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Isocrates of Athens (436-338 BC) was a contemporary of Plato (429-347 BC), although Isocrates was both born earlier and lived longer than the famous philosopher. Growing up in a wealthy family (his father Theodorus made a fortune in flute production), Isocrates received a fine education, with reports coming down to us of his studying with some of the famous intellectuals of the day, most probably with Gorgias, although Protagoras and Socrates are also mentioned as figures with whom Isocrates spent time. The family fortune was destroyed by events following the Peloponnesian War, and Isocrates was forced to write speeches for use in the law-courts in order to earn a living. He continued to write speeches for the rest of his adult life, although he eventually rejected his early courtroom speeches in favour of more politically and educationally oriented work. As a result of these later speeches, Isocrates has come to be known as one of the 'Ten Attic Orators', a canonical list of men who encapsulate the great rhetorical achievements of Athens.

Public speaking was very important to Athenian political life and to Classical Greek culture in general (Vernant 1982, 46-50); oratory is the name we give to examples of discourse that are made with the intention of educating or persuading people on some matter. Isocrates is best known for his contribution to this area of Athenian culture. Aristotle famously divides oratory into three categories: *judicial*, which covers all speeches concerned with the courts; *deliberative*, which is concerned with proper planning generally and which finds its civic example in the oratory that takes place in the Assembly; and *display*, which can be understood to include every oration not belonging in an obvious way to either the judicial or deliberative categories (*Rhetoric* 1.3). More helpfully, display (*epideictic*) speeches are orations that do not call for a specific action on the part of the audience, but rather are meant as depictions of oratorical skill or as amusements of some sort. It is to the last category, display pieces, that Isocrates made his greatest contributions.

Isocrates' fame as a speechwriter was such that he was able to open a school in Athens sometime around 392 BC (there are reports that, having been forced to flee Athens in 404 because of the Peloponnesian War, he established a school of rhetoric on the island of Chios at an earlier time). Education is a common theme in Isocrates' work, and it is important to

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realise that Isocrates characterised himself as a teacher of philosophy and his school as a school of philosophy. Isocrates established his school before Plato set up the Academy, and though it is Plato's school that tradition associates with the origins of institutionalised higher learning, Isocrates would dispute this claim. The two schools competed with each other, and it is clear that some of Isocrates' work is meant both to defend his own understanding of what philosophy consists of and to castigate other, more theoretically-based, notions of philosophy that are championed by Plato, among others. So we see that Isocrates, as well as being a speech writer, also has some right to the title of philosopher.

The fees charged at his school are now thought to have been very high, and are one source of the fortune he amassed. Life at the school was devoted to preparing for participation in civic affairs, and this meant being able to engage in public discourse. Isocrates could with some justification claim to be a trainer of speakers and politicians generally, developing his students' skill at composing effective arguments intended to persuade juries and assemblymen. Indeed, he worried that he would be known as someone who is 'able to make the weaker cause the stronger' (Isocrates, *Antidosis* 313), invoking the famous description of Protagoras the sophist. Furthermore, Isocrates is at home in the tradition of the sophists who extol pan-Hellenic virtues. In other words, Isocrates champions the attitude of Greeks thinking of themselves primarily as Greeks, as opposed to the non-Greeks who surrounded them (such as the Persians and the Egyptians), and possibly even more so than as citizens of any particular city or polis. These descriptions of Isocrates' activities, charging high fees for teaching others how to make clever speeches, pan-Hellenism, and especially the ability to invert the relative power of arguments are the hallmarks of a sophist.

However, Isocrates takes great pains to distance himself from the sophists. An early speech of his, entitled *Against the Sophists*, contains these lines:

Indeed, who can fail to abhor, yes to contemn, those teachers, in the first place, who devote themselves to disputation, since they pretend to search for truth, but straightaway at the beginning of their professions attempt to deceive us with lies? (291).

