



Kristian Bjørkdahl

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Philosophia as Cultural Politics: Reading Ramberg's Rorty with Isocrates

Kristian Bjørkdahl
University of Oslo

As Richard Rorty would be the first to remind us, we have only one way to see where the course of intellectual development leads, and that is *in retrospect* (see Rorty, 1989, 55–6). When in the midst of change, all we can do is guess. But if I were to venture such a guess, it would be that philosophy will continue down the pragmatist path that was first cleared by Peirce, James, and Dewey; which was expanded greatly by central achievements in mid-century analytical as well as continental philosophy; and which then took a new, and in some ways more radical, turn thanks to the very same Richard Rorty. Philosophy, I prophesy, will keep inching ever closer to *pragmata*, it will keep moving more deeply into the practical affairs that form pressing concerns in the lives that we lead.

This scenario is wishful thinking, perhaps, rather than an honest guess, but it nevertheless raises a question about Rorty's role in our future pragmatist dreamworld: To what extent has Rorty provided philosophy with a self-image to build on? What could "building on Rorty" even mean?

Many would reject these questions outright. They would claim that all Rorty ever did was take philosophy apart, and that one cannot build on Rorty for the same reason that one cannot build on rubble. This reaction overlooks Rorty's own repeated assurances that he did not envision any "end of philosophy" (see Rorty, 1979). When many commentators have nevertheless read him in this way, it must mean they have not in fact read him, or at least not very well—and certainly not with any measure of good

will. A better approach would be to acknowledge that Rorty wants to enact a radical shift to philosophical practice, though one which falls (just) short of ending the enterprise as such. As Kai Nielsen once argued, the idea that Rorty is “trying to deal a deathblow to philosophy” is quick, superficial, and mistaken. He adds, however, that Rorty does want to “deal a deathblow to a self-image and a cluster of related practices that philosophers tend to have and indeed hold on to tenaciously” (Nielsen, 1991, 4).

The question, “Where do we go from Rorty?,” is thus one with real stakes: And while the answer to that question does not have to be “to our graves” or “into unemployment,” it also cannot be a straightforward “straight ahead.” Could the answer, then, be something like “backwards, to tradition”? This, in essence, is the answer provided by Bjørn Ramberg (2001), in his important article, “Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy.” The main point of Ramberg’s article, as I read him, is that even after Rorty has dealt his deathblow to those tenaciously held self-images and practices, there remains *something* in the philosophical tradition to inform what Ramberg calls “a pragmatist conception of philosophy.” I take this to mean that one can be a Rortyan style pragmatist and still be recognizable as a philosopher.

In a rather bold move—considering that Rorty consistently chose Plato as the figurehead of the philosophical self-image he wanted to kill off—Ramberg suggests that we should indeed view Plato as the origin of this *something*. Specifically, Ramberg makes Plato the origin figure of “thought aiming for dialectical illumination,” and for argumentation as a practice that “expand[s] and elaborat[es] the space of discursive options.” What originates with Plato, Ramberg suggests, is what remains the discipline’s wellspring to this day, namely the ambition to employ “the tensions present in our concepts to create new possibilities for us to appropriate and consider” (Ramberg, 2001, 36 and 37).

In this article, I accept Ramberg’s suggestion that one can be a Rortyan and still be recognizable as a philosopher, but I want to question his attendant recourse to Plato. Given the radical nature of the shift Rorty is trying to enact, I think Ramberg too easily accepts mainstream philosophy’s tendency to repress and marginalize its negative “other”—most notably thinkers of a sophistic stripe. Taking a cue from Barbara Cassin, I want to suggest that Rorty’s project is better served by a reorientation towards the “history of neglected and repressed traditions, of alternative paths.” This is hard work, Cassin notes, for, “Philosophy has organized things so that any critique of the royal road is rejected as not being philos-

ophy" (Cassin, 2014, 1 and 2). It is a work that Ramberg does not take on, since in tying our commitments to Plato, he exhibits a version of philosophy's standard reflex: If it does not somehow start with Plato, it cannot be philosophy. "What other conception of philosophy *is* there?," one might ask. "What other commitments *could* we have?" This kind of reaction is to the point, for it reveals that we have been so impressed by the royal road that we have become blind to alternative routes.

The instinct I will try to substantiate in this article is that we cannot heed the radical impetus of Rorty's work by anchoring the discipline in Plato, and that we must therefore look towards alternative traditions to inform a pragmatist conception of philosophy. By placing our bets on Plato, we obstruct Rorty's proposed shift towards a postmetaphysical culture, thus leaving an important potential in Rorty's work fallow. This is the problem with Ramberg's move: It too comfortably allows philosophers to keep doing roughly what they have always been doing.

