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Author(s): Brad McAdon

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Plato's Denunciation of Rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*

*Contrary to a prevailing view within rhetoric and composition circles that finds a positive view of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, I contend that Plato mockingly denounces rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*. To support this claim, I argue that the *Phaedrus* is an unmistakable response to Isocrates' *Against the Sophists* and needs to be understood as part of this dynamic dialogue and that in the *Phaedrus* Plato is distinguishing his philosophical method, as he conceives it, from Isocrates' pseudo-philosophical method (as conceived by Plato). I provide parallels between *Against the Sophists* and the *Phaedrus* and then explain the distinction between Isocrates' and Plato's respective conceptions of what the philosopher is and should do and between each writer's philosophical method.¹*

Many scholars of contemporary rhetorical and composition studies contend that Plato in the *Phaedrus* advocates a positive view of rhetoric that has been dubbed *philosophical* or *dialectical rhetoric* and that Plato is to be understood as a rhetorician in his own right.² Bizzell and Herzberg, for example, claim that “[t]he *Gorgias* develops Plato’s most extensive condemnation of false rhetoric, while the *Phaedrus* displays his most complete realization of true rhetoric” (56). Kathleen Welch also claims that Plato in the *Phaedrus* “is forthright in his interpretation of rhetoric’s positive force” (94). Welch states further that Plato’s rhetoric relies upon “the active interchange of rhetoric and dialectic between two sides actively engaged in a search” (100). As C. Jan Swearingen explains it more recently, “Plato does not abandon rhetoric entirely as a mode of discourse,” but instead,

he argues for a philosophical and ethical rhetoric that is dialogical and dialectical, that draws upon Socrates’ presence in the agora and symposia and his attempts to reintegrate the burgeoning specializations of the sophists—in logic, cosmology, epistemology, mathematics, and language theory—with the life of daily culture in the symposia of educated Athenians. (526)

Moreover, both Welch and Swearingen, as representatives of the *dialectical rhetoric* interpretation, also advance the idea that Plato was a rhetorician himself. Welch, for example, claims that Plato's act of writing—"his own stance as a rhetorician—has received less attention, particularly in the historicizing of rhetoric and composition studies," and that "[h]ow Plato writes as a rhetorician and how contemporary appropriators of his theories write as rhetoricians are discourse issues that loom before us" (94). Similarly, Swearingen suggests that

understood as a study of interactive discourse and of its goals, rhetoric was given one of its earliest expositions by Plato, who contributed to that paradigm the goal of seeking truth through its collective pursuit. By retaining the rigorous interrogative pattern of Socrates' practice of dialectic, Plato also defined a dialogical rhetorical practice that resembles contemporary rhetorics of inquiry. (527)

In sharp contrast to this dialectical or philosophical rhetoric interpretation of Plato's conception of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, I will argue that Plato's view of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus* is consistent with the view expressed in the *Gorgias*—he denounces it completely. To support this thesis, I will argue that the *Phaedrus* is to be understood as part of the dynamic dialogue that was taking place among Alcidamas, Isocrates, and Plato concerning rhetoric and rhetorical training and is, moreover, an unmistakable response to Isocrates' *Against the Sophists*. As a response to *Against the Sophists*, Plato attempts in the *Phaedrus* to clearly distinguish the philosophical method as he conceives it from Isocrates' pseudo-philosophical method. Furthermore, Plato is making a sharp distinction in the *Phaedrus* between his and Isocrates' conception of the philosopher and the philosophic method, and Plato's dialectic that is outlined in the dialogue is to be understood as his "philosophical method" and not as a "philosophical or dialectical rhetoric"—the latter of which is an oxymoron as far as Plato is concerned. By equating Plato's dialectic with his *true conception of rhetoric*, advocates of the view that attribute to Plato a positive, dialectical, or philosophic view of rhetoric in the *Phaedrus*, conflate Plato's conception of what a philosopher is and does with what the rhetor is and does. Therefore, it will also be necessary to delineate the distinction between Plato's conception of the philosopher and rhetor. Another concern that this essay will express, both directly and indirectly, is rhetorical-historiographical methodologies. It seems to me that contemporary commentators who understand a positive Platonic rhetoric do so by appropriating to Plato and Plato's texts a contemporary understanding of "rhetoric" rather than understanding the terms *rhetoric* and *rhetor* within their immediate and ancient contexts. The body of this essay will consider these important contexts, and I will close by emphasizing

ing the inconsistencies of the historiographical methodologies of those who advocate Plato's dialectical rhetoric.

Alcidamas, Isocrates, and Plato

Hansen has clearly demonstrated that the term *rhētōr* denoted no more than what we would call today "a politician" (16–17).³ The earliest (and later) appearances of the term clearly support this conclusion, as every reference to *rhētōr* by Aristophanes, Lysias, Thucydides, Xenophon, Demosthenes, Aischines, Dinarchus, and Hyperides refers to those who advise in the Assembly or wrangle in the People's Courts (*diakstēria*)—the two institutional arenas of the Athenian democracy.

It is within this context of the democratic institutions of ancient Greece that *rhētorikē*, the craft of the rhetor (or, Athenian politician), emerged, and Alcidamas, Isocrates, and Plato inherited these conceptions of *rhētōr* and *rhētorikē*. Moreover, an ongoing and dynamic polemical relationship existed among Isocrates, Alcidamas, and Plato concerning what *rhētorikē* was and what value it offered (if any) for the Athenian community. While it is generally agreed that Alcidamas's *On Those Who Write Written Speeches* and Isocrates' *Against the Sophists* were written against each other (though who is responding to whom is still open to debate), rhetorical scholars have not given enough consideration as to how the *Phaedrus* fits into this spirited debate. This essay will attempt to shed some light on the *Phaedrus*'s place within this ongoing discussion.