It is fair enough to perceive in this castigation similarities with Hamlet's mother Gertrude who protested too much, and one question that arises when trying to understand the life of Isocrates is whether or not he is a sophist. It has been argued that Isocrates 'left several premises of the sophistical tradition intact while challenging some of its methods and results' (Poulakos 1995, 113). If this is true, then we can see why Isocrates was worried about being interpreted as a sophist, full stop: such a perspective would prevent Isocrates from preserving what he thought was worth-

while in the sophists' enterprise. In this chapter I wish to explore this question of whether or not Isocrates qualifies as a sophist and what the arguments are on either side of the case.

Because of the breadth of Isocrates' endeavours, in order to confront this question it will be useful to set the category of sophist off against the related terms of philosopher and speechwriter. As this brief introduction has shown, Isocrates has some reason to be considered as a member of all three of these professions. I hope that the notion of what a sophist is will become clearer by means of this comparison, and that seeing how Isocrates both conforms to and breaks the conventions of these three professions will give us both a better understanding of his life and a better appreciation of the other figures in this book. In any event, it is worth exploring Isocrates as a figure who exists on the fringes of the category of 'sophist': he provides an excellent test case that shows where the borders between sophist, philosopher and speechwriter lie, and this is because of the way he combines his moral life with his chosen professional activities.

To begin with, then, we shall approach Isocrates as a philosopher, a perspective which, as we have seen, he himself was inclined to adopt. Famously, the word 'philosophy' itself comes to us from ancient Greek, combining the words *philos* meaning 'love' and *sophos* meaning wise. A philosopher is thus a lover of wisdom, and the overlap between our two categories of philosopher and sophist is apparent from their etymology: they both are concerned with wisdom. The names also indicate a certain humbleness on the part of the philosopher that the sophist does not share; thus the philosopher is only a lover of wisdom. Indeed, if we are to accept the assertion of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium* that all love is a desire for something of which one is in need, then philosophers are as good as admitting that they do not have wisdom (Plato has Socrates defend this claim about love being a lack of something at *Symposium* 200a-c), while the sophist professes actually to be a 'wise one'. By Isocrates' time, the name 'sophist' had some disrepute attached to it (e.g. Plato, *Meno* 91c), but it had not by any means become simply a pejorative term; rather it is better to understand the term 'sophist' as taking on both positive and negative connotations. It seems that at this point in history the meaning of the term 'philosopher' is still vague enough to be open to clarification. Indeed, recent scholarship has indicated that establishing a clearer meaning for the word 'philosophy' was 'a valued prize well worth contending for' among the intellectual elite of this time, and Isocrates was one obvious competitor (Ober 1998, 251n.7; see also Nightingale 1995, 13-41).

Isocrates provides an indication of how he feels the word philosophy should be understood in his speech, *Antidosis*. Scholars interpret the speech as representing the formation of a new genre in the field of oratory, being a subtle blend of two court trials, one historical and the other fictional. The historical trial was a case brought against Isocrates for proper payment of civic responsibilities. In Athens at this time the wealthy

were required to finance certain activities of the state, such as outfitting warships and sponsoring plays at religious festivals. These financial burdens were called 'liturgies'. If a wealthy person who had been called on to provide a liturgy could find another citizen who was not providing an equivalent outlay to the state, then that second person could be brought to trial by the first and forced to take on the liturgy in question or to trade properties with the accuser. A challenge of this sort was called an 'antidosis', and it seems such a case was successfully made against Isocrates. Apparently, Isocrates was surprised by the lowness of his standing in Athenian society that this case revealed, and so he set about writing the *Antidosis* to make some defence of himself. The fictitious case, then, and the true subject of Isocrates' speech, is the charge 'that I corrupt young men by teaching them to speak and gain their own advantage in the courts contrary to justice' (*Antidosis* 316). It is with this obvious reference back to the trial of Socrates in mind that we should understand Isocrates' definition of philosophy.

In the *Antidosis* Isocrates states:

Since it is not in the nature of man to attain a scientific knowledge by which, once we possess it, we would know what to do or say, I consider those men wise who are able by means of conjecture to hit upon, for the most part, what is best; and I call those men 'philosophers' who are engaged in the studies from which they will most quickly achieve this kind of wisdom (*Antidosis* 271).

