

# Isocratean Ethics

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There has been a revival in Isocratean study lately which recognizes his theoretical ability and claim to the title of philosopher. Cahn (1989), Too (1995), Timmerman (1998), Poulakos (2001), Muir (2008), Haskins (2009), Wareh (2012), and Crosswhite (2013) have all written about the *philosophical* work of Isocrates. These commentators often have different readings of Isocrates, but one characteristic remains constant: Isocrates was an educator who believed that instruction in how to speak (λόγος) would inform and benefit the student's ethical interactions in general and not just his speaking ability. He writes:

Those wishing to obey the prescriptions of my *philosophy* will be helped more quickly to reasonableness and politeness (ἐπιείκειαν) than toward facility in rhetoric (ῥητορείαν). And let no one think that I am saying just-living (δικαιοσύνην) is teachable. For, in short, there is no art by which to implant justice (δικαιοσύνην) or prudence (σωφροσύνην) into those who are deviant (κακῶς) with respect to virtue (ἀρετήν). But, nevertheless, I do think that the study of political discourse (τῶν λόγων τῶν πολιτικῶν) would be the most preparatory and helpful toward this end.<sup>1</sup>

Here Isocrates identifies his *philosophia* with ὁ λόγος τῶν πολιτικῶν or political discourse, and he suggests that studying political discourse will encourage a person to conduct herself in a way which demonstrates the qualities of justice and prudence. We can think of political discourse here as the most formal mode of public speaking, i.e. what would occur in the Athenian assembly. By suggesting that the most specific mode of speaking can be used as the paradigm for our general ethical conduct Isocrates

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1. *Against the Sophists* 21: καίτοι τοὺς βουλομένους πειθαρχεῖν τοῖς ὑπὸ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ταύτης προστατομένοις πολὺ ἂν θάπτον πρὸς ἐπιείκειαν ἢ πρὸς ῥητορείαν ὠφελήσειεν. καὶ μηδεὶς οἰέσθω με λέγειν ὡς ἔστι δικαιοσύνη διδακτόν: ὅλως μὲν γὰρ οὐδεμίαν ἡγοῦμαι τοιαύτην εἶναι τέχνην, ἥτις τοῖς κακῶς πεφυκόσι πρὸς ἀρετήν σωφροσύνην ἂν καὶ δικαιοσύνην ἐμποιήσειεν: οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ συμπαρακελεύεσασθαι γε καὶ συνασκήσαι μάλιστα ἅ οἶμαι τὴν τῶν λόγων τῶν πολιτικῶν ἐπιμέλειαν. καὶ μηδεὶς οἰέσθω με λέγειν ὡς ἔστι δικαιοσύνη διδακτόν: ὅλως μὲν γὰρ οὐδεμίαν ἡγοῦμαι τοιαύτην εἶναι τέχνην, ἥτις τοῖς κακῶς πεφυκόσι πρὸς ἀρετήν σωφροσύνην ἂν καὶ δικαιοσύνην ἐμποιήσειεν: οὐ μὴν ἀλλὰ συμπαρακελεύεσασθαι γε καὶ συνασκήσαι μάλιστα ἅ οἶμαι τὴν τῶν λόγων τῶν πολιτικῶν ἐπιμέλειαν.

is, effectively, *advertising* the breadth of application of what his *philosophia* teaches; it applies to all activities and interactions from the formal to the spontaneous and day-to-day.

In the following examination I will explain how and why Isocrates thinks his *philosophia* is capable of teaching how to speak well *and* how to conduct yourself well. I will begin with an analysis of good speaking for Isocrates. Then I will examine how good speaking is actually a pedagogical tool with which we can learn how to interact with others. Throughout this explanation of Isocratean ethics I have used Plato as a point of comparison because Plato is now and has always been Isocrates' most ardent competition both as a teacher in Athens and as a philosophical figure.

### GOOD SPEAKING

In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates castigates Sophists who falsely claim to teach virtue and happiness and those who suggest that their teaching will garner a student abilities which approximate those of the gods.<sup>2</sup> Isocrates distinguishes between speaking and writing to explain his criticism:

I am amazed whenever I see these men [the sophists] deeming themselves worthy of student; who fail to notice that they are using the paradigm of an ordered and structured art (τεταγμένην τέχνην) to describe a creative process (ποιητικού πράγματος). For who, besides those teachers, does not know that letters are without change and remain fixed, so that we always continue to use the same ones in the same ways, but discourse [i.e. the use of words] (τῶν λόγων) is altogether the opposite of this? For what is said by one person is not equally useful (χρήσιμόν) for another speaker; on the contrary for he seems of the utmost skill who speaks worthily of the situation (πραγμαίων), and yet is able discover [things to say] which are different from those things said by others. And the greatest sign of this difference is that speeches cannot be beautiful (καλῶς) unless they participate in the specific circumstances (τῶν καιρῶν), propriety (τοῦ πρεπόντως), and originality (τοῦ καινῶς) of a given situation, and none of these characteristics extend to letters.<sup>3</sup>

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2. *Against the Sophists* 1-5

3. *Against the Sophists* 12-13: θαυμάζω δ' ὅταν ἴδω τούτους μαθητῶν ἀξιουμένους, οἱ ποιητικού πράγματος τεταγμένην τέχνην παράδειγμα φέροντες λελήθασι σφᾶς αὐτούς. τίς γὰρ οὐκ οἶδε πλὴν τούτων ὅτι τὸ μὲν τῶν γραμμάτων ἀκινήτως ἔχει καὶ μένει κατὰ ταυτόν, ὥστε τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἀεὶ περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν χρώμενοι διατελοῦμεν, τὸ δὲ τῶν λόγων πᾶν τοῦναντίον πέπονθεν:

According to Isocrates, the reason this analogy between writing and speaking fails pedagogically is that writing relies on a static system of signs, i.e. letters and their corresponding phonemes, but when speaking a rhetor cannot take for granted that every audience understands the same system of references, e.g. cultural allusions or historical paradigms. Therefore, instructing someone to speak in the same way that she might spell a word fails to consider the possibility that this student might encounter an audience which does not understand the same system of references and arguments which the student has been prepared to use. It also precludes the student from ever learning to improvise because if we treat speaking like spelling or writing, then we presuppose that there is a correct *spelling* and *grammar* for every speech like there is for words and sentences, respectively.

