory vocabulary. Some argued that it was not a rhetorical reference, others that in most cases *idea* makes reference to the

them. One should not conceive a well-educated man without solid rhetorical skills, if political activities are those one has to focus on in adults. But eloquence is not sufficient. That is why Isocrates refuses to be seen as a master of rhetoric. His philosophy is an education through speeches which enables to become able orators and statemen (καὶ λέγειν καὶ πολιτεῦσθαι δεινοὶ γεγόνασιν, 14, 5-6), because it is useful not only for facility in oratory (ῥητορείαν, 21, 3) but also for honesty (ἐπιείκειαν, 21,3):

And yet, those who desire to follow the true precepts of this discipline may, if they will, be helped more speedily towards honesty than towards facility in oratory<sup>12</sup>.

Isocrates pre-empts an objection: despite his emphasis on honesty, nobody can blame him for not teaching virtue, while it is true that no training can produce temperance and justice for those who has no propensity to become such. As far as morality is concerned, there is no better teaching than his, because, contrary to Socrates or Plato, he proposes nothing more than what could be expected in this field : to “encourage” (συμπαρακελεύσασθαι) virtue and to “ facilitate its practice ” (συνασκήσαι μάλιστ’)<sup>13</sup>, when virtue cannot be taught<sup>14</sup>.

Isocrates tries to convince us that he is the best educator because he alone does not fall into the category of sophists, since he refuses all false promises. And this can be ultimately shown by the manner he defines his audience. According to him, anyone can benefit from his teaching, which does not imply to claim, like Gorgias, that anyone can excel in rhetoric, and thus become a good politician. Isocrates believes that only those who are well endowed by nature and who have been schooled by experience can attain perfection in oratory and political fields. This does however not mean that his teaching is reserved for a happy few, as in the case of Plato's philosophy. Isocrates insists: his teaching is also relevant for those who cannot become good polemist, albeit their mediocre nature prevents them from being innovative<sup>15</sup>. Thanks to him, they can become more resourceful in discovering the possibilities of a subject<sup>16</sup> and they can progress along the road to virtue.

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materia of speech rather than matters of composition (SCHLATTER, [1972] ; LIDOV, [1983]). *Eidos* is used three times in the whole corpus, twice in the *Antidosis*, and only one time in *Evagoras*. *Idea* is more common, because one notes nineteen occurrences, including four in *Helen*, four in *Antidosis*, two in *Panathenaicus*, *Ad Nicoclem* and *Nicocles*, and only one in *Panegyricus*, *Philippus*, *Busiris*, *Against the Sophists*, and lastly in the letter *To the children of Jason*. In any case, as SULLIVAN [2001] and NOËL ([2010], p 51) demonstrate in a compelling fashion, they belong to Isocratean rhetorical vocabulary.

<sup>12</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 21, 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 15-5.

<sup>16</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 15.

## Experience and practical intelligence

In *Against the Sophists*<sup>17</sup>, Isocrates challenges the common assumption that philosophers are unable to teach valuable knowledge for use in politics. He shows that this criticism is valid only for those who undertake theoretical research to find the truth and who, consequently, miss the practical field's characteristics. They fail to determine which kind of philosophical knowledge could be useful.

Whereas those he qualifies as Eristics think that one must acquire a certain exact knowledge in order to attain happiness, Isocrates considers that both contingency of human affairs and limited nature of human being forbid to conceive a science telling us how to act correctly<sup>18</sup>:

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 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 (σοφούς) who is able by his opinions to arrive generally at the best course, and I hold that man to be a philosopher (φιλοσόφους) who occupies himself with the studies from which he will most quickly gain that kind of practical intelligence (τὴν τοιαύτην φρόνησιν)<sup>19</sup>.

He who excels in actions because he has a certain kind of intelligence is not led by science, but by his powers of conjecture on what should be done or said. For Isocrates, practical intelligence (*phronesis*) is the ability to adapt oneself to circumstances, and its exercise does not require to possess any science, whether political science or this knowledge of principles invoked by Plato. Isocrates highlights correct opinions' value, one can formulate if properly trained:

(...) to instruct their pupils in the practical affairs of our government and train to expertness therein (περὶ τὴν ἐμπειρίαν τὴν τούτων γυμνάζειν<sup>20</sup>), bearing in mind that likely conjecture about useful things (περὶ τῶν χρησίμων ἐπιεικῶς δοξάζειν) is far preferable to exact knowledge of the useless, and that to be a little superior in important things is of greater worth than to be pre-eminent

<sup>17</sup> On the use of the term "sophist" in order to describe those we nowadays consider as philosophers and on Isocrates' intent to teach philosophy, see in particular NIGHTINGALE ([1985], chap. 1) ; N. LIVINGSTONE ([2007], p. 15-34).

<sup>18</sup> On the hesiodic origin of the idea that man cannot reach science, see MIHRADY and TOO ([2000], p. 157).