Isocrates makes several points in this passage, two of which are important to our study. The first is his characterisation of wisdom: Isocrates places clear limits on the extent of human comprehension, and since 'scientific knowledge' concerning how to behave is impossible, wisdom becomes the ability to discern what is most likely to be the best conduct. This is a position that Isocrates maintains throughout his life: the *Antidosis* is a relatively late work, written when he was 82 (*Antidosis*, 312) but in *Against the Sophists*, one of his earliest speeches (*Antidosis* 193 tells us that this speech was written 'at the beginning of my career'), he writes that sophists pretend to be able to provide knowledge that assures achieving one's goals in the public arena, and this is 'making greater promises than they can possibly fulfil' (*Against the Sophists* 291).

This stance is perfectly in keeping with the etymological concerns of the word philosophy that were raised earlier. One of the most fiercely contested issues among intellectuals of the time was the possible extent of human wisdom, and whether humans are capable of a degree of knowledge that guarantees a stable, happy and prosperous society and individual. Isocrates comes down firmly on the side of interpreting human knowledge as being useful to these pursuits, but not providing the universal guarantee that some thinkers might envision. For example, in *Against the Sophists*, he writes

For myself, I should have preferred above great riches that philosophy had as much power as these men claim; for, possibly, I should not have been the very last in the profession nor had the least share in its profits. But *since it has no such power*, I could wish that this prating might cease (*Against the Sophists* 11; emphasis added).

That level of wisdom, says Isocrates, lies beyond human capacity. Readers of the *Antidosis* who are primed to see reflections of Socrates in the charges will also notice here an overlap of Socrates' misgivings concerning human knowledge. Socrates goes to great pains to point out the impoverished nature of human knowledge, contrary to our usual inflated selfevaluation (Plato's *Apology* gives an eloquent defence of this position). Isocrates, in attacking the sophists for claiming to know more than they actually do (indeed, Isocrates goes so far as to claim that, in his opinion, they profess to a knowledge that is not even possible), reflects Socrates' activity, challenging people to substantiate their beliefs. Taking Socrates as the paradigm case of a philosopher would thus seem to support Isocrates' claim to be listed among the philosophers.

The second point to underline in this passage from *Antidosis* 271 is the emphasis of philosophy's relationship to useful action. Isocrates writes about the necessity of actually applying studies and learning to the practical problems of life, and he castigates anyone whose concept of philosophy does not have a pragmatic end (see also *Antidosis* 183-4). On this matter, Isocrates is quite willing to trot out examples of his own former students who have gone on to be successful in the public arena, such as Timotheus, proving the utility of Isocrates' endeavours (*Antidosis* 131-9). More important is his own case: the goal of the *Antidosis* is to prove Isocrates' good effect on the youth of Athens and hence avoid the penalty of the charges. In this way he shows the practical value of his pursuits and, if we are to accept his definition of the term, of philosophy. For Isocrates, philosophy consists of studies that most quickly and efficiently lead citizens to a point where they are ready to engage in their political responsibilities. There are, according to Isocrates, pretenders who claim to be providing a philosophical education, but there is a basic problem when the course of studies remains too esoteric and never rejoins the world of practicality. Other so-called professors of philosophy

who are skilled in disputation and those who are occupied with astronomy and geometry and studies of that sort... benefit their pupils not so much as they profess, ... Most men see in such studies nothing but empty talk and hair-splitting, for none of these disciplines has any useful application either to private or to public affairs ... I do not, however, think it proper to apply the term 'philosophy' to a training which is of no help to us in the present either in our speech or in our actions, but rather I would call it a gymnastic of the mind and a preparation for philosophy (*Antidosis* 261-6).