I believe the consequences of Rorty are more radical than this. In fact, I believe that to take Rorty seriously is to *refuse to let philosophy be what it has been*. More specifically, I believe that Ramberg's Plato-infused solution is incapable of following up Rorty's appeal that philosophers should shift their priorities towards service to the cultural politics of the community in which they find themselves. In the late Rorty, the one who talks about *philosophy as cultural politics*, this call is phrased in no uncertain terms. Rorty writes, for instance, that philosophers should take as their "principal assignment [...] to intervene in cultural politics," and adds that,

[Philosophers] should ask themselves whether taking one side rather than another [in technical philosophical debates] will make any difference to social hopes, programs of action, prophecies of a better future. If it will not, it may not be worth doing. If it will, they should spell out what that difference amounts to.

Rorty, 2007a, x

Rorty is not content with a minor, after-the-fact consideration about the practical implications of various areas of professional philosophy. Rather, his ideal of philosophy as cultural politics has far-reaching disciplinary consequences. The ideal aims, in fact, to uproot the very *disciplinarity* of philosophy.

The professionalization of philosophy, its transformation into an academic discipline, was a necessary evil. But it has encouraged attempts to make philosophy into an autonomous

quasi-science. These attempts should be resisted. The more philosophy interacts with other human activities—not just natural science, but art, literature, religion and politics as well—the more relevant to cultural politics it becomes, and thus the more useful. The more it strives for autonomy, the less attention it deserves.

Rorty, 2007a, x

In this article, I want to suggest that we can better develop Rorty's idea of philosophy as cultural politics if we tie our commitments not to Plato, but rather to his adversary, Isocrates. An intellectual figure consistently marginalized from mainstream philosophy, Isocrates is a key exemplar of Cassin's "neglected and repressed traditions." So completely has Isocrates been marginalized from the history of philosophy that most today do not count him as a philosopher at all, but rather as a "rhetorician" or, even, an "orator" (see Poulakos, 1997 or Too, 1995).¹ And he has indeed grown central to the contemporary discipline of rhetoric, where he is now counted as an important origin figure and an alternative to the Aristotelian tradition (Conley, 1993, Poulakos, 1997, Haskins, 2010). Isocrates' practice was, however, distinct from (what philosophers think of as) rhetoric, and Isocrates himself consistently referred to his art as *philosophia*—philosophy. This was not, as some seem to assume (see e.g. Poulakos, 1997), simply a euphemism for the art of oratory, but a sign that Isocrates sought something more than the rhetoricians of his day, though something less than his adversary Plato. While Plato aimed to establish philosophy as a distinct form of inquiry apart from others, Isocrates insisted on an entirely quotidian and pragmatic conception of this practice, where philosophy interacts with and even blends into "other human activities," in a notable example *avant la lettre* of Rorty's "cultural politics."

Isocrates provides, I am tempted to say, the first pragmatist conception of philosophy, one which emerged alongside and in competition with that of Plato. As pragmatists, we need to rediscover the Isocratean route.²

¹ Isocrates is routinely counted among the ten "Attic orators," despite the fact that he, as he himself repeatedly stresses in his written texts, was no such thing.

² This rediscovery is, of course, well under way, see e.g. Haskins, 2010—though mostly, as far as I can see, outside of philosophy. There have been certain earlier starts, however, including Matson, 1957.

Philosophy for the *Polis*

Isocrates was born in 436 BC, a decade or so before Plato, whom he also outlived by a decade, to become a very old man, dying at the age of 98, in 338 BC. Isocrates' long life stretches across a period of history where Athens went from being at the pinnacle of power in Greece to a situation where that position was almost entirely lost: He was born at the height of the Athenian Empire, just a few years before the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, and he died in the year of Philip's decisive victory at Chaeronea and subsequent conquest of Greece.

Isocrates' lifespan as well as his life's work were deeply marked by what he saw as precipitous cultural *decline*. He dealt with this circumstance by engaging in constructive self-definition and problem-solving on behalf of the polis; as a writer, educator, and (public) intellectual, he took it upon himself to assess Athens' historical greatness, its current situation and opportunities, as well as its future prospects. And he engaged in the question of what—given this past, present, and future—was required of the citizens of the polis.³

Isocrates' strong disapproval of the Athenian society of his day is worth noting from the start, since this similarity with Plato offers a background against which we can more clearly see the differences between them. Like his adversary, Isocrates deemed the contemporary democracy deficient and debased, and again like him, he distanced himself from the sophists of this day, whom he felt catered to sycophants.⁴ The democracy, he argued repeatedly, had degenerated from the golden age of Solon, Cleisthenes, and Pericles; in the 4th century, it displayed lack of restraint (*akolosia*) and arrogance (*hybris*) and no longer valued self-control (*sophrosyne*) as it ought to.⁵ Despite expressing dislike of flattery, the citizens of Athens had nevertheless come to accept it in public affairs, where they "made speakers practice and study not what will help the state but how they might say what pleases you."⁶ As for the sophists of his day, he faulted them, in his pamphlet, *Against the Sophists*, for not speaking the

³ Isocrates switched between dealing with the affairs of a single polis (most often, Athens) and those of Hellas in general. For the sake of simplicity, I have for the most part let his panhellenism lie in this chapter.

⁴ I should note that Isocrates mostly faults his contemporaries and competitors in the 4th century, and not the so-called Older sophists of an earlier generation.

