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Arguing for the Truth: The Conflict of Truth and Rhetoric And its Ramifications in Plato's and Isocrates' Educational Ideologies

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Abstract: *If truth is absolute, how is it possible that people can argue for or against it? If truth is not absolute, on what is our existence predicated? Plato and Isocrates, two contemporaries in Classical Athens, took very different stands on the age-old problem of truth and the rhetorical manipulation of it. A close examination of Platonic dialogues and Isocrates' speeches reveals that they had different understandings of the concept and purpose of truth. This fundamental divergence caused Plato and Isocrates to have disparate notions of rhetoric and even "philosophy." Accordingly, they devised drastically different educational programs suited to their respective visions of truth and rhetoric, attempting to realize their competing ideals by means of pedagogy.*

Introduction

One prominent epistemological concern of Classical Greek philosophers such as Plato is the nature of truth. Plato proposes in the Theory of Forms that the most accurate reality is not the observable appearances of things we see, but the non-physical underlying essence, or Form, of their existence.¹ Given this account of truth as a non-empirical and immutable actuality, it is no surprise that philosophers come into conflict with rhetoricians, who apparently have the threatening ability to "make the weaker argument defeat the stronger"²: the merit of argumentation does not seem to rely upon truthfulness. Most alarming is the fact that untruth can appear even truer than the actual truth if coated in the art of persuasion, and that truth seems non-absolute and arguable. In this paper, I shall investigate the positions of Plato and Isocrates—two contemporary educators that are believed to have "operated competing educational establishments in Athens during the fourth century"³—on the conflict between truth and rhetoric. As I will argue, Plato's and Isocrates' understanding of this arguable incompatibility actually sheds light on their views about education. Their attitudes on truth and persuasion, together with the sharp difference between their professions, give rise to discrepancies in their definitions of philosophy, truth, rhetoric and sophistry, and ultimately lead to their very different beliefs in the goal of education, which are also reflected in the curricula, whether practical or ideal, that they devise for their pupils.

Plato's Vision of Truth and Rhetoric

Since Plato explicitly discusses the issue of truth and argumentation in his Socratic dialogues, it is best to start by examining his opinions on rhetoric and its disagreement with truth. In his dialogue *Phaedrus*, in which Phaedrus and Socrates discuss love and divine madness but later transfer the topic to speech and writing, Plato accuses rhetoric for its emphasis on resemblance to truth rather than truth per se. Socrates first points out the power of speaking that can "make the same thing appear to the same persons at one time just and at

¹ S. Hornblower & A. Spawforth, *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, U.K. and New York, 2003), 1192.

² See also A. Sesonske, "To Make the Weaker Argument Defeat the Stronger", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 6: 3 (1968), 217-231.

³ W. L. Benoit, "Isocrates and Plato on Rhetoric and Rhetorical Education", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 21: 1 (1991), 60-71.

another, if he wishes, unjust.”⁴ Certainly, it is impossible that the same thing can be both just and unjust simultaneously, but by virtue of argumentation it seems that the two contradictory features may coexist in the same subject matter, an obvious inconsistency with the Platonic idea of absolute truth. A little later the conversation reveals the practical principles of rhetoric as an art: “in brief, a speaker must always aim at probability, paying no attention to truth; for this method, if pursued throughout the whole speech provides us with the entire art.”⁵ What Socrates means here by “probability” is the degree to which an argument sounds probable, or plausible. The success of argumentation depends on how plausibly the speaker presents his point to make it sound *as if* it were in fact true. Untruth, it follows, can be regarded by the audience as truth if it is presented to them in a perfectly probable fashion, and truth, on the other hand, will not necessarily be taken as true—despite the fact that it is the reality—if not properly argued in a way that sounds plausible. Thus, truth is neither the necessary nor the sufficient condition for victory. The inevitable corollary is that truth is completely irrelevant to rhetoric: the substance of what the speaker says is not at all important, and all that matters is how he packages his words in a convincing manner.⁶