Isocrates is also suggesting here that teaching good speaking and learning to speak *from a written document* is ineffective because the implicit claim of any manual for good speaking is that it is, or attempts to be, universally applicable. By writing a manual we imply that there is some way to codify the proper way to speak in all cases. Michael Cahn suggests that part of Isocrates' overall project is to emphasize the teacher-student relationship over the reader-handbook relationship. In order to do this, however, Isocrates, according to Cahn, must argue that what he is teaching is not the same discipline as that which the Sophists are teaching.<sup>4</sup> Cahn thinks Isocrates undermines the institutional teachability of rhetoric as a discipline in order to affirm his own school which focuses on the student's natural ability as primary to whatever the teacher contributes. Cahn writes: "By revolutionizing its teaching procedures and its institutional framework, [Isocrates] was able to shatter the confidence in rhetoric as an art and to reconstitute it as a rarified confidence in his own school."<sup>5</sup>

Cahn's conclusion would suggest that Isocrates was trying to create a systematic prioritization of what the student brings to a moment in which he or she is going to speak. In his critique of

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τὸ γὰρ ὑφ' ἐτέρου ῥηθὲν τῷ λέγοντι μετ' ἐκείνον οὐχ ὁμοίως χρησιμὸν ἔστιν, ἀλλ' οὗτος εἶναι δοκεῖ τεχνικώτατος, ὅς τις ἂν ἀξίως μὲν λέγη τῶν πραγμάτων, μηδὲν δὲ τῶν αὐτῶν τοῖς ἄλλοις εὐρίσκειν δύνηται. μέγιστον δὲ σημεῖον τῆς ἀνομοιότητος αὐτῶν: τοὺς μὲν γὰρ λόγους οὐχ οἷόν τε καλῶς ἔχειν, ἢ μὴ τῶν καιρῶν καὶ τοῦ προπόντως καὶ τοῦ καινῶς ἔχειν μετάσχωσιν, τοῖς δὲ γραμμασιν οὐδενὸς τούτων προσεδέησεν.

4. Cahn 1989, 128-130, 134

5. Ibid. 140

Sophists he is emphasizing that to teach speaking from a handbook or to teach speaking as if it is writing ignores the contingent and particular by relying on vague heuristics.

Plato also criticizes writing and teaching with written documents. However, it is important to see how Isocrates' critique of writing is different from Plato's.

In *The Phaedrus*, Socrates explains that the problem with writing is that it *seems* to contain true knowledge but is really only a semblance of what someone truly conversant in such knowledge would know. For such a person, the writing would serve as a reminder. Plato concludes that like medicine, poetry, and music, rhetoric or the art of speaking is more than just the sum of its parts. There is something which enables the synthesis of all the forms and techniques into the successful application of those techniques. Socrates explains to Phaedrus that what made Pericles such a great speaker was his investigation into the nature of things with Anaxagoras. For Plato, this third-term is philosophy or dialectic.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Seventh Letter* Plato denies ever having written his doctrine down and suggests that even if he were to have written it down his true insight is only accessible psychically in a moment of sudden epiphany and must be self-sustaining, i.e. without reference to documents.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to say which aspect of the nature of this kind of knowledge denies its translation into written language more. On the one hand the fact that this knowledge must occur in the individual soul suggests that there can be no reference to a text or manual. And, on the other hand, the fact that the knowledge must be self-sustaining similarly implies that there can be no reference to a text which, in and of itself, is entirely ephemeral.

And, finally, in *The Statesman* Plato explains that codified laws cannot be constructed so as to be relevant to all people at once. He argues that the best government is a single ruler who continually institutes new policies and alters old laws in order to benefit the entire city. According to Plato, the overarching legal principle is that the law truly benefit the community. This critique of codified laws can be expanded to include a critique of writing in general. In the same way that codified laws fail to apply to all cases at all times, a piece of written communication cannot always be translated in a particular situation. The problem is that a written

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6. Ibid. 267-270

7. *Seventh Letter* 341c-d

law particularizes a universal principle which, by definition, undermines the universality of the principle. Writing attempts to preserve an approximation of a kind of knowledge which can only be thought.<sup>8</sup> Gadamer is very helpful in understanding the relationship between the written law and application of it. With Aristotle, he explains that “the law is always deficient, not because it is imperfect in itself but because human reality is necessarily imperfect in comparison to the ordered world of law, and hence allows of no simple application of the law.”<sup>9</sup>

Plato’s critique of writing in these three examples includes every example of written communication, while Isocrates’ critique *targets* the fallacious pedagogical analogy between speaking and writing. That said, the fundamental difference between Plato’s and Isocrates’ views on writing is that Plato distrusts writing as a communicator of absolute knowledge, while Isocrates denies that the task of writing, which relies on a static system of signs, can be compared to the process of speaking which must be spontaneous and relative to a specific audience. Put differently: Plato seems to think that there is no way for an absolute truth only accessible to the mind to be translated into writing while Isocrates, who is *unconcerned* with absolute truths, thinks that the writing is altogether too static to react to the demands of a moment. I would not argue, however, that Plato’s prioritization of the absolute denies him the ability to attend to the particular. On the contrary, Plato is constantly trying to attend to the particular *but only with the reference to the universal*.

### KAIROS AND DOXA

For Isocrates there is no universal principle or absolute truth to which we must refer while speaking or acting. Rather, all ethically determinative criteria and standards exist within the very moment itself. And so, even though their criticisms overlap in some regards, because Plato and Isocrates disagree about the existence of these fundamental absolute principles, they do not share the same critique of writing. To make this distinction clearer we need to analyze two important Isocratean concepts: *kairos* and *doxa*.