<sup>19</sup> Isoc., *Antidosis*, 271.

<sup>20</sup> The phrase "περὶ τὴν ἐμπειρίαν τὴν τούτων γυμνάζειν" is referring to these useful things Callicles talks about in Plato's *Gorgias* (484c5), when he criticizes Socrates for his lack of experience. This experience is then identified with experience of the laws of the city, and of the terms which have to be used in negotiating agreements with fellows in private or in public affairs, and of human pleasures and desires; and, in short, in men's characters. See also *Panathenaicus* thirty-first paragraph.

in petty things that are without value for living (περὶ τῶν ἀχρήστων ἀκριβῶς ἐπίστασθαι)<sup>21</sup>.

Good rhetoricians as well as good politicians are those who are able to form opinions in accordance with circumstances on useful matters. One can acquire this ability if one follows Isocrates' teaching, which gives the political experience needed to pass such judgements. In other words, excelling in rhetoric and in politics is possible for those who do not neglect the training of the mind, Isocrates' *philosophia* is. To Demonicus, he admonishes:

Take concern for everything in life, but train your practical wisdom especially, for a good man in a human body is something very great in something very significant. Try to be a lover of toil with your body and a lover of wisdom (philosophos) with your soul<sup>22</sup>.

Against the common idea that a philosopher has no practical sense and that studying philosophy deprives you from experience necessary to political matters, Isocrates invites political aspirants to ally experience and philosophy, provided they have a clear picture about what earns the right to be called philosopher:

Whenever you desire to gain a precise understanding (ἀκριβῶσαι) of such things as it is fitting that kings should know, pursue them by experience and philosophy (ἐμπειρία μέθιτι καὶ φιλοσοφία); for philosophy will show you the way but training yourself in the actual doing of things will give you power to deal with affairs<sup>23</sup>.

Good political leaders are prudent men who are able to speak and to act in the best way possible due to their experience and an appropriate philosophical training course. Isocrates' "παιδεία λόγων" will enrich experience acquired on the political stage with the helpful knowledge of politics his education through speeches can give. His speeches<sup>24</sup>, mostly fictitious, as well as his letters meant to be publicly disseminated, are a reflection of the current political reality<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Isoc., *Helen*, 5, Isocrates. Isocrates with an English Translation in three volumes, by George Norlin, Ph.D., LL.D. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1980.

<sup>22</sup> Isoc., *To Demonicus*, 40, 1-5.

<sup>23</sup> Isocrates, *To Nicocles*, 35 (trad. Norlin modified).

<sup>24</sup> See NOËL [2003]. Isocrates' speeches do not correspond to any of the three genres defined by Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (I, 3, 1356b6). They are political. He writes discourses not for private disputes, but discourses "which deal with the world of Hellas, with affairs of state, and are appropriate to be delivered at the Pan-Hellenic assemblies" (Ελληνικούς, και πολιτικούς και πανηγυρικούς) (*Antid.*, §46, trad. Norlin). Isocrates promotes the art of speaking on general and useful themes (*Antid.*, §258). His discourses are about the common values and aim at the unity of the community (see NOËL [2012], p. 385).

<sup>25</sup> After the *Panegyricus* was published in 380 BC, he expresses his personal political ideas in

Isocrates sees his Hellenic and political speech as a union between history and philosophy<sup>26</sup> which provides insights into a range of policy concerns<sup>27</sup>. For him, there is no doubt that his students are the only ones who can claim the title of philosophers, because they develop intelligence into contingent matters of public concerns<sup>28</sup>.

Isocrates' refusal of any requirement of accuracy and scientificity in the practical field should not be seen as a sign of weakness or a sign of failure on his part. He thus demonstrates an intellectual integrity, which others are lacking<sup>29</sup>, when they offer to teach a science of what ought to be done or said, Isocrates considers impossible. That is why, though he claims to teach philosophy, Isocrates should not be confused with the Socratics, as it is often the case for the general public. He distinguishes his practical philosophy with those theoretical attempts which are proven to be unsuccessful to form the mind. His education through discourses is the only *philosophia* which helps to forge intelligence in a manner that serves political purposes.

### Plato's criticism

If Isocrates is not remembered as a philosopher despite his efforts, it is owing to Plato's dialogues. In his dialogues, Plato tries to show that Isocrates's refusal to follow the footsteps of older rhetoricians on the basis of a certain view of philosophy, made his project fail both in the area of rhetoric and of philosophy. As strongly suggested in *Euthydemus*, Isocrates is not just unable of training philosophers, and thus, good politicians, he also fails to train successful rhetoricians:

(...) they regard themselves as moderately versed in philosophy, and moderately too in politics (μετρίως μὲν γὰρ φιλοσοφίας ἔχειν, μετρίως δὲ πολιτικῶν), on quite reasonable grounds: for they have dipped into both as far as they needed, and, evading all risk and struggle, are content to gather the fruits of wisdom. (...) the truth is that these people, partaking of both, are inferior to both in respect of the objects for which statesmanship and philosophy are important; and while they are really in the third place they seek to be accorded the first. However, we ought to be indulgent towards their ambition and not feel annoyed,

his discourses, including his Panhellenism. He calls on Sparta to establish concord in Greece by recognizing the fitness and right of Athens to share with Sparta hegemony in Greece and by proceeding with the national crusade against Persia.