⁵ This specific wording occurs in *On the Peace*, in Papillon, 2004, 161, but a similar critique can be found in several of Isocrates' texts.

⁶ *On the Peace*, in Papillon, 2004, 136–7.

truth, for making “greater promises than they plan to fulfill,” for making “boasts with too little caution,” and for valuing “moral excellence and happiness so little.” Isocrates’ front against the sophists echoes many of the complaints aired in Plato’s dialogues. Like Plato, Isocrates argued that the sophists were greedy and boastful, and ridiculously so, since it was doubtful whether their curriculum added anything of real value:

They have no concern for the truth but think that their art (*techné*) consists of attracting as many students as possible by the smallness of their fees and the grandness of their instruction and of being able to earn something from them. They themselves are so senseless—and they assume others are as well—that they write speeches that are worse than private citizens might improvise.

Against the Sophists, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 63.

But where many of Plato’s dialogues (cf. the *Gorgias*) leaves the impression that the manipulative art of public speaking and a degenerate democracy are two sides of the same coin, Isocrates consistently resists this conclusion—from both sides at once. For one, he repeatedly asserts that democracy is the best type of regime. Thus he underlines, in the *Aeropagiticus*, that, “In most of my previous speeches, I clearly condemn oligarchy and political advantage (*pleonexia*), and praise equality (*isotetas*) and democracy.”⁷ As for public speaking, he could not have reserved a more important place for this practice. The most famous expression of this is no doubt the so-called “hymn to logos,” which first appears in the *Nicocles*, and which he revisits in the *Antidosis*:

For in our other facilities [...], we do not differ from other living beings, and in fact we are inferior to many in speed, strength, and other resources. But since we have the ability to persuade one another and to make clear to ourselves what we want, not only do we avoid living like animals, but we have come together, built cities, made laws, and invented

⁷ *Aeropagiticus*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 196. I should mention that he adds to the line cited, “– not all democracies randomly, but giving just and sensible praise to those which are well established,” and also, that he, in the *Aeropagiticus* and several other texts, propagates for a return to an earlier, and less “radical,” democracy. Isocrates is, in other words, a political conservative, but contra scholars like David Konstan, I still think the evidence points—clearly—towards the conclusion that he is a politically conservative *democrat*. See Konstan, 2004.

arts (*techne*). Speech (*logos*) is responsible for nearly all our inventions. *Antidosis*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 251.

He goes on to determine that, “We regard speaking well to be the clearest sign of a good mind, which it requires, and truthful, lawful, and just speech we consider the image (*eidolon*) of a good and faithful soul.” He concludes that, “nothing done prudently occurs without speech (*logos*).”⁸

Isocrates thus diverges clearly from Plato’s path when it comes to his view of persuasion and public speaking, which he in fact sees as the basic enabler of social interaction and civilization, and not at all as something to be avoided. As we have seen, Isocrates offers ample criticism of how the art of speaking is taught and practiced, but he has no principled objection to it. Unlike Plato, Isocrates does not long for another *way* for humans to interact with each other; he does not entertain the idea that we can have a form of communication that somehow avoids persuasion altogether. Nor does he construe persuasion as an ancillary to a philosopher’s exclusive truth (cf. the *Phaedrus*). For him, no such form of communication exists, and even if it did, it would not matter much, since persuasion is the wellspring of sociality and civilization. In stark contrast to Plato, then, Isocrates offers an image of persuasion not just as basic to human interaction, but as a—potential—force of good. When this force does not always, in practice, work for the good, that tells us nothing at all about the art, it only reveals that many people lack the education and virtue necessary to make good use of it, and this then becomes the *raison d’être* for Isocrates’ philosophy.

Despite tying his philosophy to the art of public speaking, he does not find himself tied to the cultural atmosphere of (4th century) Athenian democracy. To the contrary, a critique of the cultural tendencies of his time was at the core of his intellectual program. On a more general level, though, Isocrates motivates philosophy almost exclusively with the good it can do to the life of the polis. To borrow Rorty’s vocabulary, Isocrates’ philosophy is consistently geared towards making a “difference to social hopes, programs of action, prophecies of a better future” for an actual community and its everyday affairs, and his work consistently revolves around *this* community’s values—*its* culture, *its* tradition, *its* ideals. His philosophy is of and for this world—that is to say, *his* world.

Unlike Plato, Isocrates did not advocate any principle of separation between philosophy and public affairs. His disdain for contemporary

⁸ *Antidosis*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 251–52.