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates’ attack on rhetoric in the presence of Gorgias, Polus and Callicles appears more fervent than that in *Phaedrus*. The definitional statement that Socrates seems to designate to rhetoric, after he challenges Gorgias to precisely define this profession, neatly summarizes its function: “Thus rhetoric, it seems, is a producer of persuasion for belief (*πιστευτική*, *creating belief*), not for instruction in the matter of right and wrong.”⁷ Therefore, truth and rhetoric cannot possibly be more divorced: rhetoric is an art of persuasion (for Socrates, as I will show, even the word “art,” which is used in the *Phaedrus* to refer to rhetoric, is not necessarily appropriate here in the *Gorgias*) that only aims to produce “belief” (*πίστις*) in the audience, which Plato thinks is fundamentally distinct from truth and knowledge.⁸ However, the fact that rhetoric has no concern for truth is not the end of the story. As he continues with his reasoning, Socrates succeeds in soliciting agreement from Gorgias that “there is no need to know the truth of the actual matters, but one merely needs to have discovered some device of persuasion which will make one appear to those who do not know to know better than those who know.”⁹ Not only does rhetoric ignore what is true, but it also has a subversive aspect that can make those who do not know the truth appear more informed than those who do. The disconnection between truth and rhetoric that is also present in the *Phaedrus* is clearly visible here: even if the speaker knows nothing about the subject matter he is talking about, he only needs to employ some clever “device of persuasion” to make himself *resemble* those with the expertise. Having knowledge about the subject of discourse does not determine whether the audience will actually *perceive* or *believe* the speaker to have knowledge or not. In other words, in both the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*, rhetoric is considered a technique that can cause certain reactions in the audience that suit the speaker’s purpose.

When Gorgias retires from the argument and Polus enters the debate, Socrates voices his own opinion about rhetoric, that it is a certain “habitude” (as opposed to “art”) that is used to

⁴ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 261D. All references to this text are taken from Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. H. N. Fowler (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1919).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 272D.

⁶ See also J. M. Cooper, “Plato, Isocrates and Cicero on the Independence of Oratory from Philosophy”, *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1984), 77-96.

⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, 455A. All references to this text are taken from Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1925).

⁸ Plato’s view on the difference between truth and belief is reflected in his *Republic* 7.534A: Socrates refers to “the first part as knowledge and the second as thought, the third belief (*πίστις*) and the fourth conjecture by means of imagery”. The distinction between opinion and true knowledge lies in the fact that “these last two [i.e. belief and conjecture] can be grouped under opinion, the first two [i.e. knowledge and thought] under understanding where opinion deals with the impermanent, understanding with the real”. Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. Emlin-Jones & W. Preddy (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2013).

⁹ Plato, *Gorgias*, 459C.

produce “gratification and pleasure”, and puts it under the name flattery (*κολακεία*)¹⁰, which he denounces as a “disgrace.”¹¹ He establishes an analogy between rhetoric and cookery: the purpose of cookery is to satisfy the pleasure of the body with attractive (but not necessarily sound by nature) foods, and rhetoric does the same to the soul.¹² Neither of them deserves the title “art” according to Socrates, because they are not rational and do not account for the real good and benefits to citizens. After a discussion of the power of persuasion and true happiness, Socrates’ critique of rhetoric culminates in his conflation of poetry and rhetoric¹³, both of which are flattery only serving to please the audience, and his criticism of Athenian politicians who he thinks have not used rhetoric appropriately to “make the citizens’ souls as good as possible.”¹⁴ Plato demonstrates through Socrates his rather contemptuous view of rhetoric because it neglects the truth and the real good, pursuing instead the superficial satisfaction of listeners.

This contrast between reality and pleasure finds echoes in the *Apology* as well, where Plato in Socrates’ defense presents his teacher, with a divine flavor, as the educator of Athens: Socrates is the gift from God that wakes the Athenians from their ignorance and complacency, “arousing, and urging and reproaching each one of you [Athenians], constantly alighting upon you everywhere the whole day long” like a “gadfly” constantly stinging a large and sluggish “horse.”¹⁵ Part of the reason why Athenians want to sentence Socrates to death, as he himself takes it, is that the truth is not always pleasant, and that they feel annoyed with Socrates “like people awakened from a nap” who might want to “slap” the one who has woken them up.¹⁶ When Callicles asks Socrates in the *Gorgias* to return to practical pursuits and serve the state, Socrates responds by saying paradoxically that he is the only one “in Athens who attempts the true art of statesmanship, and the only man of the present time who manages affairs of state,”¹⁷ since he only seeks what is best for the state and does not rely upon “pleasure and gratification” to support him. In this context, if we strip the word “rhetoric” of the pejorative connotation that Plato associates with it in his *Gorgias* and take it as a neutral term meaning simply the skills and techniques of speaking and persuasion, we see that Socrates is the only one in Athens who uses rhetoric *justly*, namely for the improvement and well-being of all the citizens.