<sup>26</sup> Isoc., *Panathenaicus*, 246.

<sup>27</sup> Isocrates' instruction through discourses is not only concerned with conveying political ideas or theoretical contents grounded in his experience. His pedagogical activities are closely linked with his political agenda: he is both a master and a counsellor who develop deliberating habits and who offers himself as a model. See *Against the Sophists*, 17-18.

<sup>28</sup> Isoc. *Antidosis*, 271.

<sup>29</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists.*, §1, 1-3.



while still judging them to be what they actually are. For we should be glad of anyone, whoever he may be, who says anything that verges on good sense, and labours steadily<sup>30</sup>.

In *Gorgias* and in *Phaedrus*, Plato sets out the reasons for this double failure, by means of a criticism directed against an empirical use of speeches.

### The true politician is not the empirical rhetorician

In *Gorgias*, the very critical approach of oratory tradition by the eponymous character and the identification of rhetoric's immoral use made possible by his teaching clearly question the value of Gorgias' student's philosophy, namely Isocrates.

In this dialogue, Plato interrogates the so-called power of Gorgias' art, and more broadly, the power of "what is named rhetoric" (τὴν καλουμένην ῥητορικὴν, 448d9-10). The Gorgias character introduces his art as the one rhetoricians use in order to persuade, defining persuasion as "the ability to persuade with speeches either judges in the law courts or statesmen in the council-chamber or the commons in the Assembly or an audience at any other meeting that may be held on public affairs (πολιτικός σύλλογος)<sup>31</sup>". He considers it as "the greatest good", because it ensures political success, while being "cause not merely of freedom to mankind at large, but also of dominion to single persons in their several cities<sup>32</sup>". Gorgias admits that his arts' ambition does not go beyond this ability to produce actual persuasion in the souls of listeners. That is why he considers Socrates' definition of rhetoric as "producer of persuasion" (πειθοῦς δημιουργός, 453a2) to be sufficient<sup>33</sup>. To influence the audience is the asset promised by Gorgias. But the power Gorgias assigns to its practice cannot be what he claimed: it is not a technical result but the effect produced by a certain use of speeches on ignorant people. Cases raised by the rhetorician in order to show the so-called power of his *technè logôn* have not sufficiently proved to be evidence of a technical practice. If Gorgias, who knows nothing about medicine, has managed to convince a recalcitrant patient to drink a remedy, where his brother, a physician, has failed in doing that, it is not because of his all-powerful art but because the patient ignores what is good or what is bad for him. Gorgias would have failed to persuade his brother to drink any beverage. Gorgias who does not understand that his supposed power

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Euthydemus*, 305d8-306d1. Plato. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 3 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967.

<sup>31</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 452 e1-4. Plato. Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vol. 3 translated by W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1967.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 452d7-8.

<sup>33</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 453a6 : "μοι δοκεῖς ἰκανῶς ὀρίζεσθαι".

is in fact the result of his audience's ignorance should be excluded from the group of technicians. Contrary to his claim, Gorgias' practice is not a technique but what Plato refers to as "*empeiria*". This empirical use of speeches is a non-reasoned practice (ἄλογον πρᾶγμα, 365a6) which is essentially a matter of blind routine and of experience, instead of knowledge.

To this epistemological criticism showing a lack of technicality, Plato adds a moral criticism. He shows that this lack of technicality prevents it from producing any good, which disqualifies this kind of rhetoric from a political perspective. As flattery (κολακεία, 463b1), this empirical use of rhetoric is reprehensible, for it pretends to be an art of oratory it is not, and much more harmful, it counterfeits this part of politics, which is justice (πολιτικῆς μορίου εἶδωλον, 463e4)<sup>34</sup>. When good politicians accomplish the good of the citizen's soul by making his moral improvement possible, empirical rhetoricians seek only to flatter their listeners. Incapable of persuading by a rational use of technical principles, this rhetoric has no choice but to aim at pleasure. As such, it takes part in a kind of *empeiria* (ἐμπειρία τις, 462d10-11), namely a flattery whose purpose is pleasure. In other words, this practice is problematic because it pretends to be something it is not : a technique aiming at good instead of an empirical practice, criticised by Plato as flattery aiming at pleasure. This kind of rhetorician who appears to be a good politician or a righteous man is actually a fraud who pretends to speak and to act as if he knew what is just or unjust and which elements are the best for citizens' souls. Because they imitate good politicians by pleasing the public instead of worrying about morally improving the listeners, orators like Gorgias are severely condemned by Plato.