Alcidamas was the head of a rhetorical school in Athens at the end of the fifth and the early years of the fourth centuries, and even though he does not name his opponent in *On Those Who Write Speeches*, most agree that he is addressing Isocrates. He argues against written speeches and those who write them. While it is difficult to determine whether Alcidamas was the first to promote these criticisms against writing and written speeches, it does seem evident both that he is writing against Isocrates and that Plato later adopted some of Alcidamas's criticisms of writing as his own. For example, Alcidamas opens his *On Those Who Write Speeches* with a censure against those writers of speeches who are "proud and boastful" (1). Isocrates often claimed that his "speeches" were "far superior to any that have been spoken by my rivals."⁴ Alcidamas also censures those sophists who are "just as inexperienced in the practice of speaking as ordinary men, but are proud and boastful about their practice of writing speeches." This could refer directly to Isocrates' admitted inexperience as a speaker and, again, to his boastfulness as a writer. Moreover, Isocrates would often boast that he spent "hours in preparing" his "speeches" (*Paneg.* 4–14); Alcidamas, in turn, claims that "those who devote their lives to writing are woefully deficient in rhetoric and philosophy" (2).⁵ Alcidamas's primary concern

seems to have been more pragmatic—to teach his students in the practice of speaking on the spur of the moment within the contexts of the Assembly or the courts rather than with preparing finely tuned prose for show in the various contests within which Isocrates was renowned.

A more specific example that suggests a close relationship between Alcidas's, Isocrates', and Plato's texts is the use of *poiētēs logōn* by all three writers. In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates claims that formal training can make men more skillful and more resourceful, but it cannot fashion those who are without natural ability into good debaters or "makers of speeches" (*logōn poiētas*), the implication being that he can (15). In his closing comments of *On Those Who Write Speeches*, Alcidas seems to have latched onto this phrase and turned it against Isocrates:

Therefore, whoever desires to become a clever rhetor [. . .] and not just an adequate maker of speeches [*poiētēs logōn*], and wishes to make better use of the opportunities rather than to speak with words precisely, and is eager to have the goodwill of the audiences rather than the oppositions' ill-will, and who desires also to have a loose (flexible) mind, a free memory with no sign of forgetfulness, and is eager to secure an ability with speeches corresponding with the needs of his life—would he not, if he made attentive practice to speaking extemporaneously always and through all circumstances, while paying attention to writing as an amusement and as subordinate to speaking, be judged among those who have good judgment to have good judgment too? (33)

Plato then picked up this use of the phrase and invokes it in both the *Euthydemus* and the *Phaedrus*. Toward the end of the *Euthydemus*, Crito tells Socrates about one who had left in the middle of the earlier recounted discussion between Euthydemus and Dionysodorus. Crito relates that this was "one of those who are so clever at turning out speeches for the law courts" who stated to him that philosophy was a "thing of no worth" (*Laches* 304E). After questioning by Socrates, Crito continued that this one was not a *rhētōr* as he had "never appeared in the *dikastērion*" (cf. Isocrates' *To Philip* 81 and *Panathenicus* 10), but that he was a "composer of speeches," what Socrates called a "maker of speeches" (*poiētēs tōn logōn*, 305B). Socrates continued that this person was a cross between a philosopher and a politician and that such people are "worse than either of their components in relation to the object to which each of them is adapted" (306A). He explains that "if philosophy and the statesman's business are both good things, and each of them has a different object, and if these

persons, partaking of both, are between them, their claims are nought; for they are inferior to both" (306B). In Socrates' criticism of the careful writer in the *Phaedrus*, he includes a censure that seems to be borrowed from Alcidas in that the careful writer will "write for amusement" (*paidias*, cf. Alcidas 34), write to "treasure up reminders for himself,"⁶ and write at his leisure "adding this phrase and taking that away." Such a person is not a "philosopher" who "has composed his writings with knowledge of the truth, and who is able to support them by discussion of that which he has written," but is merely "a maker of speeches" (*poiētēn logōn*) (276D–78E). From this representation of a writer, Socrates immediately follows with his "praise" of Isocrates and asserts that as Isocrates grows older, his studies in rhetoric will not satisfy him, "but a more divine impulse will lead him to greater things" for "a kind of philosophy is in the mind of the man" (279A). Thus, by incorporating phrases used by both Alcidas and Isocrates, Plato, in sections of the *Euthydemus* and *Phaedrus*, sketches a portrait of Isocrates as one who is neither a rhetor nor a philosopher but, mockingly, who may have something of philosophy in him. In the following section, I will argue that Plato's apparent praise of Isocrates is nothing more than mocking condescension as argued by Coulter (228) and is a fitting end to his distinction, in the *Phaedrus*, between his own philosophical method—dialectic—and Isocrates' pseudo-philosophical method—rhetoric.

The *Phaedrus* and Isocrates

The crux of my argument that the *Phaedrus* is an unmistakable response to Isocrates, and primarily his *Against the Sophists*, is the close parallel between Isocrates' rhetorical method of writing in *Against the Sophists* (14–18) and Plato's philosophical method of writing in *Phaedrus* (269ff). Plato's method of writing includes, I argue, precise, and sometimes exact, parallels to Isocrates' discussion. In Plato's discussion of his proposed method of writing that parodies Isocrates', he explains that what he has done in the dialogue up to that point has been to offer examples of good and bad writing that exemplify this proposed method and then contrast this proposed method with Isocrates' method. But, before considering this parallel, I will discuss a few other parallels that are important to my argument that the *Phaedrus* needs to be interpreted as a response to Isocrates and, primarily, *Against the Sophists*.