democracy and its attendant teachers of public speaking never drove him suggest anything like Plato's world of Ideas, nor did it cause him to think of philosophy as anything like a discipline, a practice somehow distinct from what Rorty called "other human activities." To Isocrates, there was only one world of ideas, and that was the world of the polis—this is where ideas are formed and presented, attacked and defended, tested and revised. As Kathryn Morgan writes, "Isocrates believes, as Plato does not, that reasoned political debate by citizens gives the city the best chance of making a correct decision" (Morgan, 2004, 145). The *scene*, as it were, of the wisdom that philosophy seeks is the public sphere. This means that the work of philosophy cannot be achieved by reaching for some other sphere, it can only be done from within, and in engagement with, the community to which one belongs. Philosophy in Isocrates' sense cannot be done in private symposia, in the controlled conversational environment of the Socratic *elenchus*. As Isocrates' choice of the speech format indicates, he conceives of philosophy as a *public* art, one performed in front of an audience. Isocrates' philosophy entails, as David Depew and Takis Poulakos notes, that "one cannot be practically wise without cultivating the ability to say the right thing at the right or the opportune moment; and one simply cannot achieve this skill—the skill that Isocrates wants to teach—without positioning oneself as one who appears before and is accountable to one's fellow citizens" (Depew and Poulakos, 2004, 9). To *appear before* and be *accountable to one's fellow citizens* are here to be interpreted quite literally, as signs that Isocrates' philosophy was in fact construed as a public practice, the commitments of which are tied to the welfare of the community in which one finds oneself. Isocrates' philosophy, Ekaterina Haskins writes, exhibits none of "the sort of theoretical detachment one finds in the intellectual projects of Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum"; instead, it suggests a "more performatively grounded notion of human agency" (Haskins, 2010, 2 and 3).

Against the Hairsplitters

What, precisely, did Isocrates mean when he used the word *philosophia*? This question is badly put, since Isocrates was typically not very precise about its meaning. Indeed, he often expressed disdain for exaggerated precision, on this and other issues. In the present context, this should not be a cause for despair; and it should certainly not lead us to think of Isocrates, as many have done, as "a figure of inadequacy" (Too, 1995, 1).

Instead, we can think of Isocrates' consistent aversion against exaggerated precision and technicality as a sign of his *pragmatism*. Despite originating in the Greek, this term is here of course an anachronism. It is, however, a perfectly acceptable one, for it points to how Isocrates consistently evaluated philosophy with the criterion of what difference it would make to practice. If it did not make any difference, then, Isocrates believed—just like Rorty—that “it may not be worth doing” (Rorty, 2007, x).

Isocrates' “pragmatism” surfaces time and again in his writings, but perhaps nowhere as clearly as in his *Encomium of Helen*, where he faults other sophists and philosophers for their endless ruminations on puzzles and paradoxes. “Without a thought for private or public affairs, they delight most in arguments that find no use at all,” he says, and adds that, if they were upright citizens, “They [w]ould throw away this hairsplitting, which pretends to make refutations (*elenchoi*) in speech but which has long since been refuted in action.” If they were serious citizens,

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 than to have precise knowledge of what is useless*, and that to be a little ahead in important matters is better than to excel in small matters that are no help in life.

Encomium of Helen, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 33–4. (My emphasis).

Unlike Plato, Isocrates does not see “the benefit of nit-picking, argument-following, and refutation-currying conversations” (Moore, 2020, 214), and he displays nothing but “contempt for intellectual gymnastics” (Morgan, 2004, 135). The sentiment is on display again in *Against the Sophists*, where he elaborates somewhat on *why* philosophical hairsplitting is useless: “I am amazed when I see these men claiming students for themselves,” he begins, and explains that “they fail to notice that they are using an ordered art (*tetagemene techne*) as a model for a creative activity (*poietikon pragma*).”

What is said by one person is not useful in a similar way for the next speaker, but that man seems most artful (*technikatatos*) who both speaks worthily of the subject matter and can discover things to say that are entirely different from what

others have said. The greatest indication of the difference is that speeches cannot be good unless they reflect the circumstances (*kairoi*), propriety (*to prepon*), and originality.

Against the Sophists, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 64.

Later in the same text, he writes sarcastically that, "These people go through such useless theories that if anyone followed them in practice he would immediately be in deep trouble."⁹

His aversion to theoretical precision, and conversely, his constant call to keep it useful, runs as a continuous line from *Against the Sophists*, his very first published text, to *Panathenaicus*, his very last. In the latter, he writes, again with thinly veiled sarcasm, that programs of education focusing on eristic dialogues are perfectly acceptable for young persons, since "even if these studies are able to accomplish nothing else, they will at least turn the young away from many other harmful activities." Beyond youth, however, these exercises cannot be recommended, "For I see that some of those who are so devoted to precision in these exercises that they even teach others do not use the knowledge they have in the right way (*eukairos*) and, in fact, in other subjects they have less good sense (*phronesis*) than their students (dare I say even than their slaves)."¹⁰

We should not see Isocrates' anti-precisionism as a lack of ability on his part, but rather, as one more sign that Isocrates assumed the public life of the polis as the context of his practice: He knew that the *ekklesia* or the *agora* did not allow for the sort of precision the interlocutors in Plato's dialogues (or the young men trained in eristic dialogues) desire. For him, the main challenge was therefore never to find the "correct" definition of a given phenomenon, but to find ways of understanding and speaking of that phenomenon that could make sense to—and, yes, *sway*—the citizens of the polis.¹¹ This, I take it, is what Haskins means with her phrase "performatively grounded notion of human agency"; it is not about pinning phenomena down, once and for all, but about finding ways of speaking about them that allow us to respond wisely to the situations we find ourselves in.