By revealing the lack of technicality of some rhetorical practices, Plato is implicitly attacking Isocrates' practice. Just as in *Against the Sophists* Isocrates formulates a criticism which includes Plato among the sophists, Plato's criticism of a certain rhetoric concerns Isocrates, despite Isocrates' determination not to be seen as a rhetorician like Gorgias but instead as a philosopher. In *Gorgias*, Socrates' characterisation of this non-technical rhetoric, which is focused on what their audience is looking for and which thus requires the orator to show "an incisive, gallant mind which has a natural bent for clever dealing with mankind" (ψυχῆς δὲ στοχαστικῆς καὶ ἀνδρείας καὶ φύσει δεινῆς προσομιλεῖν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις, 463a6-b1) recalls the way Isocrates presents the natural dispositions required by his students in *Against the Sophists*:

<sup>34</sup> Socrates distinguishes between two kinds of art depending on whether they are concerned with the body or the soul. While politics is regarding the soul, gymnastics and medicine consider the body. Plato then gives an analogy. Plato divides politics into two parts: legislation which is an art ordering the offices and arrangements of the state and justice. Rhetoric is to this part of politics, called justice, what pastry baking is to medicine, and what cosmetics are to gymnastics. All of these activities are aimed at surface adornment, an impersonation of what is really good.

But to choose from these elements those which should be employed for each subject, to joint them together, to arrange them properly, and also not to miss what the occasion demands but appropriately to adorn the whole speech with striking thoughts and to clothe it in flowing and melodious phrase—these things, I hold, require much study and are the task of a gallant and penetrating mind (καὶ ψυχῆς ἀνδρικῆς καὶ δοξαστικῆς ἔργον εἶναι)<sup>35</sup>.

By characterizing the empirical practice of oratory as flattery, Plato is not exclusively referring to Isocrates. The use of the adjective “στοχαστικῆς” is referring to the oratory commonplace according to which rhetoricians have to work to guess their interlocutors' thoughts or desires in order to adjust their speeches<sup>36</sup>. But the choice of phrase suggests that Isocrates is the main target of this text passage which joins an unusual adjective, “στοχαστικῆς”, to the phrase “gallant mind”, as it is the case in *Against the Sophist's* seventeenth paragraph which mentions the equally rare adjective “δοξαστικῆς”. Plato provides an uncharitable reading of Isocrates' claim. For having failed to transform oratory into an art, those orators like Gorgias and his followers reduce it to a mere flattery. This empirical use of rhetoric based on both the ability to deal with mankind and on the capacity to adjust speeches to the listeners' expectations is a formidable instrument serving demagogic policies. It is therefore only right that Isocrates considers possession of “an incisive, gallant mind which has a natural bent for clever dealing with mankind” as the key condition to his rhetoric, because without technical knowledge, this rhetorician has no choice but to capitalize on his natural assets in order to persuade. While it may be tempting to read this text as a rewriting made by Plato who interprets mind which formulates appropriate opinions as mind capable of “hazardous riddles<sup>37</sup>”, it seems nonetheless to be an acerbic reading of Isocrates' words. With irony, Plato shows that Isocrates has remained faithful to his promises, when he claims not to be a sophist by refusing all false statements. Isocrates is right to say that natural dispositions are essential to the application of his philosophy, because this is the logical extension to his statement that he teaches nothing that resembles technique. Plato just stresses what Isocrates has also said himself: his teaching's success depends on his students' nature, rather than relying on knowledge.

The second aspect of Plato's moral criticism questions Gorgias' and Isocrates' posture. It is incoherent to assign a moral purpose to their practices, without providing useful knowledge to insure their fair use. Those who like Gorgias, pretends to teach an art of oratory, while refusing to take responsibility

<sup>35</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, II, 21, 1395b5-11.

<sup>37</sup> Demont (P.), “Isocrate et le Gorgias de Platon”, dans *L'Information littéraire*, Volume 60, 2008, p 3-9.