Plato provides several clues that the *Phaedrus* has Isocrates in mind. At *Phaedrus* 261C, Socrates lists the authors of several treatises of rhetoric including Nestor, Thrasymachus, and Palamedes. Phaedrus claims that he has not heard of any of these authors' works on rhetoric unless Socrates is "disguising [*ei de kataskeuazeis*] Gorgias under the name of Nestor and Thrasymachus or

Theodorus under that of Odysseus” (De Vries 204). Socrates responds that perhaps he is. De Vries offers a translation of *kataskeuazeis* as “dress up as” and offers a parallel passage in Demosthenes for consideration. Therein, Demosthenes warns the jurors that Conon’s forthcoming defense is a distortion of the actual facts and that he will “make out” [*kataskeuazei*] that Demosthenes and his brothers are drunken and insolent men when exactly the contrary is true (204). I suggest that this practice of disguising or misrepresenting names in the *Phaedrus* could also apply to Lysias and the speech attributed to him and that by Lysias, Plato could mean Isocrates (who was also a logographer). Two passages can be offered in support of this interpretation.

First, early in the *Phaedrus*, Phaedrus⁷ states that Lysias is “the cleverest writer of our day” (*deinotatos ōn tōn nun graghein*, 228A). In the passage from the *Euthydemus* that was previously mentioned, Crito discusses

a man who thinks himself very wise, one of those who is so clever at turning out speeches for the lawcourts (*ta dikastēria deinōn* [304D]), [. . .] only he is reputed to know about the business, so they declare, and to be a clever person, and compose clever speeches. (*deinon einai kai deinous logos* [305C])

Many commentators agree that this is a reference to Isocrates and that he offers what seems to be an unmistakable response to this charge in the *Antidosis*:

If, therefore, I were to agree with my accuser and concede his claim that I am the “cleverest” [*einai deinotatos*] of men and that I have never had an equal as a writer of the kind of speeches which are offensive to you, it would be much more just to give me credit for being an honest man than to punish me. (35)

In fact, Isocrates claims that the *Antidosis* itself is “the most convincing proof” that no one has been harmed “by his cleverness or his writings” (*hupo tēs deinotētōs* [33]). This seems to be a clear response to the *Phaedrus*.

Another clue begins at *Phaedrus* 230C where Phaedrus is chiding Socrates because Socrates acts as though he is a stranger outside the city walls. Socrates seeks forgiveness and responds, “You recognize, dear friend, that I am a lover of learning” (*philomathēs gar eimi* [230D]). There is a tradition, cited in Ascham’s Scholemaster and referenced by Norlin, that “Isocrates did cause to be written at the entrie of his schole, in golden letters, this golden sentence, (*Ean es philomathēs, esē polumathēs*),” which translates as “If you are a lover of knowledge, you will be a master of knowledge.” Moreover, in *To Demonicus*, Isocrates exhorts the young king to pursue knowledge, for “If you love knowledge, you

will be a master of knowledge,” and the Greek is exactly that cited by Ascham (18). Thus, at *Phaedrus* 230C, Socrates is, I suggest, invoking an Isocratean axiom that would be recognized by readers as a clear reference to Isocrates.

There are other clues that the *Phaedrus* is a response to Isocrates. Malcolm Brown and James Coulter have cogently argued that in the middle speech in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates' first speech, “Plato is sketching a certain type of rhetorical sophist whose philosophy (or more accurately ‘philodoxy’) is totally unPlatonic” (405). They go a step further and “venture to identify the mentality represented [in the middle speech] with that of Isocrates” (405). Citing passages from Isocrates' *To Nicocles*, *Helen*, and *Busiris*, they argue convincingly that the middle speech fails at providing a clear definition of the issue under consideration and that the underlying method of the speech is “philodoxical” in that it relies upon theory (or, opinion—*doxa*) rather than knowledge (*epistēmē*) (406–08).

If Brown and Coulter are right, then it is not surprising to also find allusions to Isocrates in the third speech. Of the many that could be cited, perhaps the most notable is the familiar reference to the two horses and the charioteer and the stumbling of the soul. “If possible,” Isocrates exhorts Demonicus,

avoid drinking-parties altogether, but if ever occasion arises when you must be present, rise and take your leave before you become intoxicated; for when the mind is impaired by wine, it is like chariots which have lost their drivers; for just as these plunge along in wild disorder when they miss the hands which should guide them, so the soul stumbles again and again when the intellect is impaired. (*To Demonicus* 32)

In the third speech in the *Phaedrus*, Plato has Socrates associate the soul with a pair of winged horses and a charioteer, and explains how the soul loses its wings and falls. The soul's fall is due to its reliance upon opinion (*doxa*) rather than pursuit of truth, and the discussion is punctuated with references to opinion (*doxa*) versus knowledge (*epistēmē*) and the distinction between the real philosopher and the not-so-real philosopher (246A–49D)—issues that are polarizing points of contention between Plato and Isocrates. While these clues provide possible connections between Isocrates and Plato, that the *Phaedrus* and its speeches are concerned primarily with the different conceptions of the philosopher and the philosopher's task, a closer and more precise connection can best be understood by considering more closely first the direct relationship between *Against the Sophists* (14ff) and *Phaedrus* (271ff), and, second, by considering both writers' conceptions of *philosopher* and *philosophia*.