Isocrates' pragmatism runs even deeper than this, however. For his tendency to ridicule precision, technicality, and formalism is also connected to an idea of *habituation*, which entails that our ways of doing things in any

⁹ *Against the Sophists*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 66.

¹⁰ *Panathenaicus*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 176.

¹¹ Though, as he somewhat bitterly notes in the *Antidosis*, he did not always succeed in this regard.

case have another source than philosophical definitions, positions, and arguments. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Isocrates, at one point, talks about “the great power of practice (*epimeleia*)”—and there is no doubt that practice, for him, is a basic challenge as well as an opportunity.¹² It is a challenge because he believes that we do not, in general, change our minds, shift our commitments, or replace our identities and social bonds for no good reason. A lot of the time, we don’t even do so in the presence of good reasons. The great power of practice is, in other words, a constraint. This, of course, is what motivates his complaints against the sophists: They promise a great deal, but if they (or their customers) had had a more realistic idea of how enculturation and habit work, their promises would be exposed as a bluff. In contrast, Isocrates makes far more modest promises for his own teaching. “Abilities in speaking and all the other faculties of public life are innate in the well-born and developed in those trained by experience,” he notes, and then adds simply that, “Education (*paideusis*) can make such people more skillful and better equipped at discovery. It teaches those who now hit upon things by chance to achieve them from a readier source.”¹³ But if the great power of practice constrains us, the latter quote also establishes that it offers an opportunity; by way of *practice* we can develop skill and facility; the great power of practice is such that we can continue where nature and primary socialization left off, as it were.

As Isocrates sees it, practice and habituation do not only give shape to individuals’ lives, but to entire societies: Just as individuals develop character through iteration and reinforcement, so does a city, and the challenge of *practicing* in the right way, so as to develop the right type of character, is our first requirement—as individuals and as a polis. In the *Aeropagiticus*, where Isocrates is once again on his hobbyhorse about the superior configuration of the democracy of the 5th century, the underlying theme is public virtue—which Isocrates takes to be intimately tied to the city’s constitution. The problem with 4th century democracy, however, is not the constitution itself, which is never anything but a formalized image of the morals of the people, but cultural decline, specifically the contemporary lack of moderation (*sophrosyne*). Here, Isocrates takes the argument one

¹² *Antidosis*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 244. The word is translated here as “practice,” but it also (even primarily) means something like “care,” as in “take care of” or “to be concerned about.” It also connotes attentiveness and tending to one’s duties and responsibilities.

¹³ *Against the Sophists*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 64. Isocrates here anticipates Aristotle’s famous rationale for rhetoric in *Rhetoric*, 1.1.

step further. It is not enough to simply acknowledge the great power of practice, he suggests, we need, *at the cost of* such things as “meticulously written laws,” to place primacy on practice, i.e. on “habits,” “everyday activities,” and “customs.”

But progress in virtue comes not from these [precise laws] but from everyday activities: most people turn out to conduct themselves according to the habits in which they were educated. Second, a large number of specific laws is a sign that a city is badly governed, for in erecting these obstacles to crime, people are forced to make many laws. Those who are properly governed do not need to fill the stoas with written [laws] but to have justice in their souls. Cities are well governed not by legislation but by customs, and those who have been badly brought up will venture to transgress even meticulously written laws, whereas those who have been well educated will be willing to obey even simple laws.

Aeropagiticus, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 191–92.

On “Swift-Flying Feet”

Despite his aversion to technical definitions, Isocrates does offer certain positive hints, here and there, of what he means by the term philosophy. A prominent example is the *Antidosis*, which in effect is an apology for the art he has practiced throughout his long life. Though, here too, he points out, in characteristic fashion, that we should not ask for exact knowledge.

[T]hose whose concern is philosophy pass on to their pupils all the structures which speech (*logos*) employs. When they have given them experience and detailed knowledge of these, they again exercise the students and make them accustomed to hard work, and then force them to synthesize everything they have learned in order that they may have a more secure understanding and their views (*doxai*) may be better adapted to the right moments (*kairoi*). It is not possible to learn this through study, since in all activities, these opportune moments elude exact knowledge (*episteme*), but in general those who are particularly attentive and can understand the consequences most often apprehend them.

Antidosis, in Mirhady and Too, 2000.

The extract offers a clear contrast to Plato's conception of philosophy, in that it connects this practice neither to a stable sphere against which our concepts can be measured and validated, nor to certainty, nor to anything resembling metaphysics. Instead, Isocrates' *philosophia* refers, as Stephen Usher points out, to an "interactive study of practical (including international) politics, ethics, and rhetoric" (Usher, 1999, 297). This "interactive study" begins, the *Antidosis* makes clear, from the technicalities of *logos*—what we would today call rhetoric. To put it differently, the structures of speech are, for Isocrates, the foundation—the basic "craft," as it were—of philosophy.