when his pupils use it in immoral ways will not be taken seriously, because Those who like Gorgias, pretend to teach an art of oratory, while refusing to take responsibility when their pupils use it in immoral ways will not be taken seriously, because they have lectured them on the importance of honesty. Although he does not defend a technical amorality, Gorgias has paved the way for political immoralism, embodied by Callicles. Even if his empirical use of rhetoric has no such strength Gorgias claims for it, because there is no technical expertise here, this practice has consequences. Throughout the dialogue, Plato uncovers the disastrous consequences this rhetoric had on Athenian democratic system. It is necessary to recognize that Gorgias' use of rhetoric has a certain "dunamis" in order to consider what share of responsibility Gorgias and his followers have in Athens' decline. The arrival in power of those who affect to have political skills against those who actually know something about politics has been made possible by Gorgias' teaching. This corresponds to Themistocles, Cimon, Miltiades and Pericles, namely all those who had led to the 404 debacle, but this also corresponds to the newest generation of political aspirants, like Callicles, Tisander of Aphidnae, Andron, son of Androtion, and Nausicydes of Cholargos. By showing how this allegedly moral teaching has opened the door to some political immoralism, Plato suggests what may be the consequences of the education of his student, Isocrates. As well as Gorgias invites his followers to make fair use of his technique, without even knowing what justice is, Isocrates claims that honesty is his philosophy's end, without trying to find out what honesty could be. For Plato, Isocrates speaks falsely in *Against the Sophist*, when he says one can make a fair use of rhetorical and political skills, without teaching virtue<sup>38</sup>. Although Isocrates is not included by name in the criticism, Gorgias' failure clearly foreshadows Isocrates own failure.

### Empirical rhetoricians as opinion hunters

Phaedrus' argumentative strategy differs from Gorgias'. In *Gorgias*, Plato develops an epistemological criticism which underlines the lack of technicality of practices which ignore causes as well as a moral criticism which complains of an inability to produce any good in listeners' soul. In *Phaedrus*, he criticizes rhetoricians who do not hesitate to say one thing and then the very opposite, in order to indirectly attack Isocrates. In *Phaedrus*, Plato specifically considers the tradition of oratory initiated by Gorgias. After mentioning Isocrates' name, he refers to one of the founders of the Sicilian School, Tisias, who was also a student of rhetoric's alleged inventor, Corax. Not only Plato does not seem to

<sup>38</sup> Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, §21.

solely criticize Gorgias and his followers' art of oratory, but he appears not to focus on Sicilian school, because he also refers to Thrasymachus or Theodorus of Byzantium<sup>39</sup>. The assertion made by Gorgias and Tisias, at lines 276a6-7, that "probabilities are more to be esteemed than truths, who make small things seem great and great things small" in a dialogue where Plato intends to show that truth is required for the production of probable gives Gorgias and Tisias, and Sicilian school through them an importance their presentation tends to obscure. Even if the Sicilian school is not the exclusive target of this text, it is no doubt the main one. Tisias' name refers to Lysias and to Gorgias but also to "the fair Isocrates<sup>40</sup>". In *Phaedrus*, the criticism directed against an empirical use of rhetoric aiming at producing probabilities, regardless of truth, serves to condemn the disconnection between logical and ontological.

In this dialogue, Plato's criticism of *empeiria* is used to challenge this view of rhetoric which considers it as production of probable, without clearly identifying what rhetoric is as an art and what its link with philosophy is. Is it possible to persuade with art without any knowledge about truth and about what exists, as it is claimed by those who, like Isocrates, stress probabilities' power<sup>41</sup>? In *Phaedrus*, Plato attacks the belief that "comes from what seems to be true, not from the truth" (τὰ δόξαντ' ἄν πλήθει ὄπερ δικάσουσιν)<sup>42</sup>, that is to say from opinion. They are wrong those who think that knowledge of truth does not give the art of persuasion<sup>43</sup> and that, at best, philosophy has to be learned before rhetoric in order to facilitate its practice. They underestimate philosophy as knowledge of truth's importance, and this mistake explains for Plato why they are unable to become experts in oratorical art. Those who don't know the truth, but pursues opinions, persuades instead of persuading with art<sup>44</sup>. He will, it seems, attain an art of speech which is ridiculous, and not an art at all. Plato says it is "a non-technical routine" (ἄτεχνος τριβή, 260 e4-5) and concludes about such orator: "unless he pays proper attention to philosophy he will never be able to speak properly about anything<sup>45</sup>". This rhetoric which makes antilogical use of speeches possible without relying on knowledge of truth, is equally unable to produce persuasive probabilities than to produce truths about any matters.

Plato's criticism undermines Isocrates' *paideia logôn*. Whereas in *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates underlines the Eristics' vanity, including Plato's, who "track contradictions in words but are blind to inconsistencies in deed" (τὰς

<sup>39</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 261 sq., 266d1-267d10.

<sup>40</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 278be8.

<sup>41</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 259e1-262c3.

<sup>42</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 259e7-260a4.

<sup>43</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 260d3-9.

<sup>44</sup> See, Plat., *Phaedrus*, 260 e6-7.

<sup>45</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 261a4-5 : "(...) εἰάν μὴ ἰκανῶς φιλοσοφήσῃ, οὐδὲ ἰκανός ποτε λέγειν ἔσται περὶ οὐδενός".