Against the Sophists 14ff and Phaedrus 271ff

In *Against the Sophists* (1–8), Isocrates, in part, criticizes those eristics who, he claims, prefer exact knowledge (*epistēmē*) to conjecture (or opinion, *doxa*). He claims further that “when people observe that those who follow their own judgments [*tais doxais*] are more consistent and more successful than those who profess to have exact knowledge [*epistēmē*], then they have good reason to condemn such studies as babbling and trifling” (or hair-splitting), but not as “diligent study of the soul” (*ou tēs psuchēs epimeleian*) (8).

After criticizing some who claim to teach *politikous logous*, he begins delineating his own view, for, he notes, it is not enough only to rebuke others. Abilities, he claims, whether in speaking or other fields, are found in those with good natures presumably from birth and in those who have been trained with experience, as training makes them more artful (*technikoteroi*) and more resourceful. Students, he says, need to know and learn the different kinds of discourse, and in order to obtain the knowledge of making good speeches, students need to entrust themselves to someone who knows about making good speeches. It is necessary that the student choose and bring together the appropriate material for each subject, to arrange this material properly, not miss what the occasions demand (*kairōn*), and adorn the speech with striking thoughts with a rhythmic style. These abilities require much diligence and are the work of a manly (*andrikēs*) and conjecturing or theorizing (*doxastikēs*) soul. As for the teacher, he must pass these skills on accurately while leaving nothing out and must himself prepare such examples (*paradeigmata*) so that those speakers who have been shaped by him and patterned after him will appear more brilliant and more graceful than those trained by others without these skills. Finally, when all of these skills are brought together, the practicing philosophers (*hoi philosophountes*) will have perfectly completed their task. But, according to the measure that any of these things that have been mentioned are left out (*elleiphthē*), to this end, the students will necessarily be in a meaner/sorrier state of mind (14–19).

When we compare this section of *Against the Sophists* to the *Phaedrus*, striking similarities are evident. Following Socrates’ second speech, the discussion between Phaedrus and Socrates is replete with references to the importance of the speaker knowing the truth and having knowledge (*epistēmē*) rather than relying upon opinion or conjecture (*doxa*). Beginning at 266D, Socrates begins to delineate and then criticize the handbook approach toward writing speeches, claiming that these traditional conventions—introduction, narrative, testimony, proofs, probabilities, confirmation, and, then, stylistic concerns—do not in themselves make one a good speaker or writer (266–69). Socrates then begins to explain to Phaedrus that in order to be truly rhetorical one must “add to his rhe-

torical nature (*huparxei phusei rhētorikō*) knowledge (*epistēmēn*) and practice (*meletēn*). At whatever point you are deficient (*ellipēs*) in these, you will be incomplete" (269D). This is clearly a direct reference to the passage from *Against the Sophists* (14–15) discussed above. It is worth noting that Plato adds the acquisition of knowledge (*epistēmēn*) to Isocrates' two requirements of a natural aptitude and practice—an addition that, on the one hand, Isocrates would adamantly reject as he vehemently opposed the Platonic conception of *epistēmē*⁸ but, on the other, an addition that he later incorporated into his revised requirements for the training of the rhetor in the *Antidosis*. Therein, to the requirements of natural aptitude and practice, he adds—because of Plato?—that "they must be trained and grasp the knowledge (*labein tēn epistēmēn*) whatever it might be concerning each [subject]" (187).

Socrates, however, is only beginning to unveil his method of writing that emulates, parodies, and builds upon Isocrates'. He continues that since the nature of rhetoric is to persuade the soul, the nature of the soul, echoing *Against the Sophists* (8), must be carefully analyzed by its various forms, and thus extending the breath of Isocrates' suggestion that the soul be merely studied. Moreover, echoing Isocrates further, the student must learn to classify and divide the different kinds of speeches, add a knowledge of the times for speaking, and distinguish the times for brief, intensive, or pitiful speeches. Once again, Plato has Socrates summarize by stating that when, and only when, one has acquired and mastered these skills—classifying the kinds of soul and kinds of speeches and recognizing the opportune occasions—will his art be fully and completely finished. And, once again, he concludes by claiming that if anyone who omits (*elleipe*, mimicking Isocrates again) any of these points in his speaking or writing claims to speak by the rules of art (which Isocrates had omitted in his model), the one who disbelieves him is the better man. It is also important to note that Plato has Socrates state, "Perhaps the author says, 'O *Phaedrus* and Socrates, do you really think it is this way? Or, must the art of speaking arguments be explained some other way?'" (271D–72B). By articulating a singular author who would question Socrates' method of writing, Plato is identifying no one else than the person whom he has been emulating/parodying—Isocrates.