Isocrates says: “Speeches cannot be beautiful (καλῶς) unless

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8. *The Statesman* 294a-296e

9. Gadamer 2004, 316

they participate in the specific circumstances (τῶν καιρῶν), propriety (τοῦ πρεπόντως), and originality (τοῦ καινῶς) of a given situation, and none of these characteristics extend to letters."<sup>10</sup> The three qualities Isocrates requires for beautiful speaking all serve to emphasize the specificity of each and every attempt at successful eloquence. According to him, the speech must relate to that moment or *καίρος*; it must be appropriate or proper to that *καίρος*; and it cannot be a replication of some prior speech meant for some other *καίρος*. Though each of these qualities is distinct, the truth is that participation in the *καίρος* is chief among them. The other two qualities (propriety and originality) are defined in terms of the *καίρος*. There is no way to recognize what is proper for a speech or to know what is an original way of expressing an argument without first understanding what the moment is in which the speaking occurs.

Siaporra tells us that, for Isocrates, "an understanding of the importance of *καίρος* as a *dynamic* principle rather than a static, codified rhetorical technique is integral to rhetorical success."<sup>11</sup> We are not, therefore, to consider the *καίρος* as a technique which is part of our rhetorical tool-box. The *καίρος* is a principle with which we must contend while formulating a speech and the arguments therein. As Siaporra puts it: "The opportune moment must be chosen for a particular treatment of a theme, the appropriate arguments for each of the historical events must be marshalled, and the actual arrangement of the words must be skillful."<sup>12</sup> Because the *καίρος* is dynamic it is constantly changing in relation to the interpreter and the evolution of other events around it. Each *καίρος* brings with it a new set of implicit demands which neutralize or invalidate a piece of writing written for a different *καίρος* and, simultaneously, make necessary a mode of communication which relates to the *καίρος* in and through a relation to the audience.

Plato too notices the importance of the *καίρος* as it relates to rhetoric, but he does not conceive of the demands of the moment in the same way as Isocrates. We see this manifest partly in *The Phaedrus* when Socrates and Phaedrus refer to the specificity of their location and how it is the location itself which is, in

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10. *Against the Sophists* 13

11. Siaporra 1990, 125

12. *Ibid.*

part, dictating their conversation.<sup>13</sup> But Plato's most important reference to the *καίρος* appears at the climax of the discussion of rhetoric as Socrates explains that a rhetor must have a dialectical understanding of the kinds of souls and the kind of rhetoric which corresponds to each soul.<sup>14</sup> This is, perhaps, Plato's most explicit engagement with rhetoric's place in the particular. Before this part of the dialogue Socrates and Phaedrus think of rhetoric as a theoretical art or craft, but now Socrates claims that only when a rhetor can identify the *actual* representative of a kind of soul and know which kind of rhetoric he will need to persuade that *particular* person will the rhetor be a master of the art. It is the emphasis Socrates puts on the actuality of this application that indicates a move from theory into practice.<sup>15</sup>

Along with this knowledge of the souls and corresponding kinds of rhetoric, the rhetorician will also know what the corresponding time (*καίρος*) is for speaking or not speaking.<sup>16</sup> This appeal to the notion of *καίρος* demonstrates, at some level, an affinity to Isocrates' definition of the concept, but what we have to notice is that for Plato *καίρος* does *not* contain the determinative elements of what we ought to say. For him, we look at people as if they are representative of a kind and to that kind we will apply the corresponding kind of rhetoric *and* if the moment calls for it we will give a speech. For Isocrates, it is the *καίρος* which determines the arguments and the words we will use for speaking. Isocrates and Plato both recognize the necessity of the moment implicit in any successful attempt at persuasion, however Plato's theory that we can theoretically prepare for any type of soul with a dialectical analysis of types of rhetoric is *not* the same as Isocrates' insistence on being practically aware of the *δόξα* of the audience.

Yunis suggests that when confronted with the problem of choosing what to do in a given *καίρος*, Plato refers to the process of leading souls based on previous dialectical analyses of those souls, which is to say Plato makes use of something outside of the *καίρος* itself.<sup>17</sup> I would argue that Plato's dialectical analysis of kinds of souls and kinds of rhetoric does not recommend the

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13. For *καίρος* in the *Phaedrus* see 229a and 272a; for references to the specific location see e.g. 230b-c, 238c, 242a

14. *Phaedrus* 271-2

15. Cf. Yunis 2011, 216

16. *Phaedrus* 272a

17. Yunis 2011, 217

same kind of imminent criteria for speaking as Isocrates' insistence on the attention to δόξα.

Isocrates writes:

Those [teaching] philosophy pass on to their students all of the kinds (ιδέας) which discourse (λόγος) happens to use. And once they have made them experienced and conversant in those techniques, they exercise them again, and make them accustomed to work, and then [the teachers] compel [their students] to synthesize those things they have learned so that they have a firm grasp on it and so that they are nearer to the opportune moments by means of the judgements [of those moments]. For, on the one hand, it is not possible to embrace all of these situations [with one technique] since in every scenario they elude exact science (ἐπιστήμας), but, on the other hand, those who most heartily put their minds to this task and are able to see the consequences, they most often hit up on the opportune moment.<sup>18</sup>

Here, good speaking combines rote memorization of different forms of speeches and rhetorical techniques with the ability to apply those forms and techniques to unique situations. That ability is perfected, however, by gaining some *proximity* between ourselves and the καίρος through the judgments or opinions (δόξαις) in those moments.<sup>19</sup> Notice how, unlike Plato, the different kinds of speeches and techniques are not applied to souls but selected *because of* the καίρος and the δόξα therein.