ἐναντιώσεις ἐπὶ μὲν τῶν λόγων τηροῦντας<sup>46</sup>), Plato rejects empirical rhetoricians' claims by presenting them as opinions hunters (δόξας τεθηρευκώς, 262c2). Those who, like Isocrates, have stressed the value of opinions and the force of appearances rather than the power of truth, miss what could be a technical use of rhetoric, because they have failed to understand that credible likelihoods are those produced on the basis on truth. Just as best lies are those which appear true, without being true, probabilities are more powerful when produced on the basis on what is true:

(...) we were saying that this probability (τοῦτο τὸ εἰκὸς) of yours was accepted by the people because of its likeness to truth (δι' ὁμοιότητα τοῦ ἀληθοῦς); and we just stated that he who knows the truth is always best able to discover likenesses<sup>47</sup>.

Plato criticises the empirico-sophistical rhetoric which confuses to play with imitations at the expense of the true with the technical production of probabilities which objectively resemble something to the truth which is authentic rhetoric's purpose. Isocrates deserves special criticism because he exacerbates this confusion, when he claims to teach *philosophia* instead of rhetoric, misleading us into believing that philosophy has to do with opinions. Isocrates makes impossible to conceive both true rhetoric and true philosophy. Philosophy is not an ancillary activity, as rhetoric's speech would have people believe at lines 260d3-9, but the necessary condition for producing true speech as well as probabilities.

Those who, like Isocrates, reduce the art of discourse to rhetoric defined as regarding probability, and thus ignore that rhetoric is a species of the genus "art of discourse" (265c-266e), miss the other species, which is dialectic. They condemn themselves to make an empirical use of rhetoric. Rhetoric and dialectic are species (τὸ εἶδος, 266c7) of the art of discourses and rhetoric cannot be identified with this empirical practice with which it is confused by Phaedrus. Art of rhetoric is yet to be imagined.

### Isocrates' philosophy as preparatory activity of rhetoric

The true rhetoric whose possibility is admitted at *Gorgias*' end<sup>48</sup> finds a positive content in *Phaedrus*. True rhetoric, based on the knowledge of truth, is a way to lead the soul by mean of words:

<sup>46</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 7, 5-6.

<sup>47</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 273d3-6.

<sup>48</sup> Plat., *Gorgias*, 504d5.

Is not rhetoric in its entire nature an art which leads the soul by mean of words (ψυχαγωγία τις διὰ λόγων), not only in law courts and the various other public assemblages, but in private companies as well? And is it not the same when concerned with small things as with great, and, properly speaking, no more to be esteemed in important than in trifling matters<sup>49</sup>?

Rhetoric has to be distinguished from dialectic as power to know the truth. Whereas dialectic requires two principles, that of perceiving and bringing together in one idea the scattered particulars, and that one may make clear by definition the particular thing which he wishes to explain, rhetoric uses many figures of speech<sup>50</sup>. These figures of speech lie at the very heart of Isocrates' teaching.

In *Phaedrus*, Plato clarifies the status of rhetoric's knowledge of processes: they are the necessary preliminaries of rhetoric and not rhetoric itself (τὰ πρὸ "X" ἀναγκαῖα μαθήματα, 268e6). One can make virtuoso use of the processes (*technēmata*) called "the niceties of the art" (τὰ κομψὰ τῆς τέχνης, 266d9) by empirical rhetoricians, if one practice long enough, as can be seen from Lysias' speeches. Lysias has no technical expertise, so that he is only to proceed by practice and routine.

For Plato, the advocates of this empirical rhetoric are wrong about what is necessary in order to persuade with art. Those who, like Isocrates, are proud to teach rhetoric's elements do not understand that this is only preliminary knowledge. No one can technically produce credible speeches, which bear any resemblance to the truth, on the basis of it. Against them, Plato defends a provocative thesis: if producing probable speeches is rhetoric's aim, one cannot be good at it, except if one acquires dialectical power (*dunamis*)<sup>51</sup> of knowing the truth. Indeed, who can seriously pretend to produce what resembles the truth while ignoring it and ignoring the nature of what he is talking about? He who knows the truth is always best able to discover likenesses:

(...) unless a man take account of the characters of his hearers and is able to divide things by classes and to comprehend particulars under a general idea, he will never attain the highest human perfection in the art of speech<sup>52</sup>.

By saying that technical competence requires a knowledge of nature, Plato reverses the criticism Isocrates addressed to him first<sup>53</sup>, when he says that it is fair to consider theoretical philosophy is only "chitchat and narrowness"

<sup>49</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 261a6-b2.

<sup>50</sup> See. Plat., *Phaedrus*, 267a-e.

<sup>51</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 265c9-d1 : "but in these chance utterances were involved two principles, the essence of which it would be gratifying to learn, if art could teach it" (τούτων δὲ τινὼν ἐκ τύχης ῥηθέντων δοῦναι εἰδοῖν, εἰ αὐτοῖν τὴν δύναμιν τέχνη λαβεῖν δύνατο τις, οὐκ ἄχαρι).