There are two more similarities between the methods of writing in the *Phaedrus* and *Against the Sophists* that Plato does not address in the passage above but does address in the *Phaedrus* that merit brief mention. Isocrates claims that the teacher must provide examples (*paradeigmata*) for his students to emulate (*Against the Sophists* 17–18). Plato plays on this by having Socrates assert that the three speeches are examples (*paradeigmata*)—negative and positive—from which the student could learn principles of speaking and writing (262C, D, and 264E). The first two speeches are an example (*paradeigma*) of the

way in which one who knows the truth may lead his hearers on with sportive words (262D). Socrates also refers to the first speech as including examples (*paradeigmata*) not to be followed (264E), but suggests that the third speech especially (even though it was, as a whole, merely childish play [*paidia pepaistha*] [265C–D]), provides the important principles of (1) perceiving and bringing together in one idea scattered principles and (2) dividing things by classes, both of which the student must master if he is to be a good writer (265D–E), which Plato accomplished in his classification of souls and his division of four kinds of madness in Socrates' second speech. Plato's use of "childish play" in this context (and throughout) seems also to be a reference to, or borrowing of, Alcidas's reference to Isocrates' works as "childish play" (Alcidas 34). A final important similarity concerning the third speech is Phaedrus' response that Socrates' argument that the nonlover should be favored is presented most manfully (*mal' andrikōs*, 265A). As mentioned above, Isocrates claimed that to become a good writer required a manly (*andrikēs*) soul. Plato, too, picked up on this and attributes such manliness to Socrates' speech.

Now it could be argued that these many similarities between Isocrates' *Against the Sophist* and Plato's *Phaedrus* are nothing more than coincidence or the common use by two authors of common terms. In response to such a claim, I posit that the number and close similarities of these parallels—the similarities between *Against the Sophists* (14–18) and *Phaedrus* (2701ff), the use of "clever speaker" (*deinos*), the lover of learning (*philomathēs*), the addition of Platonic knowledge (*epistēmē*) to Isocrates' requirements of natural ability and practice, the chariots and their drivers, the importance of understanding/studying the nature of the soul, the "maker of speeches" (*poiētēs logōn*), the specific reference to the speeches in the *Phaedrus* as *examples*, and the "manly spirit" required by Isocrates and exhibited by Socrates—point to direct, and intentional, reference. When we add to these similarities Plato's "praise" of Isocrates, which will be argued below is nothing other than mocking condescension of Isocrates' view of philosophy, it seems unmistakable that the *Phaedrus* needs to be read against *Against the Sophists*.

Isocrates' and Plato's Conception of *Philosophia* and *Philosophos*⁹

It is important to remember that Isocrates claims that it is those who are practicing philosophers (*hoi philosophountes*) who are responsible to both promote/teach good writing and learn to speak and write well, and that he claims to be such a *philosophos* (*Against the Sophists* 18; *Ad Demonicus* 3). It is in the *Antidosis*, however, where he constructs the fiction of his own trial that he expounds his view of a philosopher and *philosophia*. After explaining that what

some people (seemingly Plato) call *philosophia* is not entitled to the name and claiming that it is not in the nature of man to grasp knowledge (*labein epistēmēn*) that will absolutely tell us what to do or say, he submits that those are philosophers (*philosophous*) who are able to arrive at the best course of action by their conjectures (*tais doxais*) and who occupy themselves with the studies that lead to this end. These studies are nothing other than the ability to speak well (*legein eu*), the ability to persuade one's audience, and the desire to seek one's advantage (271ff).

Isocrates maintains that one who desires to speak well, in the sense that he means it, will not support causes that are unjust or petty, but, and this will be important when we compare Isocrates' conception of *philosophos* to Plato's, support those concerns that are devoted to the welfare of man and the common good. Thus, for Isocrates, the ability to speak well and think well (*phronein*) will be rewarding to those who have a philosophical and reputable disposition. The ability to persuade (*peithein*), for Isocrates, includes the absolute condition of a reputable character, for "the argument that is made by a man's life is of more weight than that which is furnished by words." As for seeking one's advantage, he does not mean accruing advantage by ill-gotten gain. Rather, as he explains in his response to those philosophers (*tous philosophountas*) who criticize his idea of seeking advantage, there is nothing wrong with seeking the enjoyments of as many things as possible while at the same time practicing justice, honoring the gods, and cultivating all the other virtues (*Nicocles* 1–2). Thus, as far as Isocrates is concerned, the terms *philosophos* and *philosophia* should not be attributed to those who ignore the practical needs of the state and who would rather pursue the "mental juggling" of the ancient sophists, but should be attributed to those who pursue and practice those studies—speaking well, persuading others, and seeking advantages—that will enable them to govern wisely both our own households and the commonwealth. It is these studies, he argues, that should be the objects of our work, of our pursuit of knowledge, and of our every act (*Antidosis* 285).

As for Isocrates' distinction between *epistēmē* and *doxa*, as mentioned above, it is not so much that he thinks any *epistēmē* is not possible to acquire since the *epistēmē* necessary to compose good discourses is possible and he claims that he can provide it (*Against the Sophists* 16). Rather, his concern with those who claim to have and teach *epistēmē* is that he understands these to claim they are able to provide (absolute or near-absolute) knowledge (*epistēmē*) about (1) civic matters that will benefit the state but who do not provide any *action* to make the state a better state (*Helen* 9) or (2) personal matters that if grasped by the students, they will know what to do in life (*Against the Sophists* 3). Such knowledge, according to Isocrates, does not exist. Rather, it is those who apply themselves to the study of "theories" or "conjectures" (*doxai*) who will be better

prepared for the many diverse circumstances of life (*Antidosis* 184). As Norlin notes, *doxa* “is here, not irresponsible opinion, but a working theory based on practical experience—judgement or insight in dealing with the uncertain contingencies of any human situation which presents itself,” in which realm “there can be no exact science” (*Antidosis*, note *a*, 290–91). Similarly, in his introductory remarks in *Helen*, after censuring those eristics who try to prove useless abstract notions with hair-splitting arguments, he submits that

to conjecture [*doxazein*] about useful things is much better than to have exact knowledge [*akribōs epistasthai*] concerning useless things and that to be a small player in important things is better than being a big player in little things and in those things that are of no value in life. (*Helen* 5)

In summary, Isocrates’ philosopher is a pragmatist. I think that Edward Schiappa is right, for the most part, when he points out three interrelated themes in Isocrates’ writings that “have obvious contemporary Pragmatist parallels.” These include

his regard for the importance of informed opinion [*doxa*] and doubts about certainty [*epistēmē*]; his belief that pedagogy ought to be moral and aimed at preparing students for participation in civic affairs, and his general preference for practical over speculative philosophy. (*Beginnings* 181)

His *philosophical method* is dependent upon forming elegant and persuasive speeches that reflect informed theories (*doxa*) about the greatest of civic affairs.