Isocrates makes a point of distinguishing δόξα from ἐπιστήμη as a possible means for understanding the necessity of the moment: "Since in every scenario they [the moments] elude exact science (ἐπιστήμας)." Isocrates makes this distinction in order to emphasize that there is no way to deduce or scientifically analyze a moment or καίρος outside of that very καίρος. The καίρος eludes ἐπιστήμη, for Isocrates, because there is no way to anticipate the uniqueness of a καίρος before it has happened. Any attempt to

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18. *Antidosis* 183-4: οἱ δὲ περὶ τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ὄντες τὰς ιδέας ἀπάσας, αἷς ὁ λόγος τυγχάνει χρώμενος, διεξέρχονται τοῖς μαθηταῖς. ἐμπείρους δὲ τούτων ποιήσαντες καὶ διακριβώσαντες ἐν τούτοις πάλιν γυμνάζουσι αὐτούς, καὶ πονεῖν ἐθίζουσι, καὶ συνείρην καθ' ἐν ἕκαστον ὧν ἔμαθον ἀναγκάζουσι, ἵνα ταῦτα βεβαιότερον κατὰσχωσι καὶ τῶν καιρῶν ἐγγυτέρω ταῖς δόξαις γένωνται. τῷ μὲν γὰρ εἶδεναι περιλαβεῖν αὐτοὺς οὐχ οἷόν τ' ἐστίν: ἐπὶ γὰρ ἀπάντων τῶν πραγμάτων διαφεύγουσι τὰς ἐπιστήμας, οἱ δὲ μάλιστα προσέχοντες τὸν νοῦν καὶ δυνάμενοι θεωρεῖν τὸ συμβαῖνον ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ πλειστάκις αὐτῶν τυγχάνουσι.

19. It is better to think of δόξα as a judgment rather than an opinion, in this case, because Isocrates is suggesting that our ability to *read the room* or *judge* which arguments and words should be used is determinative of how effective our speaking will be.

prepare for a *καίριος* assumes certain knowledge about it which would actually inhibit the speaker's ability to react should those assumptions prove false. Isocrates insists that rather than attempt to scientifically prepare for a *καίριος* we should react and adapt to the demands of that moment as it arises. In *The Phaedrus* when Socrates tells us that we must know the kinds of souls and their corresponding kinds of rhetoric this suggests that we are to construct a science or *ἐπιστήμη* around these kinds of souls and kinds of rhetoric. This, I contend, is one of the methods Isocrates is fighting against. He would rather we attend to the judgments and opinions present in the moment than attempt to inject something into the moment from outside.

### IDENTITY AND DOXA

The difference between Plato and Isocrates comes down to how the rhetor identifies his audience. In his essay, "Isocrates' use of *doxa*," Takis Poulakos argues that Isocrates uses *δόξα* in a way which prioritizes the identity of the audience over the goal of persuasion. Poulakos posits: "If the orator can succeed in guiding auditors to see the new situation as confirming their traditions and as validating their familiar notions of self, then there is hardly any need for persuasion."<sup>20</sup> Poulakos goes on to demonstrate that, for Isocrates, successful speaking occurs when an orator smoothly integrates a novel situation into the prevailing opinions of the audience. In this way the audience is not persuaded to change its mind, but its identity is affirmed in the alternative propositions of the speaker. Poulakos' argument enriches our understanding of *δόξα* because it suggests the *δόξαι* of a given *καίριος* arrive with the audience; they are the contentions and the propositions with which the audience is familiar. In this way the audience itself dictates, to some degree, how is most appropriate to speak in the given situation.

In contrast to Isocrates, for Plato, rhetoric is the art of leading souls. He compares it, in *The Phaedrus*, to a lover encouraging his beloved to behave and think like a particular god. This analogy implies that the rhetor, like the lover, knows where the beloved/ audience is before the leading takes place. That is to say, before I lead an audience toward a new idea, I must first make sure of how

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20. Poulakos 2001, 69

close to (or far away from) the audience is in relation to that idea. But this system relies on a metaphysical distinction (i.e. where a soul *actually is* compared to where it *could be* in relation to where a rhetor wants to lead it), the knowledge of which the rhetor brings to bear on the καίριος. In this way, Plato *does* recognize and attend to the practical and the pragmatic, but he only does so with reference to absolutes which remain outside the καίριος.

Isocrates, on the other hand, wants speakers to be sensitive to the audience as an *other* and to engage with that audience on its own terms. This requires recognizing the historical and cultural tradition of the audience and being aware in some capacity of what the audience thinks of you as the speaker. For Isocrates we use the audience itself as the target of our persuasion; persuasion is simply the re-affirmation of the identity of an audience in a novel situation. This is not to say that Isocrates wants to avoid transforming an audience's δόξαι. But effective use of δόξαι occurs when a rhetor can demonstrate how an audience's current δόξαι gives rise to something new.<sup>21</sup> A rhetor should work to recognize those δόξαι and use them as a mechanism through which he can translate the present into some alternative.

We could argue that for Plato we are also leading the audience toward themselves in so far as we are leading them to the ideal of what they could be. But Isocrates does not think of speaking as this process of leading in the same way Plato does. For Isocrates, the arguments and strategies a speaker employs are dictated by the identity of the audience in the moment not a hypothetical ideal of that audience. He wants us to show the audience that the novel alternative is consistent with the current moment; he is looking for an almost neutral translation, and not a movement toward and ideal.

### HOW AND WHY SPEAKING WELL TEACHES US TO LIVE WELL

Up until this point we have been examining, a *mode* of λόγος, i.e. τῶν λόγος πολιτικῶν. This mode of λόγος refers to public speeches for which young aristocrats and royalty in 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E Athens would be trained by teachers like Isocrates. But Isocrates does not

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21. I am intentionally avoiding words like "improvement" and "progress" in reference to this aspect of Isocrates' theories because those terms imply a sort of goal or ideal toward which we are moving.

think λόγος is only at work in these formalized institutions. Rather λόγος for Isocrates represents the actual limits of human speaking, doing, and thinking. There is no activity which occurs outside of λόγος, so learning how to function within the realm of political discourse can teach us how to conduct ourselves with others. The logic of our ethical interactions (between the self and the other) is the same as that of the rhetor and his audience.