One acquires knowledge and familiarity with these structures not by asking the right questions, that is, not by Plato/Ramberg's "dialectical illumination," but by way of "experience and detailed knowledge." There is a certain sort of dialectic involved in Isocrates' conception of philosophy too, of course, but this dialectic is rhetorical, rather than logical, and the paradigmatic situation is the rhetor addressing the Assembly rather than the private inquisitor engaging in tightly controlled exchanges. Philosophy, in this conception, is coupled to—indeed largely co-extensive with—public education, *paideia*.

His emphasis on experience and detailed knowledge as the building blocks of this education assumes that we, through systematic study of history and tradition and human experience, can discover *known* ways of doing things with words. And while these known ways do not exhaust our opportunities, it would be unwise not to start with them. The educational thrust of his philosophy is underlined by the phrase about "hard work," which again offers a clear contrast to Plato's dialectical ideal. To exercise students and accustom them to hard work, suggests, as Haskins noted, that Isocrates' philosophy is grounded in *performance*; it is a skill that must be trained, and the basic fuel of this training is experience—the experience gained by observing and studying others, as well as that gained by practicing it oneself.

The basic mode of Isocrates' philosophy is to enact cultural ideals by way of model speeches. Isocrates is not very explicit about this in the above extract, but at the heart of his philosophical teaching were his own written speeches, which were designed to model oratorical skill and situational (moral) wisdom in a single movement. Isocrates' model speeches are much more, however, than rhetorical exercises of the type one finds in some of the sophists (cf. Antiphon); they are cultural critiques that engage with real, ongoing public affairs. In his critiques, Isocrates himself

is very much present, whether he takes on someone else's character or his own. As Kathryn Morgan writes, "The Isocratean speaker rails at, reasons with, and cajoles his audience. When he addresses the Athenians, he attempts to teach them to be an idealized version of themselves" (Morgan, 2004, 135). Unlike Plato, then, Isocrates did not hesitate a second about the value of *mimesis*—indeed, imitation was at the very core of his philosophy. For when he "attempts to teach [the Athenians] to be an idealized version of themselves," he does so by putting himself forth—immodestly, one might say—as a model citizen. This admittedly makes Isocrates a somewhat difficult character to like, but that is beside the point: The important thing is that philosophy, in Isocrates' conception, does not hinge on an ability to separate reality from appearances, but rather on our ability to work with—that is emulate, develop, and adapt—*models*. His approach on this point recalls a comment Rorty once made about various modes of (moral) philosophy, where he expressed his preference for a mode that proceeds by "choosing heroes, debating which figures a youth should try to model himself upon." Such debates, Rorty added, "concern alternative moral identities—and thus provide moral issues to get one's teeth into—in a way that debates about the alternative merits of the categorical imperative and the utilitarian principle do not" (Rorty, 2007b, 2000).

If Isocrates provides a prototype for Rorty's talk about cultural "heroes," and if he proceeds by way of modelling cultural ideals, we should acknowledge that these are far from being universally accepted conceptions of philosophy: Some would probably object that Isocrates leaves no room for what should be an important ambition in any philosophy, viz. to question widespread opinions, since his modelling mode leans too heavily on models familiar to the culture in question. A similar objection might even be made on "Rortyan" grounds, for does Isocrates not place his bet on *normal* discourse rather at the expense of *revolutionary* ditto? How can imitation possibly engender innovation?

The objection is not without relevance, for Isocrates does say that, "One should not look for novelty in these discourses about rules for living, for in them there is no room for paradox, or for what is incredible or unconventional. Instead we should consider most accomplished the man who is able to draw together the most ideas held by others and to articulate them elegantly."¹⁴ But this only takes us back to the previous point about practice and habituation, where Isocrates, as we have seen, puts a

¹⁴ *To Nicocles*, in Mirhady and Too, 2000, 165–66.

heavy emphasis on how we are practically bound by the commitments we have been habituated to take as ours. Given his conception of philosophy, where the basic criterion is to make a difference for the life of the polis, it would be entirely absurd to aim for “what is incredible or unconventional,” for “paradox”—for the simple reason that such moves will not persuade anyone.

This stance, however, does not prevent Isocrates from taking on the role of cultural critic. Far from it: As we have seen, cultural criticism is at the very core of his philosophical program. In performing this critique, however, he constantly tries to heed the pragmatic criterion of making a difference to practice. He has various ways doing this, and one of them—again—directly recalls Rorty: It is the technique of juxtaposing the expressed ideals of one’s culture—drawn loosely from history and tradition, myth or literature, public discourse, and the like—and the actual practice of that same culture. Isocrates’ critique thus takes the form of what we, to strengthen the link to Rorty, can call *achieving our polis*. A telling example of this is *On the Peace*, where Isocrates’ uses the cultural ideals of the Athenians themselves to criticize their empire, which he refers to as a “disaster.”¹⁵ A related technique is when he, as in the *Panathenaicus*, uses the cultural commitments of the polis to lay out a potential, a set of choices, certain courses of action, which it—given those commitments—would be meaningful for that community to pursue, e.g. that the Hellenes should band together and make war on the barbarians. These techniques are only examples, and I am perhaps misguided in calling them “techniques,” given Isocrates’ own point that there are no fixed ways of doing these things, since each situation presents us with a new set of constraints and possibilities. The central point, however, is that cultural criticism is very much an option also after one has relinquished the desire for “paradox” or “the incredible.”