In sharp contrast to Isocrates’ conception of a philosopher and philosophic method, Plato’s philosopher is, rather than civic minded in the Isocratean sense, otherworldly. In the *Phaedo*, for example, as Socrates awaits the hemlock, Plato has him explain that the philosopher should not fear death for he, more than any other man, separates the soul from communion with the body—“True philosophers” (*hoi philosophountes orthōs*), he says, “and they alone are always most eager to release the soul, and just this—the release and separation of the soul from the body—is their study, is it not?” (67D). And, one who is really a philosopher is confident that he will find pure wisdom nowhere else than in the other world (68b). Moreover, Plato’s philosopher is estranged from Athenian civic affairs. In the *Theaetetus*, for example, he has Socrates explain that philosophers, from their youth up, are ignorant of the way to the Agora, do not know where either the People’s Court (*dikastērion*), the hall where the Council of Five Hun-

dred meet, or any other common meeting place of the citizens are. They neither hear the debates over proposed laws and decrees nor see them when they are published. They shun public meetings and banquets, avoid the chorus girls, ignore the personal affairs and inheritances of their families, for it is only his body that has its place in the city. In his mind, all these things are considered petty, and he disdains them all. This same sentiment is also reflected in the *Republic* where philosophers are said to be "of no service at all to the multitude who make up the state" (487E).

While Plato's philosopher would not associate with the Athenian democratic institutions and their practitioners, in his ideal state, it would be the philosophers who would be its leaders (*Republic* 484C). In his introductory remarks in the *Republic* leading up to his definition of a philosopher, Plato has Socrates state that

unless the philosophers rule as kings or those now called kings and chiefs genuinely and adequately philosophize, and political power and philosophy coincide in the same place, while the many natures now making their way to either apart from the other are by necessity excluded, there is no rest from ills for the cities, my dear Glaucon, nor I think for human kind, nor will the regime we have now described [Bks 1–4] in speech ever come forth from nature, insofar as possible, and see the light of the sun. (Bloom 473D)

Plato then has Socrates explain that political leadership (statesmanship) belongs to the philosopher and his realm of study because of his very nature. This philosophical nature includes a love and a desire to acquire the kind of knowledge that reveals to him something of the essence that is eternal, a spirit of truthfulness, a love of the truth, temperance, gentleness, and a mind endowed with measure and grace that has been perfected by education and maturity (484C–488A). The education of these philosophers, in preparing them for statesmanship, includes, and in contrast to Isocrates' educational curriculum, math and the ability to reckon (*logismos*), geometry (the knowledge of the eternally existent), astronomy (for its utilitarian uses in formulating calendars, festivals, and seasons), a knowledge of the good, and the ability to reason from first principles to a conclusion (503C–31). It is important to note here that rhetoric is not only not included as part of the philosopher's education, but it also plays no role whatsoever in Plato's ideal republic.¹⁰ As lovers of knowledge (*epistēmē*), Plato's philosopher will know that knowledge (*epistēmē*) is naturally related to that which is, to know that and how that which is is (477A)—similar to Aristotle's claim that demonstrative knowledge (*apodeixis*) knows not only what is but why

what is is (*Po. An.* 1.7, 1.12, and 1.27)—and that opinion (*doxa*) is somewhere between knowledge and ignorance and, as such, equivocates between the two (*Republic* 477B–80A). Thus, those practitioners of opinion (*doxa*) are not lovers of wisdom (*philosophous*), but lovers of opinions (*philodoxous*), and many scholars understand *Antidosis* 271ff—Isocrates’ defense of his philosophical based upon *doxa*—as his response to this charge.

These areas of philosophical study are for Plato only precursors that will prepare his budding philosopher for the crux of his philosophic method—dialectic (531E). Dialectic is the crown jewel of Plato’s philosophical (not rhetorical) training. In addition to defining dialectic as the “attempt through discourse of reason to find one’s way to the very essence of each thing” (*Republic* 533A), Plato, throughout his dialogues, juxtaposes his dialectical method with the rhetorical method as practiced in the democratic institutions of the Assembly (*ekklēsia*) and the People’s Courts (*dikastēria*). In the *Theaetetus*, for example, he has Socrates explain that it is natural that those who have studied philosophy for a long period of time appear ridiculous when they enter the courts of law as speakers. In comparison to *freemen* who have been brought up in philosophical pursuits, he considers those practitioners of the People’s Courts (the rhetors) to be as slaves in breeding because while the practitioners of philosophy have the leisure to engage in argument after argument

the men of the other sort [those who engage in courtroom discourse] are always in a hurry—for the water flowing through the water-clock urges them on—and the other party in the suit does not permit them to talk about anything they please, but stands over them exercising the law’s compulsion by reading the brief from which no deviation is allowed. (127Cff)

This penetrating question-and-answer method of argumentation that attempts to “exact an account of the essence of each thing” by “striving to examine everything by essential reality and not by opinion” (*Republic* 534B–C) belongs, we are told time and time again, only to the philosopher. This is the case throughout the *Theaetetus* and *Republic*, and there are far too many passages in these texts that attest that dialectic belongs only to the philosopher to list. In the *Sophist*, too, Plato has Socrates attribute the practices of dividing and classifying to dialectic, and then asserts that “surely, I suppose, you will not grant the art of dialectic to any but the man who pursues philosophy in purity and righteousness. [. . .] How could it be granted to anyone else?” (253Cff).