In that sense, rhetoric naturally follows dialectic, the rational and constructive inquiry for the sake of truth rather than *ad hoc* argumentations directed towards victory or personal gain, and the appropriate use of rhetoric must be in conformity with truth and must be performed by those who are able to discover the reality beyond sense perception.¹⁸ In Book VII of the *Republic*, Plato outlines a highly ideal educational program for training such persons, or Philosopher-kings, who have the ultimate responsibility to “contrive varied devices to control the conduct of the citizenry.”¹⁹ These “devices” include rhetoric, which is “a means of seduction employed by the Philosopher-king to shape or mold the character of the individual and the state according to absolute moral standards of excellence.”²⁰ In other words, the product of Plato’s ideal education can also serve as teachers of the *polis* in terms of virtue and true knowledge. The pedagogy these teachers will employ is rhetoric, not in the sense of

¹⁰ Ibid., 462C.

¹¹ Ibid., 465A.

¹² Ibid., 464B-465E.

¹³ Ibid., 502B-E.

¹⁴ Ibid., 503A.

¹⁵ Plato, *Apology*, 30E. All references to this text are taken from Plato, *Apology*, trans. H. N. Fowler (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1919).

¹⁶ Ibid., 31A.

¹⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, 521D.

¹⁸ T. M. Perkins, “Isocrates and Plato: Relativism vs. Idealism”, *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 50: 1 (1984), 49-66; see also K. V. Erickson, *Plato: True and Sophistic Rhetoric* (Rodopi N.V., Amsterdam, 1979), 7.

¹⁹ Perkins, “Relativism vs. Idealism”, 56.

²⁰ Ibid., 56.

ethically unstable manipulation that rhetoric is notoriously capable of, but for the sake of the real good. While Socrates is presented in the *Apology* as an individual educator of the entire city of Athens, Plato designs a systematic educational program focused on training groups of such philosophers that are immune to the corruption of the *polis*.

Plato's Educational Program

Then how exactly does Plato delineate this ideal education? The most unusual aspect of the system he describes in Book VII of the *Republic* is what Socrates calls “preliminaries” for dialectic²¹—arithmetic²², geometry (in both two²³ and three²⁴ dimensions), astronomy²⁵, and harmony.²⁶ Since the goal of this process is to produce just rulers for the state—a rather political purpose—one does not immediately recognize the reason why Plato would include these subjects in the first place. Their necessity stems from the inability of sense perception to fully understand reality: there are things that “demand that [the mind and intellect] should be used to investigate in every way because the sense perception is producing nothing sound.”²⁷ Socrates goes on to define these things as “resulting in contrary sense impressions at the same moment.”²⁸ Bigness and smallness, hardness and softness, thickness and thinness, these are all features that the sense organs could attribute to things we perceive, and some things can be seen as their opposites. Therefore, the intellect is required in such cases to make up for the inadequacy of sense perception. Socrates points out that arithmetic is a perfect way to stimulate intelligence to derive the truth, because the same problem with visual perception persists when it comes to numbers: “for we see the same number as one and an enormous number at the same moment.”²⁹ Socrates further justifies the legitimacy of arithmetic as a subject of interest by appealing to both its practical and philosophical significance: “anyone involved in warfare must learn all this [calculation] for marshaling his troops and a philosopher must rise above the transient and grasp the substance of the real world.”³⁰ Thus, the political goal of Plato's ideal educational program is transcribed into a pursuit of mathematics, a matter of utmost importance for the Philosopher-king, guardian of the state who must be well versed in both warfare and philosophy.

The same applies to geometry, astronomy, and harmony as well, since they all seek pure knowledge. Socrates also takes care to distance his argument from the inappropriate methodologies of astronomers and musicians of his time. The correct way to study astronomy, according to Socrates, is to go beyond simply believing that “stars that adorn the heavens... are the most beautiful and perfect examples of their kind” and examine instead “those courses, represented by real speed and real slowness in real number and in all the real geometrical shapes,”³¹ namely the underlying physical laws that govern celestial movement. He rather contemptuously depicts those astronomers who base their studies upon pure observation of the visible realm (as opposed to the intelligible) as “throwing his head back and looking at the

²¹ Plato, *Republic*, 7.536D. All references to this text are taken from Plato, *Republic*, trans. C. Emlyn-Jones & W. Preddy (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2013).