As for (the related) purpose of innovation, it is not so foreign to Isocrates’ philosophy as it might seem. A hint of this is provided in the final part of the above extract, from the *Antidosis*, where Isocrates underlines the *dynamic* nature of his teaching. What he teaches—in effect, what he models—is a set of mobile resources. The promise offered by his philosophy is that of an intellectual capacity built outwards from the basic building blocks he refers to as “the structures which speech (*logos*) employs.” But these building blocks, even the entire repository of resources one is left with at

¹⁵ *On the Peace*, in Papillon, 2004, 157.

the end of Isocrates' teaching, are neither exhaustive of nor sufficient for practical wisdom, which should rather be understood as a product of the confrontation between one's views (*doxai*) and the situation or "opportune moments" (*kairoi*). It is not only that philosophy itself fails to offer exact knowledge, but rather, that no such thing is in sight anywhere. For since "opportune moments elude exact knowledge (episteme)"—and since no responsible conception of philosophy, on Isocrates' view, can elude those opportune moments—we must expect philosophy to be an ongoing, never-ending work of public communication.

Against this background, philosophy is not to be understood as a "quest for certainty," but rather as a practical educational program that one can (and should) engage in to capacitate oneself as a public model and counsel. The central idea—if not a central word¹⁶—in the *Antidosis* extract is the challenge of adapting to fleeting moments, since it signals that the work of philosophy will never be done; there is no destination, no "end of inquiry," as pragmatists would say. Instead, Isocrates' philosophy incorporates the mythic Kairos figure, who according to legend says, when asked why he had long hair covering his face, but none at all in the back: "To be seized by the ones who approach me [but then:] Once I have passed on my swift-flying feet, I'll be captured by no one, longing to make me rewind, reeling me in from behind."¹⁷ Isocrates' "kairotic" emphasis entails, I would argue, that philosophy is endlessly innovative. Philosophy begins with "experience and detailed knowledge," with the basic "structures which speech employs," but it ends in endless dynamic and creative efforts to model and counsel a polis in the changing situations in which it finds itself. Which is another way of saying that it never ends.

Backwards, but to Neglected and Repressed Traditions

If what I have said goes some way towards making an "Isocratean" reading of Rorty's cultural politics more attractive, this proposal neverthe-

¹⁶ Too's readable translation is here at a certain distance from the literal Greek, καὶ τῶν καιρῶν ἐγγυτέρω ταῖς δόξαις γένωνται. Norlin's earlier translation is closer to the original, with the phrase, "bring their theories [*doxais*] into closer touch with the occasions [*kairon*] for applying them." See Isocrates, *Antidosis*, George Norlin, on: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>.

¹⁷ Morgan, 2004 highlights Isocrates' emphasis on consistency to an extent that would challenge my rather more "kairotic" reading. I believe she has identified an important strain in Isocrates' thought, but I am not convinced the consistency ideal drowns out kairos in the way she suggests.

less comes with certain complications—at least as an alternative to Ramberg’s “Platonist” reading. The most significant challenge is the distinctly *Gadamerian* inflection of Ramberg’s Plato.

In “Rorty and the Instruments of Philosophy,” Ramberg explicitly invokes Gadamer to support the contention that “in dialogue, argument and counter-argument stand mutually illuminated,” adding that this, “as Gadamer persuasively argues, is the essence of Platonic dialectic” (Ramberg, 2001, 36). Gadamer’s lead becomes quite apparent also in the central place that Ramberg reserves for the idea of *tradition*. What is the point of invoking Plato?, Ramberg asks. Is it simply, as Rorty would say, that Plato “kicked off the sequence we now refer to as the history of Western philosophy?” That cannot be all, Ramberg adds, for this would put us in “danger of jeopardizing the idea of philosophy as a tradition,” which, given Rorty’s own emphasis on conversation, would seem like a risky thing to do. For Ramberg, the crux of the matter is that “the idea of a tradition is a normative one,” in the sense that it tells all who take part that they are engaged in the *same* conversation, the *same* effort to “come to grips with the subject” (Ramberg, 2001, 38 and 39). Without Plato to anchor the philosophical tradition, the conversation of philosophy—to the extent it would now even qualify as such—would be shallow, superficial, and instrumental; it would be a series of (sophistical) *arguments* rather than *argumentation*, i.e. “thought aiming for dialectical illumination.”

For my purposes, the complication here is not so much Ramberg’s use of Gadamer, as it is Gadamer’s use of Plato—which Ramberg appears to take on board. The trouble, as has been articulated well by John Arthos, is that: “What has typically been read as rhetoric’s counter-tradition, a kairotic-performative rhetoric championed by Isocrates and Cicero against Platonic essentialist philosophy [. . .], is for Gadamer the counter-tradition to Western essentialism as a whole, anchored squarely in Plato’s dialogic example!” (Arthos, 2008, 172). In his rereading of Plato’s significance for rhetoric, Gadamer arguably opened up new and interesting ways of reading Plato, which incidentally have been developed much further in recent years, though often without any explicit reference to Gadamer (see e.g. Allen, 2010 or Kastely, 2015). But despite the promises of this revisionism, it cannot—except at the risk of its own plausibility—eliminate the differences between Isocrates and Plato, and in fact, this revisionism only consolidates further the image of the “royal road”: Now, not only is Plato the intellectual anchor of philosophy, he is also cast in the same role for rhetoric!