It is this “sheer irreconcilability,” as Coulter terms it (226), between Plato’s concept of the philosopher and his philosophic method and Isocrates’ concept of the philosopher and his philosophic method that we find in the *Phaedrus*. Plato

parodies Isocrates' philosophic method of writing "finely tuned" and persuasive speeches that rely upon conjectures (*doxai*) with his own philosophical method of dialectic that relies upon *epistēmē*, division, and classification. This is clear in the closing lines of the *Phaedrus*, for Plato attributes to the writer who subscribes to his dialectical method the name of philosopher (*philosophon*), whereas to the writer who, once again invoking Alcidas's critique (29–32), "turns his words up and down at his leisure, and adding this phrase and taking that away," he attributes the title "maker of speeches" (*poiētēn logōn*)—another unmistakable reference to Isocrates. That it is Isocrates whom Plato has in mind here is further demonstrated by explicit reference to Isocrates in the immediate passage as still "young yet" and as having "something of philosophy inborn in his mind" (279A–B). We can better understand the mocking tone of this passage if we understand that if the *Phaedrus* was written, as many suggest, around 370 BCE, then Isocrates was near seventy—certainly not still young, and by understanding the passage within the context of the two different writers' irreconcilable views as to what a philosopher and the philosophic method are, as I have attempted to outline above. Understood within this context, Plato's "praise" of Isocrates is nothing more than mocking condescension and a fitting conclusion to a dialogue in which Plato contrasts two irreconcilable views of the philosophic method—Isocrates' *rhetorical* method and his own *philosophical* method.

Closing Argument and Conclusion

I began this discussion by claiming that contemporary rhetorical and composition scholars' claims that Plato's *Phaedrus* offers a positive view of rhetoric (a philosophical or dialectical rhetoric) and that Plato was, himself, a rhetorician are not supported by the texts they rely upon to support their view. I have attempted to demonstrate, if only in outline form, that the *Phaedrus* is an unmistakable response to Isocrates' works (primarily *Against the Sophists*) and Isocrates' conception of the philosopher and the philosophic method and that these important contexts need to be considered in any interpretation of the *Phaedrus*. Plato was not advocating a positive view of rhetoric as *rhētorikē* was understood by fourth-century BCE Athenians, by Plato, or by Isocrates. Rather, in the *Phaedrus*, Plato rejects Isocrates' conception of *philosophia* and philosophic writing (what Plato terms *rhētorikē*) and advocates his philosophical method—*dialektikē*—that he assigns to no one else than the philosopher as he is conceived by Plato. Moreover, to state that Plato was a rhetorician is to use the term *rhetor* equivocally. Equivocation occurs when we attribute to an ancient term, *rhētōr*, a contemporary meaning that the ancient term did not originally connote. The ancient Greeks did not consider Plato a rhetorician. Plato certainly

did not consider himself a rhetorician, but a philosopher, and later commentators, including Aristotle, did not consider Plato a rhetor. There is, in Plato's understanding of these two terms, an important distinction that has been blurred by contemporary scholars who understand Plato as a rhetorician who advocate a philosophical or dialectical rhetoric.

If my argument is sound, then at least two significant implications would seem to follow. These implications are the methodological practices and pedagogical dispositions that are either explicitly or implicitly advanced by the Dialectical School, as presented by Welch, that have significantly influenced contemporary understandings of classical rhetorical texts. According to Welch, this group of scholars within contemporary rhetoric and composition studies "reject formalist readings that privilege texts over other discourse issues" (168). Welch asserts that these scholars within the Dialectical School "tend toward inquiry in the connectedness of classical rhetoric rather than discovering a definite rhetorical 'reality'" (168). She distinguishes the Dialectical School from that group she terms the Heritage School who, she claims, are characterized by their "positivistic" disposition in that they understand that classical rhetorical texts exist "in a more or less world of artifacts, knowledge, and retrievable reality" (9), who regard "classical rhetoric as a series of objective writings," and who exclude the classical rhetorical texts from their contexts (169).

As Welch explains it, the Dialectical School attempts to "connect" ancient rhetoric with the present by illuminating classical languages and culture and by making connections between the ancient past and the present (29)—that is, understanding the complexities and the varieties of contexts and the "dialectical tensions" associated with classical rhetoric. She suggests that such "dialectical tensions" are evident in Plato's struggle with what she calls "sophistic" rhetoric and "philosophical" rhetoric, and argues that commentators who claim that Plato denounced rhetoric "decontextualize" Plato's works and need to consider more of Plato's works than the *Gorgias* in order to ascertain Plato's view of rhetoric, and, moreover, that those who focus upon Plato's censure of rhetoric in the *Gorgias* have "lost Plato's rhetoric and dialectic," for Plato's "philosophical rhetoric," as expounded in the *Phaedrus* (and *Sophist*) understands rhetoric as "a promoter of knowledge" (47–48).