Isocrates' clearest description of his concept of λόγος appears in *To Nicoles* and is repeated in *The Antidosis*:

Regarding the other [powers] we have, we surpass no other form of life, but we are lacking, in terms of swiftness, strength, and many other faculties, but born into us is the capacity to persuade one another and to make clear to one another what we desire, and through this not only do we distance ourselves from the lives of beasts, but also we come together and found cities, set-down laws, and discover arts, and in nearly all of our constructions, discourse (λόγος), which helps in all of these institutions, is there. For [in and through discourse] we set down laws concerning just things and unjust things and shameful things and beautiful things, and [without those laws] we would not be able to come together and live (οἰκεῖν) with one another. And it is through [discourse] that we indict (ἐξελέγομεν) evil things and praise good things. Through this we educate the ignorant (ἀνοήτους) and approve the practically wise (φρονίμους). For it is necessary that being able to speak well (τὸ λέγειν) is the greatest sign of practical thinking, and true and just discourse (λόγος) is the image (εἶδωλον) of a good and faithful (πιστῆς) soul. With this ability [discourse] we both contend and seek knowledge about matters which are unknown; for we use those same arguments in private deliberation as in public debate, and we call someone eloquent (ῥητορικούς) if they can speak in front of many people, and we consider well-advised, those who debate the best with themselves about public affairs (τῶν πραγμάτων). And if it is necessary to sum up this ability [discourse], then we must say this: we shall find that none of our intellectual deeds (τῶν φρονίμως πραττομένων) are without discourse (ἀλόγως), but that in all of our deeds and thoughts we are led by [discourse], and it is most employed by those having the most wisdom (νοῦν). Therefore, those who dare to blaspheme against educators and philosophers deserve our hatred just as much as those who profane in the places of the gods.<sup>22</sup>

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22. *Nicoles* 5-9: τοῖς μὲν γὰρ ἄλλοις οἷς ἔχομεν οὐδὲν τῶν ἄλλων ζῶων διαφέρομεν, ἀλλὰ πολλῶν καὶ τῷ τάχει καὶ τῇ ῥώμῃ καὶ ταῖς ἄλλαις εὐπορίας καταδεέστεροι τυγχάνομεν ὄντες· ἐγγενομένου δ' ἡμῖν τοῦ πείθειν ἀλλήλους καὶ δηλοῦν πρὸς ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς περὶ ὧν ἂν βουληθῶμεν, οὐ μόνον τοῦ θηριωδῶς ζῆν ἀπηλλάγημεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ συνελθόντες πόλεις ῥκίσαμεν καὶ νόμους ἐθέμεθα καὶ τέχνας εὐρομεν, καὶ σχεδὸν ἅπαντα τὰ δι' ἡμῶν μεμηχανημένα λόγος ἡμῖν ἐστὶν ὁ συγκατασκευάσας. οὗτος γὰρ περὶ τῶν δικαίων καὶ τῶν ἀδίκων καὶ τῶν

In this passage, often called the “The Hymn to λόγος,” there are two premises which are fundamental to Isocrates’ thought. Firstly, λόγος is the defining ability of the human species. It is comparable to the speed and strength of other animals, which is to say that it is not, for Isocrates, a semi-divine characteristic. And secondly, because λόγος is the medium by which we persuade one another and make clear our own desires to others, it allows us to do things *together*. Therefore, it is in terms of these two modes of interaction (persuasion and the clear expression of our own desires) that we participate in all human activities and endeavours.

It is important to note that Isocrates does not discuss any use of λόγος which happens in an isolated or private domain. He makes a single reference in this passage to individual use of λόγος, but he does so only to claim that individual *and* interactive use of λόγος relies on the *same* arguments. He, thereby, denies any radical difference between the way we interact through λόγος and the way we think or reflect privately. The fact that we use the same arguments privately as publically means that our thinking and decision making process is inherently discursive and mediated through λόγος which is always already intersubjectively oriented. Thus, we should see that for Isocrates our ethical categories do not come to us from some transcendent realm of pure thought. Rather, in λόγος we generate our own ethical categories and then maintain them.

Isocrates moves through a conceptual archaeology of ethical categories such as justice and shame in order to show how such ethical norms depend on human interaction via λόγος. This

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αἰσχροῶν καὶ τῶν καλῶν ἐνομοθέτησεν: ὧν μὴ διαταχθέντων οὐκ ἂν οἶοί τ’ ἦμεν οἰκεῖν μετ’ ἀλλήλων. τούτῳ καὶ τοὺς κακοὺς ἐξελέγχομεν καὶ τοὺς ἀγαθοὺς ἐγκωμιάζομεν. διὰ τούτου τοὺς τ’ ἀνοήτους παιδεύομεν καὶ τοὺς φρονίμους δοκιμάζομεν: τὸ γὰρ λέγειν ὡς δεῖ τοῦ φρονεῖν εὐ μέγιστον σημεῖον ποιούμεθα, καὶ λόγος ἀληθῆς καὶ νόμιμος καὶ δίκαιος ψυχῆς ἀγαθῆς καὶ πιστῆς εἰδωλὸν ἐστίν. μετὰ τούτου καὶ περὶ τῶν ἀμφισβητησίμων ἀγωνιζόμεθα καὶ περὶ τῶν ἀγνοουμένων σκοπούμεθα: ταῖς γὰρ πίστεσιν αἷς τοὺς ἄλλους λέγοντες πείθομεν, ταῖς αὐταῖς ταύταις βουλευόμενοι χρώμεθα, καὶ ὀρητορικοὺς μὲν καλοῦμεν τοὺς ἐν τῷ πλήθει δυναμένους λέγειν, εὐβούλους δὲ νομίζομεν οἵτινες ἂν αὐτοὶ πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἄριστα περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων διαλεχθῶσιν. εἰ δὲ δεῖ συλλήβδην περὶ τῆς δυνάμεως ταύτης εἰπεῖν, οὐδὲν τῶν φρονίμως πρᾶττομένων εὐρήσομεν ἀλόγως γιγνόμενον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἔργων καὶ τῶν διανοημάτων ἀπάντων ἡγεμόνα λόγον ὄντα, καὶ μάλιστα χρωμένους αὐτῷ τοὺς πλείστον νοῦν ἔχοντας: ὥστε τοὺς τολμώντας βλασφημεῖν περὶ τῶν παιδευόντων καὶ φιλοσοφούντων ὁμοίως ἄξιον μισεῖν ὥσπερ τοὺς εἰς τὰ τῶν θεῶν ἐξαμαρτάνοντας.