<sup>52</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 273d8-e4.

<sup>53</sup> Isoc., *Against the Sophists*, 8.

(ἀδολεσχίαν καὶ μικρολογίαν). Plato replies that “all great arts (πᾶσαι ὅσαι μεγάλοι τῶν τεχνῶν) demand discussion (ἀδολεσχία<sup>54</sup>) and high speculation about nature (μετεωρολογίας φύσεως περί<sup>55</sup>)”<sup>56</sup>. If one is to proceed in a technical manner, instead of proceeding only by routine and experience (μὴ τριβῆ μόνον καὶ ἐμπειρία ἀλλὰ τέχνη, 270b5-6), one must analyse a nature (φύσις). Pericles’ loftiness of mind is due to the fact that, added to his great natural abilities<sup>57</sup>, he followed Anaxagoras’ teaching. Anaxagoras filled him with high thoughts (μετεωρολογίας ἐμπλησθεὶς<sup>58</sup>) and taught him the nature of mind and of lack of mind (ἐπὶ φύσιν νοῦ τε καὶ ανοΐας ἀφικόμενος<sup>59</sup>), subjects about which Anaxagoras used chiefly to discourse, and from these speculations he drew and applied to the art of speaking what is of use to it. In this respect, the method of the art of rhetoric is much the same as that of healing, because in both cases you must analyse a nature, in one that of the soul and in the other that of the body<sup>60</sup>. For not being dialecticians, they ignore the importance of this knowledge of nature for a technical use of rhetoric:

A man must know the truth about all the particular things of which he speaks or writes, and must be able to define everything separately; then when he has defined them, he must know how to divide them by classes until further division is impossible; and in the same way he must understand the nature of the soul, must find out the class of speech adapted to each nature, and must arrange and adorn his discourse accordingly, offering to the complex soul elaborate and harmonious discourses, and simple talks to the simple soul. Until he has attained to all this, he will not be able to speak by the method of art, so far as speech can be controlled by method, either for purposes of instruction or of persuasion. This has been taught by our whole preceding discussion<sup>61</sup>.

Because they ignore the nature of the soul and what kind of speeches is adapted to each nature, they are unable to elaborate a discourse adapted to a kind of listeners and not this peculiar listener. A lack of knowledge about the soul’s nature explains why empirical rhetoric is not living up to the political claims attributed by some, like Isocrates. Unable to persuade based on a technique, that is to say to a knowledge of causes, and consequently unable to

<sup>54</sup> Socrates was said “talkative” by comic poets (Eupolis, fragment 252 ; Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 1484). See also Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 19d.

<sup>55</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 270a1

<sup>56</sup> Plat. responds to the criticism addressed to meteorologists by Isocrates but also by Gorgias. See *Encomium of Helen*, 13.

<sup>57</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 270a3 : “πρὸς τῷ εὐφυσίῳ”.

<sup>58</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 270a4-5

<sup>59</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 270a5-6 : Divergences are observed between the manuscripts: Bodleianus Clarkianus 39 (B) ; Marcianus gr. 185, saec. XII (D) ; Marcianus App. Class., IV, 1, saec. x (T) ; Vindobonensis Suppl. gr. 7, saec. x-xi (W), Hermias 244, 15 propositent ἀνοΐας ; Parisinus gr. 1808 (XIIIe s.): ἐνοΐας ; Vindobonensis phil. gr. 109 (XVe s.), διανοΐας.

<sup>60</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 270b4-7.

<sup>61</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 277b5-c7.



manage its effects on its audience (which is reflected by the great number of rhetoricians who have fallen out of favour after having received the backing of the majority), this empirical rhetoric cannot have a psychagogical power. For that reason, it differs from true rhetoric which can be a powerful instrument at the hands of good politicians. His rhetorical skills make him capable of lead on the road of moral improvement, even those who have no access to Ideas. For example, although all citizens have no true understanding of laws, the legislator of the city of Magnetes, for example, ensures obedience to the Law by constraint and by using preambles justifying usefulness of existing laws.

For Plato, those who demonstrate small-mindedness are not the Platonists who stress the importance of the knowledge of truth even to persuade on the basis of likelihood. They are those criticized by Plato for their empirical use of rhetoric. They try to please powerful men to suit their interests, instead of pleasing the gods as true rhetoric should do<sup>62</sup>.