The need to promote the relevance of philosophy to life is actually not as striking as it might seem at first, as it is a common enough theme among those who wrote on the nature of philosophy. For example, at *Gorgias* 521d Plato has the philosopher Socrates say, 'I think that I am one of very few Athenians, not to say the only one, engaged in the true political art, and that of the men today I alone practise statesmanship.' Far from being impractical, Plato is famous for having proposed that philosophy is the only essential element to politics. Indeed, other thinkers such as Plato are quick to point out the practical benefits of studying philosophy, but they tend not to see this as the only reason to engage in philosophy. Rather, philosophy and wisdom are understood as ends in their own right, and are good to have in and for themselves, as well as for other benefits that they might bring. Isocrates sets his own account apart through the extent to which his view of philosophy turns away from being an actual love of wisdom. Those who study abstraction and knowledge purely because they love to have knowledge are not, according to Isocrates, philosophers. Wisdom, as an end in itself, is not the goal of Isocrates' philosopher, and it is this position that is problematic if we are to understand Isocrates as a philosopher himself.

Seeing Isocrates with this rather utilitarian view of philosophy may seem to be a further reason to cast his lot in with the sophists. Sophists came to be regarded suspiciously because of a perception that their wisdom served the sole purpose of personal profit. On this reading, sophists are not to be trusted because their motives are never for the common good. Proof of this attitude towards the sophists is grounded in the realisation that sophists might be able to train their pupils to win their case in arenas of public discourse, no matter what position was being advocated. For example, sophistic training in rhetoric raised the possibility of winning a trial purely because of facility with argumentation, regardless of where matters stand in terms of justice. Similarly, good, sophistically trained speakers can be supposed to have an advantage in the Assembly where public policy is formulated, and this to the detriment of the interests of their fellow citizens. Thus sophists may possibly undermine the foundations of consent-based politics, where dialogue and debate in the Assembly are expected to produce a course of action that is best for the whole city, and not just the interests of a limited few. If a citizen gained in oratorical skill to the point of being able to control the goings-on in the Assembly through the power of persuasion (a power the sophists commonly advertised themselves as being able to provide), then those people have effectively consolidated their own power within the city, turning a democratic Assembly (in the case of Athens) into a tyranny.

It is not the place of this chapter to answer problems concerning the viability of the sophistic agenda within an open political system. Certainly there are many responses that the sophists could make in response to these fears, not the least of which is the claim that there is no necessary

connection between rhetorical skill and unabated self-interest. Be that as it may, the possibility of the use of rhetorical skill for purely selfish ends, or worse, in order to exploit others, remains a dangerous aspect of the sophistic movement. Partly, this concern is a response to the itinerant nature of the early sophists' lives; apart from Antiphon of Athens, all the early sophists were chronic wanderers, taking up residence wherever they could make financial gain. Even in the case of Antiphon, one could not say that he does not see the value of approaching the world with a narrowly individualistic and selfish attitude. Furthermore, sophists are famous for amassing fortunes from their profession, and one is left with the image (false or not) of a sophist coming to a town, bleeding it dry of money, and leaving it in no better shape for being introduced to sophisticated education. Thus it is easy to see why the sophists are criticised for being too selfish in outlook, and lacking a patriotism or allegiance to a home city that the Greeks consider a basic component of life. The claim of making the weaker argument appear stronger comes back to haunt the sophists at this point, for it is difficult to hear this slogan without finding something morally discreditable in it.

Against this, we see Isocrates brandishing his patriotism. The glory and goodness of Athens is another theme that runs throughout Isocrates' career, and it can be interpreted as a foil to the other aspects of his life that align him with the sophists. 'I am sure that all men would acknowledge that our city has been the author of the greatest number of blessings, and she should in fairness be entitled to the hegemony', wrote Isocrates in his early work *Panegyricus* (100). He was deeply committed to Athens, and often enough his speeches were written with the purpose of giving political advice to the city. And while Isocrates left Athens during the civil strife that enveloped Athens at the end of the Peloponnesian War, he returned when it was safe to do so, and remained a proud citizen of the city till the end of his days. No travelling from city to city for him, selling his rhetorical wares to those who might pay a high price. Instead Isocrates stayed at home, combining his ability to make a living at rhetorical instruction with an active interest and involvement in civic affairs. Isocrates put the welfare of Athens at the forefront of many of his speeches, and we might understand him as seeing his own benefit as coinciding with that of the city itself, something any good citizen ought to do.