²² *Ibid.*, 7.522C.

²³ *Ibid.*, 7.526C.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.528B. A few lines before 528B, Socrates seems to designate solid geometry as the third subject of his ideal curriculum and separate it from “geometry”, which he thinks deals with plane surfaces only.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.528E. Socrates seems to conflate astronomy and solid geometry when he says astronomy “entails the movement of solid bodies”.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.531A.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.523B.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.523C.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.525A.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.525B.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 7.529D.

decoration on the ceiling.”³² The absolute truth Plato imagines that underlies astronomy is the abstract number and geometry, which cannot be studied through sense perception, and the physical act of looking upwards at the sky is not equivalent to directing one’s soul upwards to the intelligible realm. When the conversation moves to harmony, Socrates claims that musicians should “challenge and inquire which numbers are concordant and which aren’t, and why the differences,”³³ rather than only “search for the number in the concord of sounds,” and certainly not “prefer their ears to their minds”³⁴ as Glaucon succinctly describes what the empirical musicians do (whom he mistakenly thinks are the target of Socrates’ attack). Because of their objectivity, these subjects if studied in the right ways should encourage the future Philosopher-kings to activate their intellect and better prepare them for dialectic. To tie the discussion back to truth and rhetoric, only Philosopher-kings that have undergone this long educational process (also including training in dialectic and practical political science up to when the students are 50 years old³⁵) can manage to use rhetoric justly for the good of the city.

Isocrates’ Different View on Truth and Rhetoric

Compared to Plato, Isocrates also has problems with rhetoric that does not follow the truth. He begins the *Encomium of Helen* with a fiery attack on sophists who think “it is possible to say what is false, to contradict anything, or to compose two opposing speeches about the same subjects.”³⁶ The “opposing speeches” on the same subject matter immediately remind us of Plato’s discussion in the aforementioned *Phaedrus* of rhetoricians who can make the same subject appear both just and unjust, good and bad, if they wish. He also reproaches the sophists because they “spend their time in disputes, pretending to seek the truth but attempting from the beginning of their lessons to lie.”³⁷ It is evident that rhetoric must follow truth and not be used for pointless “disputes.” In the *Antidosis*, an auto-biographical speech and personal apologia for his life, conduct, and educational practices, Isocrates directs his attack on falsity towards Lysimachus, the fictional prosecutor (Isocrates more frequently uses the word “sycophant” to refer to Lysimachus) he invents³⁸ who dishonorably entangles an old man like him in lawsuits. He dismisses the accusations posed against him as libel, which “destroys the truth, gives the audience false opinions, and unjustly destroys any citizen it comes upon.”³⁹ The harmful effects of false speech could not be more pronounced here. Interestingly, the *Antidosis* contains many similar arguments to those in the *Apology*. For example, Isocrates states that Lysimachus accuses him of making “weaker speeches stronger,”⁴⁰ an echo to Socrates when he mentions accusers who “said that you [Athenians] must be on your guard not to be deceived by me, because I was a clever speaker”⁴¹ and who unjustly claims that he “makes the weaker argument the stronger.”⁴² Ironically, both men who profess themselves to be followers of truth are accused of rhetorical manipulation that violates it. Isocrates also mentions that Athens “has

³² Ibid., 7.529B.

³³ Ibid., 7.531C.

³⁴ Ibid., 7.531A.

³⁵ Ibid., 7.540A.

³⁶ Isocrates, *Encomium of Helen*, 1. All references to this text are taken from Isocrates, *Encomium of Helen*, trans. D. Mirhady, in *The Oratory of Classical Greece vol. 4: Isocrates I* (Austin, Texas, 2000).

³⁷ Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 1. All references to this text are taken from Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, trans. D. Mirhady, in *The Oratory of Classical Greece vol. 4: Isocrates I* (Austin, Texas, 2000).

³⁸ Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 8. All references to this text are taken from Isocrates, *Antidosis*, trans. Y. L. Too, in *The Oratory of Classical Greece vol. 4: Isocrates I* (Austin, Texas, 2000).

³⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁴¹ Plato, *Apology*, 17A.

⁴² Ibid., 18C; see also W. R. M. Lamb, “Introduction to the Apology”, in *Plato I: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1919), 66, which argues that Socrates might actually have been confused with the sophists because he was a leader of thought.

frequently regretted judgments based on anger rather than on proof,”⁴³ a view similar to Socrates when he refers to “those who persuaded you [Athenians] by means of envy and slander”⁴⁴ and spread ungrounded rumors about him in order to plant prejudices in the citizens’ minds. One main reason why these personal defenses are written in the first place is that both Socrates and Isocrates suffer unjust accusations not based on truth, but emotions (“anger”, “envy”) and wickedness (“slander”). In short, Plato and Isocrates agree on the importance of truth and need for rhetoric to follow it.

However, unlike Plato, Isocrates seems less concerned with absolute truth. In fact, he denies the possibility that humans can ever learn the eternal and intangible truth and act in accordance with it. In the *Antidosis*, he explicitly claims that “human nature cannot attain knowledge that would enable us to know what we must say or do.”⁴⁵ Similar sentiments also appear in *Against the Sophists*: “I think it clear to all that it is not in our nature to know in advance what is going to happen.”⁴⁶ His definition of truth, therefore, is very different from that which originates from Plato’s epistemological philosophizing. In the *Encomium of Helen*, when he urges the sophists (and some philosophers alike) to stop their “hairsplitting,” he states that “they should pursue the truth, educate their students about the affairs in which we act as citizens, and develop their students’ experience of these matters, with the consideration that it is much better to conjecture reasonably about useful things.”⁴⁷ Truth for Isocrates is practical wisdom that can guide citizens in civic activities in the *polis*; it should be down to earth, and should not be taken as some aloft abstract essence that exists non-physically.

Not only do they hold different views on truth, but their definitions of rhetoric and sophistry also diverge significantly. It is obvious that Isocrates makes a distinction between rhetoricians and sophists who pretend to teach truth and engage in “hairsplitting.” He considers himself a true orator, one who engages in “philosophy” (the use of this word by Isocrates will be discussed later). Plato, however, believes that rhetoric and sophistry can be the same thing. After Socrates calls rhetoric “flattery” in the *Gorgias*, he makes a cross-comparison between rhetoric and important subjects such as law and medicine: “as self-adornment is to gymnastic, so is sophistry to legislation; and as cookery is to medicine, so is rhetoric to justice.”⁴⁸ The words “sophistry” and “rhetoric” seem interchangeable here. Afterwards, although Socrates admits the “natural distinction” between sophistry and rhetoric, he explicitly says that “they are so nearly related that sophists and orators are jumbled up as having the same field and dealing with the same subjects.”⁴⁹ Given the overall disparaging tone of the *Gorgias*, it can be concluded that Plato thinks rhetoric has not much difference from sophistry as long as it is not used justly. Of course, the very few who can use rhetoric justly exist only as the product of the ideal education he envisages.

In addition, there are also places in Isocrates’ corpus that possibly indicate his more specific objection to Plato’s view on truth and education. For example, in the beginning of *Encomium of Helen*, he mentions “others maintaining that courage, wisdom, and a sense of justice are all the same thing—that we have none of them by nature and that there is a single science (*ἐπιστήμη*) concerning all of them,”⁵⁰ which is reminiscent of Plato’s argument in the *Protagoras*.⁵¹ This kind of “science” is included in what Isocrates describes scornfully as “an

⁴³ Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 19.

⁴⁴ Plato, *Apology*, 18D.

⁴⁵ Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 271.

⁴⁶ Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 2.

⁴⁷ Isocrates, *Encomium of Helen*, 5.

⁴⁸ Plato, *Gorgias*, 465C.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 465C.

⁵⁰ Isocrates, *Encomium of Helen*, 1.