As I have attempted to demonstrate throughout my argument, this influential and popular understanding of Plato is both foreign to Plato's dialogues, if they are understood within their immediate cultural and philosophical contexts, and it distorts the ancient rhetorical past by reducing the complex and dynamic argument of the *Phaedrus* to a claim that it can be connected to contemporary composition instruction because of the value of its organic structure as expressed in the "writing as living body metaphor" (25). I call this pedagogical

approach of “making connections” pedagogical determinism because it seems as though the Dialectical Schools’ historiographical method is influenced by how to use these classical rhetorical texts in the contemporary composition classroom rather than by attempting to understand these texts in their ancient and dynamic educational and philosophical contexts first and foremost. But Welch’s Dialectical Schools’ methodological attempt to “make connections” between the past and present disparages such a “close reading” of ancient rhetorical texts that tries to understand these texts within their immediate contexts because such an historiographical methodology is, she claims, “positivistic” in that it understands classical rhetorical texts exist “in a more or less world of artifacts, knowledge, and retrievable reality” (9). Yet, her claim that Plato was a “rhetorician” who advanced a “dialectical or philosophical rhetoric” is just as grounded in the acceptance of definite “rhetorical reality” as those she criticizes, for she must think that Plato “really” maintained such a position in a historical place and time if she claims that Plato was a “rhetorician” who, living in a real place and time, advanced a “dialectical rhetoric.” By claiming that Plato held any theoretical position whatsoever concerning rhetoric, she is inescapably bound to also accept that there was, in fact, “a definite rhetorical reality” that Plato maintained, and by doing so, she undercuts her own position. Therefore, it becomes a question of which “rhetorical reality” better fits the evidence that can be extracted from the rhetorical past that can be retrieved through a careful historiographical methodology.

So, as Schiappa in *The Beginnings of Rhetorical Theory in Classical Greece* has recently addressed the problems with the traditional reception of the origins of Greek rhetoric as presented by Kennedy’s problematic taxonomy of technical, sophistic, and philosophic rhetoric, I have attempted here to demonstrate that the prevailing view that Plato was a rhetorician who advocated a dialectical or philosophical rhetoric is not supported by the texts these scholars depend upon to support their view. This is not to say that teachers of writing cannot learn important principles from Plato, for we can. Contemporary discussions of critical thinking are indebted to the epistemological principles that Plato most ardently advocates, including: developing confidence in reason, refining generalizations, clarifying issues, analyzing the meanings of words and phrases, questioning deeply by raising and pursuing root or significant questions, analyzing or evaluating arguments, actions, and policies, and reasoning dialectically, just to mention a few. A fuller explication of the relationships between contemporary composition theory that relies upon critical thinking and Platonic reasoning is beyond the scope of this essay, but this is the direction, I think, that historical-rhetorical studies should pursue. Rather than attributing contemporary conceptions to ancient texts that distort the retrievable ancient rhetorical past, I suggest that we attempt to

understand these ancient rhetorical texts within their ancient (and dynamic) interdisciplinary contexts first and foremost—to, as Richard Enos has recently suggested, “recover the lost art of researching the history of rhetoric” (7–20).

Notes

¹I would like to thank *RR* reviewers Richard Leo Enos and Edward Schiappa for their appropriate and constructive comments on two earlier drafts of this paper that have helped to make this a better essay.

²For earlier expressions of the view that Plato advocated or developed a dialectical or philosophical rhetoric, see Rollin Quimby’s “The Growth of Plato’s Perception of Rhetoric,” Edwin Black’s “Plato’s View of Rhetoric,” Charles Kauffman’s “The Axiological Foundations of Plato’s Theory of Rhetoric,” and Kennedy’s taxonomy of Plato’s “philosophical rhetoric” (especially 66–74) and their respective bibliographies.

³See also Jeffrey Arthurs’ “The Term *Rhetor* in Fifth- and Fourth-Century B.C.E. Greek Texts.”

⁴Compare *Paneg.* 4, cf. *Panath.* 269 and *Antid.* 13 and 61, and for Isocrates’ response to this charge, see *Panath.* 33.

⁵Compare also *Alcid.* 6 to *Antid.* 15.49; *Alcid.* 2 and 12 to *Isoc. Antid.* 46–7; and *Alcid.* 4 to *Isoc Panath.* 206, 233ff, and *Aerop.* 56.

⁶This is a common theme in Isocrates; see *Antid.* 6–9 and *To Philip* 153.

⁷Athenaeus’s claim that it is impossible that the historical Phaedrus would have been either the associate or lover of Socrates (505f) is worth consideration in light of other claims in the dialogue (to be discussed in the text) that suggest that Plato is creating a fictional, rather than historical, context.

⁸See *Against the Sophists* (3.4, 8.4) and *Antidosis* (184ff, 271ff).

⁹For other considerations of Isocrates’ conception of *philosophia*, see, in addition to Nehamas, Goggin and Long’s “A Tincture of Philosophy, A Tincture of Hope: The Portrayal of Isocrates in Plato’s *Phaedrus*,” Schiappa’s chapter “Isocrates’ *Philosophia*” in *Beginnings*, and David M. Timmerman’s “Isocrates’ Competing Conceptualization of Philosophy.”

¹⁰The term *rhētorikē* occurs only once in the *Republic* (548D), and its use there is benign.

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Brad McAdon is an assistant professor in the English Department at the University of Memphis. His primary research interests include the history of rhetoric, classical rhetoric—especially Aristotle—New Testament rhetoric, the rhetoric of the canonization of the biblical texts, and theories of argumentation and critical thinking.