means that what is just or unjust is not something deduced from transcendent concepts and then symbolized in language. Rather, justice and injustice are deliberated on and require some sort of agreement or human interaction to take shape. Interestingly, Isocrates posits that shame and praise appear in the same logical step as justice and injustice. This association of the concepts of justice and laudability implies that the realms of the social in which shame and praise occur as well as the realm of the judicial in which justice and injustice occur, are not only co-original to one another, but logically subsequent to the realm of λόγος.

In his “Hymn to Logos” Isocrates also manages to convey that λόγος represents the boundaries of human knowing.<sup>23</sup> That λόγος is the sufficient condition for human activity implies that there is no activity for humans which occurs outside of discourse or λόγος. Therefore Isocrates does not consider the possibility of any *a priori* concepts which transcend or resist language. Such concepts may very well exist, but he neither discusses them nor would their existence have any real ramifications for human activity.

Because Isocrates does not think that there are such things as absolute ethical criteria, δόξα becomes the hinge on which we can collapse the ability to speak well into the ability to conduct herself well. It is through δόξα that a speaker may gain access to the words and arguments appropriate to her speech, and, similarly, it is through δόξα that she can aim at the most appropriate way to conduct herself. That δόξα represents this criteria is remarkable because it implies first and foremost that what it means to act well and speak well is ultimately relative to the context of the action and the speaking. By basing our conduct on δόξα and not something universal, Isocrates demonstrates his lack of concern for acting in a way which will garner the agent universal approval. The criteria for good conduct is specific to a moment and that given context. Isocrates says:

For since, in the nature of man it is not possible to ascertain through science (ἐπιστήμην) what we must do (πρακτέον) or what we must say (λεκτέον), out of this, I consider wise those who can recognize the judgements (δόξαι) most of the time, correspondingly, they are philosophers who spend time gathering such a practical wisdom (φρόνησιν) as quickly as possible.<sup>24</sup>

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23. Nicoles 9

24. *Antidosis* 271: ἐπειδὴ γὰρ οὐκ ἔνεστιν ἐν τῇ φύσει τῇ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐπιστήμην λαβεῖν ἢν ἔχοντες ἂν εἰδεῖμεν ὅ τι πρακτέον ἢ λεκτέον ἐστίν, ἐκ

Notice first that Isocrates associates knowing what to do with knowing what to say. For him this knowledge comes from the same source, namely, δόξα. The ability to internalize and make use of the δόξα quickly, he calls φρόνησιν or practical wisdom. For Isocrates, we determine the appropriateness of our words when making a formal oration to an assembled audience, in the same way we determine an appropriate action in our everyday dealings.

It may sound as if Isocrates is arguing for a sort of valueless relativism. But this interpretation misunderstands the fact that for Isocrates we must always be working toward the benefit and perpetuation of our community. For Isocrates we achieve this perpetuation in two ways: (1) always disposing ourselves toward civic agency, and (2) constantly working toward agreement or concord. That is not to say that Isocrates simply posits alternatives to the prevalent universal categories. On the contrary, Isocrates actually understands ethics and ethical interaction from the perspective of a speaker who deals moment to moment and not in terms of absolutes.

In his *Antidosis* there is a difficult passage in which Isocrates attempts to explain how wanting to speak well encourages virtuosity in the name of the city and human welfare. Isocrates writes:

But, for me, people improve and become more worthy, if they dispose themselves toward speaking well in a way which deserves honor (φιλοτιμίως), and toward being able to persuade those listening, and also those who desire advantage (πλεονεξίας). I don't mean the kind of advantage which the unlearned consider advantage, but what it means to truly possess this power [to persuade]. And that this is so, I intend to make quickly clear.

For firstly, someone choosing to speak and write speeches worthy of praise and honor will not make them about topics which are unjust or small or deal simply in private matters, but they will choose large and magnificent topics about human welfare and public situations ... Someone experienced in contemplating and examining such topics will have that experience not only with respect to their speaking but in their actions as well. It follows therefore that good speaking and practical thinking (φρονεῖν) will reward those who are intended toward discourse.<sup>25</sup>

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τῶν λοιπῶν σοφοὺς μὲν νομίζω τοὺς ταῖς δόξαις ἐπιτυγχάνειν ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ τοῦ βελτίστου δυναμένους, φιλοσόφους δὲ τοὺς ἐν τούτοις διατρίβοντας ἐξ ὧν τάχιστα λήψονται τὴν τοιαύτην φρόνησιν.

25. *Antidosis* 275-277: οὐ μὴν ἀλλ' αὐτούς γ' αὐτῶν βελτίους ἂν γίγνεσθαι

According to Isocrates, as we learn to speak well we begin to become conversant in those issues which are important to humanity in general. We learn to value these civically and politically relevant topics ahead of those which are private and small. In other words, we learn to put others before ourselves. We are not simply determining the value of actions arbitrarily from situation to situation. Rather, we are always looking outwards to others and considering: What are my audience's opinions? What is my audience's history and cultural tradition? How do I appear to my audience? What topic is most critical to the perpetuation of the society in which we all live (οἰκεῖν)? These questions inform the content of our speeches as well as how we conduct ourselves day to day, but, critically, the answers to each of these questions are relative to the *καίρος* and contained, for the most part, in *δόξα*.