One further argument can be made for doubting a full identification of Isocrates as a sophist and it is based on his contribution to the intellectual advancements that the sophists achieved. The accomplishments of the sophists in what we would call the humanities are many; for example, Protagoras gives us a theory of relativism that undermines the great Greek essentialists for generations to come and which is debated still in moral philosophy, Gorgias is the first to point out explicitly the degree to which oratorical facility must be considered in assessing the stability and inclusiveness of a political system based on discourse, and Antiphon

outlines a powerful individualistic theory of human nature. If we place Isocrates beside these figures, we do not find a corresponding commitment to intellectual innovation. In a way the reasoning here is similar to the justification behind not wanting to label Isocrates a philosopher because of his unwillingness to engage in a love of wisdom for its own sake. On this matter the sophists and the philosophers stand together, participating in the intense intellectual growth of the period.

If we see shortcomings in identifying Isocrates as a philosopher or as a sophist, he is more obviously at home under the heading of speechwriter. Here Isocrates did make valuable contributions to his field, both in its technical development and in its place in Greek culture. Without Isocrates' contributions, rhetoric and oratory would be much poorer. One clear advancement he gave to the art of speechwriting was the injection of hiatus avoidance into his speeches; 'hiatus' refers to the practice of placing a word that begins with a vowel sound after a word that ends with a vowel sound; the effect of Isocrates' concern to avoid hiatus is to give the speech a more natural and flowing sound when it is recited or even read in private. Following up on this observation, we see Isocrates was careful everywhere to make sure that no unnecessary clashes or artificiality arose during the pronunciation of his work. This aspect of his technical facility in the construction of speeches has had wide influence; even Plato took it up as a rule of composition. Isocrates also moved Greek speechwriting more generally towards a natural style. Prior to Isocrates, oratory as an art was dominated by the style of Gorgias, an affected and artificial way of speaking. This can be a highly effective strategy, especially as it sets itself off from mundane speech and thus seems somewhat more appropriate to the high political purpose speech serves for Athenians. It is even possible that such a style was a necessary phase for rhetoric to go through in establishing itself. Isocrates is the figure who brought rhetoric back to a more common mode of talk, arguably helping to remove some of the elitism in political discourse and bringing it closer to being a tool of the masses.

Isocrates wrote his speeches by and large for private consumption. True, his earliest works were forensic, meaning they were to be used in court, and he has speeches concerned with the unity of Greece that may have been recited in public, but it is generally accepted that most of his orations were intended for private audiences, perhaps at small gatherings. Indeed, some of his works appear to be too long to be read out in public, and are probably meant to be read only (Too 1995, 48). In this way he engaged in a more direct relationship with his audience, a 'one on one' meeting, rather than the old image of an orator speaking to a crowd. Thus Isocrates was part of a generation that took advantage of the growing literacy of the Athenian population. While a high degree of illiteracy among citizens can help to emphasise the oral nature of political discourse (and this is especially true of the early history of the polis), as a population

becomes more and more literate, the possibilities of authors being able to circumvent the actual speaker of a speech and engage an audience directly through writing becomes more and more viable (Thomas 1989, *passim*). Isocrates was a speech writer who took advantage of this shifting ground of the Athenian citizenry, and his ability to keep speech writing in tune with cultural developments that are happening more generally is another aspect of his contribution to the field. These observations all combine to show Isocrates standing at the forefront of the practice of speechwriting. His somewhat suspicious attitude towards learning and abstraction should cause some doubt concerning his philosophical claims, but his heartfelt devotion to his home city and concern for the actual betterment of his fellow citizens exclude him from the usual understanding of what a sophist is; his real home is among the writers who are trying to effect some change in their polity through persuasion.

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