⁵¹ Plato, *Protagoras*, 333C: “Then temperance and wisdom must be one thing? And indeed we found before that justice and holiness were almost the same thing” and ff., Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2014). The *Protagoras* was composed “towards and probably beyond the end of” a 12-year period after Socrates’ death in 399 BCE,

odd, paradoxical theme.”⁵² He also refers in the *Antidosis* to the same subjects that Plato proposes in *Republic VII*⁵³ (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and so on) and shows agreement with the view of “most men” that such studies as “astrology, geometry, and other branches of learning” are “babbling and hairsplitting” and are “in every respect nonessential.”⁵⁴ Because his view of truth is different from Plato’s, there is no reason why he should approve of wholehearted dedication to these “useless” subjects that are prescribed for Plato’s version of absolute truth. In fact, the value that Isocrates attributes to these studies is merely a kind of gymnastics of the mind, or a “preparation for philosophy.”⁵⁵ Astrology and geometry can sharpen the pupils’ minds and make it easier for them to acquire knowledge in other studies that are more relevant to their role as citizens. Although these subjects do not directly help students in pursuing Isocrates’ “truth,” they can prepare students for his “philosophy.”

An Alternative “Philosophy” and Educational Program

One point that must be noted is that Isocrates’ use of the word “philosophy” (*φιλοσοφία*) would strike a modern reader as peculiar, given the word’s consistent reference among later generations to the theoretical and *a priori* studies that originated from Plato. The definitional warfare between Isocrates and Plato, two intellectual and financial rivals in Athens, was eventually won by Plato, whose version of “philosophy” was passed on to posterity while Isocrates’ definition faded into oblivion.⁵⁶ Thus, it would be methodologically incorrect to impose our modern sense of philosophy on Isocrates, who actually explains in his speeches specifically what his philosophy means: “I think that the wise are those who have the ability to reach the best opinions (*δόξαι*) most of the time, and philosophers are those who spend time acquiring such an intelligence as quickly as possible.”⁵⁷ Since Isocrates rejects absolute truth, he focuses on the present situations and immediately relevant realities that one has to deal with. His philosophy, not surprisingly, is the process by which people acquire the ability to make reasonable judgments and decisions that best suit whatever the circumstances demand. For Plato, philosophy is an inquiry into the truth he envisioned; for Isocrates, his philosophy serves the same function, yet truth for him is considerably more practical and realistic.

Accordingly, Isocrates’ educational program serves his philosophy and the truth he believes in, and puts an emphasis on preparing students as qualified citizens in the *polis*. The way to achieve this goal is to be trained in “speaking well” and to “have a passion for being able to persuade their audience.”⁵⁸ Isocrates highly values speech and discourse (*λόγος*), which he believes is what sets humans apart from animals and Greeks apart from barbarians.⁵⁹ Citizens with a “superior education in intellect and speech”⁶⁰ are extremely beneficial to the

according to W. R. M. Lamb, “General Introduction”, in *Plato II: Laches, Protagoras, Meno, Euthydemus* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2014), xi. This dating makes it possible for Isocrates to have read the *Protagoras* when he composed the *Encomium of Helen* in 370, as the “favorable light” that the *Encomium of Helen* “casts on the Spartans” leads commentators to date the speech to 370 “after Sparta’s military strength became less threatening,” D. Mirhady, “*Encomium of Helen*: Introduction”, in *The Oratory of Classical Greece vol. 4: Isocrates I* (Austin, Texas, 2000), 32.

⁵² Isocrates, *Encomium of Helen*, 1.

⁵³ As for the date of Plato’s *Republic*, “there is general agreement that *Republic* was composed (or reached its final form) in the mid-370s, before Plato’s second visit to Sicily”, C. Emlin-Jones & W. Preddy, “General Introduction”, in *Plato VI: Republic Books 1-5* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2013), x. Therefore, it is likely that Isocrates had read the *Republic* when he composed the *Antidosis* in 353, “imagining himself as a second Socrates” after a loss in the law court, Hornblower & Spawforth, *OCD*, 770.

⁵⁴ Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 261-262.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁵⁶ D. M. Timmerman, “Isocrates’ Competing Conceptualization of Philosophy”, *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 31: 2 (1998), 145-159.

⁵⁷ Isocrates, *Antidosis*, 271.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 294.

polis. In fact, Isocrates argues that “speech (λόγος) is responsible for nearly all our inventions”: cities, laws, arts, everything that distinguishes civilization from the uncivilized.⁶¹ He describes λόγος as “the leader of all thoughts and actions”⁶²—speech is fundamentally associated with the unique human ability of reasoning. Language and thought coexist and are not separable from each other. Perhaps it is a fortuitous fact that the Greek word λόγος also means “reasoning” and the “rational faculty” besides “speech.” The word’s semantics correspond perfectly to Isocrates’ perspective on the mutually dependent relationship between thought and speech.