For Isocrates we also perpetuate our community by constantly seeking agreement. Eucken says that Isocrates' understanding of human interaction is grounded in shared and corresponding experiences and not everyone simply doing as they want. He further insists that the measure of *δόξα*'s appropriateness comes out of a public consensus.<sup>26</sup> Eucken's claims corroborate Yun Lee Too's assertion: "After *λόγος* establishes community, it stops persuading and starts perpetuating the community it generated."<sup>27</sup> In a way we can also return to Poulakos' theory that Isocrates' use of *δόξα* prioritizes the identification of the audience and not persuasion because what we are looking for is agreement and the perpetuation of the community and not an ideological homogeneity.

Isocrates' emphasis on agreement and consensus comes across nicely in the following passage. Here he pits the unyielding

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καὶ πλέονος ἀξίους, εἰ πρὸς τε τὸ λέγειν εὖ φιλοτίμως διατεθεῖεν, καὶ τοῦ πείθειν δύνασθαι τοὺς ἀκούοντας ἐρασθεῖεν, καὶ πρὸς τούτοις τῆς πλεονεξίας ἐπιθυμήσαιεν, μὴ τῆς ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνοήτων νομιζομένης, ἀλλὰ τῆς ὡς ἀληθῶς τὴν δύναμιν ταύτην ἔχούσης. καὶ ταῦθ' ὡς οὕτω πέφυκε, ταχέως οἶμαι δηλώσειεν.

πρῶτον μὲν γὰρ ὁ λέγειν ἢ γράφειν προαιρούμενος λόγους ἀξίους ἐπαίνου καὶ τιμῆς οὐκ ἔστιν ὅπως ποιήσεται τὰς ὑποθέσεις ἀδίκους ἢ μικρὰς ἢ περὶ τῶν ἰδίων συμβολαίων, ἀλλὰ μεγάλας καὶ καλὰς καὶ φιλανθρώπους καὶ περὶ τῶν κοινῶν πραγμάτων: μὴ γὰρ τοιαύτας εὐρίσκων οὐδὲν διαπράξεται τῶν δεόντων... ὁ δὲ τὰς τοιαύτας συνεθιζόμενος θεωρεῖν καὶ δοκιμάζειν οὐ μόνον περὶ τὸν ἐνεστώτα λόγον ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ τὰς ἄλλας πράξεις τὴν αὐτὴν ἔξει ταύτην δύναμιν, ὥσθ' ἅμα τὸ λέγειν εὖ καὶ τὸ φρονεῖν παραγενήσεται τοῖς φιλοσόφως καὶ φιλοτίμως πρὸς τοὺς λόγους διακειμένοις

26. Eucken 1983, 33

27. Too 1995, 4

certainty of scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) against the possibility of agreement in studying δόξα. Isocrates writes:

Those who consult δόξαι are more agreeable (ὁμονοοῦντας) and more successful (κατορθοῦντας) than those who claim to have scientific knowledge (ἐπιστήμην), and it seems to me likely to disregard such time-sinks and consider them immature and trivial, and not a way to care for (ἐπιμέλειαν) the soul.<sup>28</sup>

In this passage “agreeable” or ὁμονοοῦντας literally means “to be of the same mind.” That Isocrates chooses this word instead of ὁμόλογος which literally means “to be of the same language” suggests that to be cognisant of δόξα is not simply speaking the same language or using the same argument. Rather to be conversant in δόξαι and to use them in speaking and doing creates a certain kind of identity between an agent and the others with whom she interacts. From another perspective we could say that ὁμονοοῦντος implies that we are not looking for cosmic confirmation that our perceptions actually reflect reality. Rather good conduct and good speaking manifest in a meeting of minds around an issue not by applying normative doctrine to something novel. This seeking of agreement as a means to discovering ethical criteria for conduct implies that these sorts of questions can be answered in discourse and do not depend on scientific derivations or analysis of the essence of things. We can use δόξα to be ethical, and this, in turn, makes us more agreeable.

### ISOCRATEAN PHILOSOPHY AND PLATO

What makes Isocrates so problematic for Plato is that, as Jaeger puts it, “he makes a virtue of necessity.”<sup>29</sup> Instead of conceiving of an ethics which derives the criteria for good conduct from an absolute ideal, Isocrates thinks that each moment and its circumstances *necessitates* its own specific set of ethical criteria, i.e. the δόξαι of that καίρος.

For Plato, *that* truth must always come first makes it impossible for him to recognize Isocrates’ system as philosophical. In *The Phaedrus* Socrates speaks as Persuasion personified:

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28. *Against the Sophists* 7-8: μάλλον ὁμονοοῦντας καὶ πλείω κατορθοῦντας τοὺς ταῖς δόξαις χρωμένους ἢ τοὺς τὴν ἐπιστήμην ἔχειν ἐπαγγελομένους, εἰκότως οἶμαι καταφρονοῦσι, καὶ νομίζουσιν ἀδολεσχίαν καὶ μικρολογίαν ἄλλ’ οὐ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπιμέλειαν εἶναι τὰς τοιαύτας διατριβάς.

29. Jaeger 1939, 65

For I do not cause those ignorant of the truth to learn to speak, but if my advice means anything, they will procure this first before acquiring me. For this greatness of myself I speak: without me the man who knows reality (τὰ ὄντα) is no closer to the art of persuasion.<sup>30</sup>

Plato reminds us here that the bare truth is not persuasive. And someone who is fully aware of the way things really are is no more capable of communicating those *facts* than anybody else, *unless* she possess the ability to speak well. In this way, for Plato, the abilities to speak well and persuade are *properly* informed by the truth or facts (τὰ ὄντα). Persuasion-personified also suggests here that we investigate truth *prior* to learning the art of persuasion. So, if Plato had his druthers, it seems that learning the art of persuasion would come only *after* learning to do dialectic and studying philosophy.