In *Phaedrus*, the controversy against a certain concept of rhetoric serves to disparage Isocrates' education, as can be seen at the end of the dialogue<sup>63</sup>, where Plato is pretending to praise the fair Isocrates. Socrates' character says "he has a nature above the speeches of Lysias and possesses a nobler character", because he better highlights how far he is from becoming both a good rhetorician and a good philosopher. By acknowledging that "philosophy of a sort (τις φιλοσοφία, 279a9)" is inborn in Isocrates' mind, Plato suggests that this kind of philosophy is not what deserves to be called *philosophia*. It is also a thinly veiled criticism when Plato says that "he should so excel in his present studies that all who have ever treated of rhetoric shall seem less than children", then adds immediately that he suspects "that these studies will not satisfy him, but a more divine impulse will lead him to greater things", which are the real objects of philosophical studies. This is evidence by this passage in which Plato specifies what is philosophy:

Yes, Phaedrus, so it is; but, in my opinion, serious discourse about them is far nobler, when one employs the dialectic method and plants and sows in a fitting soul intelligent words which are able to help themselves and him who planted them, which are not fruitless, but yield seed from which there spring up in other minds other words capable of continuing the process for ever, and which make their possessor happy, to the farthest possible limit of human happiness<sup>64</sup>.

Isocrates' philosophy, which Plato defines as an empirical practice of discourse based on opinions, should not be confused with true philosophy based on dialectic which plants in souls seeds of truth. Philosophy is involved

<sup>62</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 273d2- a5.

<sup>63</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 279a3-b3.

<sup>64</sup> Plat., *Phaedrus*, 276e4-277a4.

with dialectic and not rhetoric or this appearance of rhetoric which is Isocrates' practice of speeches.

## Isocrates' response

Isocrates did not make any mistake about Plato's intentions, for he replies to *Phaedrus*' criticism in the *Antidosis*. Plato's assertion that Isocrates' teaching is an introductory education about rhetoric is turned against his author: it is what Plato sees as philosophy which should be regarded as preliminary study for his *paideia logôn*. Isocrates discusses Plato's thesis that oratory perfection demands discussion and high speculation about nature. He does not share the common view that astronomy or mathematics, which are highly valued by Platonists, are just chitchat and useless matters. The teachers who are skilled in disputation and those who are occupied with astronomy and geometry and studies of that sort do not injure but, on the contrary, benefit their pupils, not so much as they profess, but more than others give them credit for. However, he still believes that such *philosophia* has been rightly criticized because it is of no use in actions:

Most men see in such studies nothing but empty talk and hair-splitting (*ἀδολεσχίαν καὶ μικρολογίαν*); for none of these disciplines has any useful application either to private or to public affairs; nay, they are not even remembered for any length of time after they have learned because they do not attend us through life nor do they lend aid in what we do, but are wholly divorced from our necessities. But I am neither of this opinion nor am I far removed from it; rather it seems to me both that those who hold that this is training of no use in practical life are right and that those who speak in praise of it have truth on their side<sup>65</sup>.

Considering that contingency of human affairs hampers Plato from putting into practice scientific ideas, Isocrates promotes a teaching that helps students to form useful opinions.

In other words, while Plato criticizes Isocrates for being unable to form successful rhetoricians as well as honest and qualified politicians, Isocrates criticizes Plato's philosophy for its uselessness. For anyone who refuses to call *philosophia* any teaching without practical value, to highlight that Platonic Ideas has no practical use is sufficient to prove Plato's claims' emptiness when he says that his philosophy, and only his, can help political leaders to act. Isocrates' attack did not achieve the desired effect, because Plato's view of philosophy triumphed. Nowadays Isocrates is mainly studied for his contributions to

<sup>65</sup> Isoc., *Antidosis*, 261-269.

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rhetoric<sup>66</sup>,—and that is ironic— while refusing to be seen as a master of rhetoric, when Plato appears like one of the most important philosophers of his time.

## Conclusion

We cannot help but be struck by the way Plato's criticism still influences the manner Isocrates is generally considered, not as a philosopher but as a rhetorician, which is totally in opposition with the way Isocrates wanted to be seen. Plato, who presents Isocrates as someone who fails to form good rhetoricians and good politicians, because he refuses to teach rhetoric and instead promotes a kind of philosophy with no regard to truth, but only to opinion, is clearly the winner of the controversy. But was Isocrates just someone who did not manage to become a rhetorician and a good master of rhetoric, as Plato claims? Isocrates clearly inherits from Gorgias the idea that a good education involves a mastery of words, since politics is the most appropriate activity for adult men. He also agrees with the idea that knowledge of nature is of no use in a practical field characterized by contingency. Does this mean that one should concentrate on rhetoric on the grounds that it provides power? Certainly not. Isocrates promotes a complete formation of the individual, which implies to conceive philosophy as a discipline useful to determine what ought to be done or said. Isocrates is a philosopher because he claims his love for theoretical knowledges and moral concerns, without ignoring the fact men have to content themselves with a rhetorical-political training thank to which they form useful opinions. To reaffirm the practical value of opinions on useful matters is a strong philosophical gesture, whether Plato agrees or not.

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<sup>66</sup> See, for example, the way POULAKOS shows that Isocrates's part consists in giving a political orientation in oratory tradition (see "Speaking for the Polis : Isocrates' Rhetorical Education", Columbia : University of South Carolina Press, 1997).

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