Since speech and intellect are linked to each other, Isocrates believes “speaking well to be the clearest sign of a good mind.”⁶³ His educational program implements this belief by training students rhetorically. In *Against the Sophists*, after criticizing the other sophists, Isocrates voices his own opinions on how rhetoric should be taught. Nature and nurture are both necessary for students to become skilled speakers: “abilities in speaking and all the other faculties of public life are innate in the well-born and developed in those trained by experience.”⁶⁴ However, Isocrates seems to place more emphasis on nature when he states that education “cannot fashion either good debaters or good speechwriters from those who lack natural ability.”⁶⁵ Nurture can only make up for deficiencies in nature by a limited degree, and only those who possess both can eventually become the most successful speakers. Later, Isocrates outlines the difficulty of speech, including requirements for substance, structure, and delivery. The correct “forms” (ἰδέαι)—not just figures of speech but “the thought elements or ideas... which the orator has already as part of his stock in trade”⁶⁶—should be selected for the subject matter, and then mixed and arranged suitably; the speech should also contain “considerations (ἐνθυμήματα, reasoning or argument)” and be delivered “rhythmically and musically.”⁶⁷ One prerequisite for rhetorical education is that the student should choose a teacher who actually has knowledge of the “forms” in the first place, rather than “surrender himself to those who make easy promises”⁶⁸—Isocrates himself might be one of those qualified teachers, and sophists who make empty boasts are obviously whom the students should avoid. In fact, his school is very small with only a few pupils at a time, and individual attention to each pupil is guaranteed.⁶⁹ Besides instructing the students in the “forms,” the teacher’s responsibility also includes offering himself as a model so that students can “appear more florid and graceful than others” through imitation.⁷⁰ The reciprocal nature of the ancient classroom is evident here, as Isocrates lays out the responsibilities of both parties involved. Only when both the student and the teacher accomplish all the aforementioned can “those who practice philosophy achieve success.”⁷¹ Therefore, Isocrates’ educational program also contains a grain of idealism, although the truth that he wishes students could acquire through this process is realistic. Unlike Plato’s, which follows the guidance of an intangible ideal truth, his program touches upon the ideal with perfectionism.

Apart from the methodologies that Isocrates describe in his corpus, we do not know precisely the subjects that are adopted in his curriculum (unlike Plato who outlines the subjects clearly in his *Republic*). We can only infer what the program includes from our understanding of his educational philosophy. Possible subjects are “history, political science, geography,

⁶¹ Ibid., 254.

⁶² Ibid., 257.

⁶³ Ibid., 255.

⁶⁴ Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 14.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶⁶ H. M. Hubbell, *The Influence of Isocrates on Cicero, Dionysius, and Aristides* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1913), 7.

⁶⁷ Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 16.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁹ R. Johnson, “Isocrates’ Methods of Teaching”, *The American Journal of Philology* 80: 1 (1959), 28.

⁷⁰ Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 18; see also T. Papillion, “Isocrates’ *technē* and Rhetorical Pedagogy”, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 25: 1 (1995), 149-163.

⁷¹ Isocrates, *Against the Sophists*, 18.

ethics, literary studies,” which are not studied in the way as they would be in a modern university but to serve the function of political rhetoric.⁷² The point of these subjects is to help the orator form his arguments and persuade his audience, in accordance with Isocrates’ conceptualization of truth, which concerns the practical aspects of Classical Athenian civic life.

Conclusion

Plato’s and Isocrates’ views on truth and rhetoric, as we can gather from their extant corpora, provide insight into their definitions about key philosophical and intellectual concepts, namely the distinction between true and sophistic rhetoric, the meaning of truth, and ultimately the notion of philosophy itself. Both educationists devise programs for their students according to their conceptualization of what is true and what is most conducive to the common good of the *polis*. At the same time, their educational ideologies are an excellent embodiment of the philosophical thoughts that guide them as the leading intellectuals of their time, and these programs still pose questions to the modern observer about the purpose of education and the means to realize that goal.

⁷² Johnson, “Isocrates’ Methods of Teaching”, 29.

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