Contrary to the Palinode, in the second speech of *The Phaedrus* Plato describes a rhetor who uses rhetoric without ever investigating or learning the truth. Plato imagines an ethical system in which the ideal, so to speak, is δόξα led by λόγος.<sup>31</sup> Though this may seem similar to what Isocrates prescribes, the difference is that for Isocrates λόγος is the condition for δόξα. It is not that there is more than one kind of δόξα or some δόξα which can be led by λόγος. There is only λόγος in which we make use of δόξα. Poulakos describes this well:

Plato's scheme demand[s] something that Isocrates was not prepared to do: distinguish δόξα into two levels, an inferior and a superior δόξα, and demonstrate under what conditions and on the basis of what standards superior δόξα could approximate wisdom, or *sophia*. Unwilling to go this route, Isocrates remain[s] committed to situating *phronesis* within the troublesome domain of political life, that is, on the same level as the ambiguous world of δόξα.<sup>32</sup>

There is no divided line of onto-epistemological realms for Isocrates. There is only λόγος and the interactions humans have within λόγος produce δόξαι and those δόξαι determine how we can continue interacting. In the ethical schema Plato creates for the middle speech λόγος has a beneficial effect on δόξα – as if λόγος can make a given δόξα better than some other δόξα. But there is no room for this kind of hierarchy for Isocrates.

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30. *Phaedrus* 260d: ἐγὼ γὰρ οὐδέν' ἀγνοοῦντα τὰληθές ἀναγκάζω μανθάνειν λέγειν, ἀλλ', εἴ τι ἐμῆ συμβουλή, κτησάμενον ἐκεينو οὕτως ἐμὲ λαμβάνειν: τότε δ' οὖν μέγα λέγω, ὡς ἄνευ ἐμοῦ τῶ τὰ ὄντα εἰδοῖτι οὐδέν τι μᾶλλον ἔσται πεῖθειν τέχνη.

31. *Phaedrus* 237

32. Poulakos 2001, 73

In the *Palinode*, Socrates describes the οὐσία ὄντως οὐσα as “μόνῳ θεατῇ νῶ” or “only visible to the mind.”<sup>33</sup> This phrase, “μόνῳ θεατῇ νῶ,” suggests that what really is, the truth, is neither describable in language nor visible to the eyes. The word “θεατῇ” is etymologically related to the word from which we derive the words “theory” and “theorize,” and its root word can also be translated as “contemplate.” The etymological implications of θεατῇ emphasize that Plato is not talking about physical visibility but something more akin to intellectual accessibility. He is claiming that true reality, is not available to the senses, but only accessible in and through our minds or νοῦς. The onto-epistemological structure Plato describes here precludes the possibility of true reality being accessed from inside the realm of λόγος and δόξα, so, for Plato, whatever information we might glean from the realm of true reality would be lost if we follow Isocrates’ ethical prescriptions to stay attuned to the fluctuating δόξα of each καίρος.

### NORMATIVITY

Now, we come the final question: Is there a normative principle for Isocrates in the same way that there is for Plato? In other words: How do we judge, for Isocrates, that a given act is more appropriate than another?

For Plato we glean normative principles for ethical conduct from studying ethical absolutes, e.g. The Good and Justice. And in this way Plato argues for a double attention to *both* the universal and particular. It is, however, problematic in some ways to expect the demand of normativity implicit in Plato’s idealistic ethics to be met in Isocrates’ *kairic* or pragmatic ethics. If we think that ethical conduct can be explained in and through recourse to absolutes and ideals, then we implicitly require some sort of standard or criteria to which to compare our conduct and assess its value. For Isocrates there is no such absolute demand. Moreover, as I noted above, in Plato’s *Meno* he discusses the *functional* equivalency of “true opinion” and knowledge. If we were to act *rightly* because of opinion, i.e. through our own judgements without recourse to the ideal, then there would be no way of determining whether we deduced it from the ideal or not. Plato admits in this way that there is no *practical* demand for a normative principle in so

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33. *Phaedrus* 247c

far as “true opinion” is just as effective as knowledge. Of course, for him, philosophical knowledge of the Good would secure certainty that all your actions are universally good and just, whereas, for Isocrates, this certainty is impossible for humans to attain. Confronted with the question of studying such questions Isocrates responds: “Likely conjecture (δοξάζειν) about useable things (τῶν χρησίμων) is far more powerful (κρείττον) than exact knowledge (ἐπίστασθαι) of useless things (τῶν ἀχρήστων).”<sup>34</sup> This line summarizes the Isocratean position on the necessity of ascertaining perfect certainty in ethical conduct: deciding whether there is or is not a normative principle for ethical conduct is not a useful endeavour, in so far as, not having one (as is the case with “true opinion”) does not always result in evil deeds and can result in right action. Therefore, it is more powerful (read: applicable) to be able to estimate and hypothesize good conduct than it is to try to gather functionally irrelevant certainty.

### CONCLUSION

This article is a reflection on the philosophy and ethical system of Isocrates. Isocrates thinks that teaching people to speak well also teaches them to conduct themselves ethically in so far as the basis of human interaction is λόγος. For Isocrates, being well-spoken and conducting yourself well both require a fine tuned attention to the καίριος and the δόξα of those with whom you are interacting. Isocrates tells us that to speak well requires “a brave and *doxastic* soul (ψυχῆς ἀνδρικῆς καὶ δοξαστικῆς).”<sup>35</sup> We must be brave in order to attempt novel and unique arguments but remain, simultaneously, attentive to what is conventional and customary so as to maintain appropriateness to the historicity of the καίριος.

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34. *Helen* 5

35. *Against the Sophists* 17

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