What gets buried, when Ramberg reads Rorty's pragmatism through Gadamer's Plato, are those "neglected and repressed traditions"—those "alternative paths"—that Barbara Cassin encouraged us to find. In burying those neglected and repressed traditions, I believe Ramberg removes much of the potential for the pragmatist conceptualization of philosophy that he himself seeks. Isocrates provides precisely what Ramberg fears will be lost if we give up Plato, namely a *tradition*. But if we start from *this*—kairotic-performative—tradition, we get a much more radical way of reading Rorty's pragmatism than the one Ramberg presents us with.¹⁸ We get a pragmatism that emphasizes *cultural politics*, where metaphors of "dialogue" and "conversation" point not (only) to face-to-face encounters between specialists in academic symposia and seminar rooms, but also (and not least) to public performances in democratic spaces about matters of public concern—what the Greeks in fact called *pragmata*.

If, as Nielsen argued, Rorty's work prompts us to enact a shift in the self-image and practices of philosophy, then I hope to have given at least a first stab at showing how Isocrates offers a more apt point of origin for a pragmatist conception of philosophy than does Ramberg's Gadamerian Plato. If I have, this is because Isocrates presents a self-image for philosophy which is much more modest than Plato's—more modest, indeed, than what one generally finds along the "royal road."

Isocrates moderates the promises of philosophy, first, by underlining that "nature," or primary habituation, is not so easily turned around. People do not, in general, change their minds, shift their commitments, or replace their identities and social bonds for no good reason—and a lot of the time, they do not even do so in the presence of good reasons. Education by way of philosophy is both possible and potentially effective—if it were not, Isocrates would be out of a job. Its scope is nevertheless limited, since it must always grapple with people's natures as well as the other forms of habituation that are at work on them—and those are persistent phenomena indeed.

Next, he moderates philosophy's self-image with his emphasis on *kairos*. He asks us to relinquish any idea of another *kind* of knowledge

¹⁸ I am presenting the choice of traditions here as a *choice*, which Ramberg, in another very enlightening piece, has given me reason to think that he might not approve of, cf. Ramberg, 2011. I believe, however, that the choice between Isocrates and Plato is not a choice between two different traditions as much as between the two faces, or two emphases, of the same tradition. They are not *different things*, but the *same thing, done differently*. And unless we are beings incapable of making choices at all, we can indeed choose to shift our emphasis; and arguably shifting one's emphasis is a very Gadamerian to do.

than the experiential one that goes into the training, since “opportune moments” (*kairoi*) in any case “elude exact knowledge (*episteme*).” Rather than the desire for a different kind of knowledge entirely, Isocrates tells us to work towards the more mundane ideal of *synthesis*. When he says that students should “synthesize everything they have learned,” this is a purely practical piece of advice; it means, quite simply, that one should rehearse seeing, weighing, judging, and maybe rearranging, the various components of a situation against each other, so that a wise course of action can be identified. Since otherworldly *episteme* is off the table, we are left with an ongoing effort to match up *doxa* with *kairos* using this-worldly and pragmatic *phronesis*—the only type of wisdom that makes a difference in practice. But since there are an infinite number of “opportune moments”—each one to some extent unique—one cannot expect to learn this art “through study”: *Phronesis* remains suspended between experience, on the one hand, and situational creativity, on the other. Under these circumstances, the only claim Isocrates makes on behalf of his philosophy (cf. the final lines of the extract from the *Antidosis*) is that his program of study will *better* equip someone to adapt views to situations, and hence, to offer wise counsel.

For those accustomed to Plato’s conception of philosophy, which strives to establish *enduring* answers, Isocrates’ version of that practice is sure to disappoint. Most likely, they will think of him as a “figure of inadequacy,” since, from their point of view, Isocrates appears to leave substantial questions—What is Truth? What is Beauty? What is Good?—in the balance, only to orient philosophy towards fleeting *moments*.

But if this disappoints philosophers, they should rather be disappointed by discovering that the self-image they “hold on to tenaciously” does not itself hold. As Rorty once put it, philosophy’s traditional self-image has rested on “visions of becoming destiny’s tot, reality’s faithful companion, truth’s devoted servant, reason’s guardian—rather than simply one more product of transitory circumstance,” and these, he says, “bolster fantasies we would be better off without” (Rorty, 2010, 3). Isocrates bolsters no such fantasies, entertains no such visions. Instead, as a true pragmatist, he returns time and again to the question of how philosophy can make a difference to the practical affairs that form pressing concerns in the lives that we lead. It is time that we, pragmatists, discovered his neglected and repressed tradition.

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