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Choosing Between Isocrates and Aristotle: Disciplinary Assumptions and Pedagogical Implications

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This essay examines several disciplinary and pedagogical assumptions behind Aristotle's centrality in the classical rhetorical canon and calls for a reconsideration of the established hierarchical relation of Aristotle to Isocrates.

Introduction

I was invited to speak at the Revisionist Classical Rhetorics symposium as someone implicated in "reconfiguring the established hierarchical relation of Aristotle to Isocrates." Despite several recent attempts to revive Isocrates as a classical figure worthy of attention, his name still appears as a footnote to Plato and Aristotle in most disciplinary histories of philosophy and rhetoric.[1] In *Logos and Power in Isocrates and Aristotle*, I argued that Isocrates and Aristotle ought to be regarded as opponents in a debate over the scope, resources and ends of rhetorical education. In what follows, I call into question some of the assumptions behind Aristotle's centrality in the classical canon and ponder the implications of challenging his centrality for the practice of teaching histories of rhetorical theory and, more broadly, for the models of teaching and studying rhetoric as an art in the twenty-first century.

Disciplinary Assumptions

Aristotle's central position in traditional accounts of the classical rhetorical canon depends upon a set of interlocking assumptions about Classical Greek rhetoric in particular and rhetoric in general:

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1) Classical Greek rhetoric is a single, monolithic paradigm.
2) Aristotle's articulation of *techne rhetorike* transcends its historical context.
3) Theory is superior to practice.
4) Rhetoric is concerned with persuasion.
5) *Techne rhetorike* is a neutral instrument.

1. *Classical Greek rhetoric is viewed as a single, monolithic paradigm*, rather than as an arena of competing conceptualizations and pedagogies. This view, although it has been effectively challenged by recent scholarship, still enjoys currency, whether we consider cultural conservatives' invocation of the "canon" as a positive model of liberal education or cultural radicals' denunciation of the elitism, sexism, and racism of that canon. "Dead Greeks," whether as models or as targets, have become convenient stereotypes in a contemporary culture war. Needless to say, either position is guilty of de-historicizing the so-called canon.

However, this homogenized, historically impoverished image occasionally plagues historians of rhetoric as well. One of the most recent examples is an edited volume *Rhetoric before and beyond the Greeks*. Several authors in this volume appear to take for granted a certain cultural and theoretical homogeneity of Classical Greek approaches to rhetoric, referred to, sometimes interchangeably, as "agonistic," "Athenian," and "Aristotelian" (see Sullivan 2005, 107). This identification of Greek rhetoric with Aristotle's formulation of it seems to stem from a belief that whatever came before *The Art of Rhetoric*, however polemical and conflicted, found a neat resolution in Aristotle's judicious and systematic treatment of the subject. This position regards the history of rhetoric as an evolution from less articulate and less methodical explanations of the power of language to Aristotle's mature art, in which Platonic strictures on rhetoric and sophistic reliance on *doxa* are reconciled. Furthermore, such authorities as Eric Havelock and Walter Ong lend weight to an explanation of this evolution in terms of the transition from orality to literacy. Aristotle's insistence on definition and categorization in all areas of knowledge, on this view, is a classic case study of a literate rationality at work.

While I agree that Aristotle was a great "systematizer," I also see his intellectual project as a way to discipline and often subvert the thinking of his predecessors. That he turned many of the thinkers whose arguments he assimilates into "lisping Aristotelians" (Cherniss xii-xiv) does not mean that his endeavor was merely encyclopedic. By putting Isocrates and Aristotle side by side, I have previously

attempted to show that much of what Aristotle had to say about rhetoric was an implicit reaction to Isocrates. Whether or not I have dislodged Aristotle's *Rhetoric* from its position of dominance in the minds of contemporary students, I hope to have presented some good reasons for questioning Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as the pinnacle of evolution of rhetorical thought in Ancient Greece. Indeed, if I were to propose one adjustment to the ways we teach classical rhetoric, it would be a requirement to attend to the contestation among the various "schools of thought" within the "canon," alongside the recovery of "muted" voices of the politically and culturally disenfranchised.

2. *Aristotle's articulation of techne rhetorike transcends its historical context* and therefore can be mapped onto other historical periods and cultures—an assumption paradigmatically expressed half a century ago by Donald Bryant's essay "Rhetoric: its Function and Its Scope" and restated recently by George Kennedy's *Comparative Rhetoric*. In an effort to uphold rhetoric's disciplinary identity and ethical integrity in a historical situation when advertising and propaganda were rapidly becoming major forms of public address, Bryant appeals to Aristotle's definition of the art and argues that Aristotle's main points can be easily updated with more recent material. For example, Bryant adds "informative" to the range of rhetorical discourse to defend the vital role of rhetorical training for experts in specialized fields (or their spokespersons). Bryant also appeals to Aristotle's "truth owes its defeat to its own advocates" line in order to separate good rhetoric, presumably taught at American speech departments, from its perversions, practiced by certain political campaign managers and advertising firms.

Kennedy's argument is more ambitious: he proposes to go beyond the Greco-Roman canon (the historical-cultural context in which the principles of rhetoric were developed most fully) to examine the rhetorical nature of communication in non-Western cultures as well as among some social animals. While Kennedy advocates an expansion of our conception of the rhetorical, he simultaneously imports Aristotelian categories to describe and explain patterns of symbolic behavior. In his view, stags exhibit patterns of deliberative rhetoric, female chimpanzees engage in "a kind of gentler judicial rhetoric," and crows practice epideictic rhetoric when they assemble to "renew their 'crowness'" (18–21). Aristotle's rhetoric naturalized, indeed.

To be sure, one can argue that Aristotle himself was responsible for attempting to turn the cultural and historical particularity of Athenian rhetoric into a set of atemporal premises. This, in fact, was his method in all areas of inquiry, as he relied on *endoxa*, "the

received opinions of the many and the wise," to articulate the principles of theoretical sciences, moral philosophy, and the *technai* of poetics and rhetoric. His treatment of *endoxa* reveals that Aristotle relied upon them not because he valued them as popular wisdom of a culture, but because he could distill from them propositions that, in his view, reflected the ability of humanity as a whole accurately to perceive the world of phenomena. Aristotle's epistemological optimism, his faith in the human ability to see the world as it is, is warranted by his own cultural beliefs about the process of vision, transparency of language, and the cyclical nature of history (see Haskins "Endoxa"). It is therefore useful to "re-historicize" Aristotle's approach to rhetoric to show how the great philosopher's methods were in themselves historically contingent.

3. *Theory/practice binary*, in which theory occupies a privileged position, is another assumption that buttresses Aristotle's centrality. Just as the transition from the oral state of mind to the literate gives rise to abstract thinking, formal theory is presumed to occupy a higher plane of existence than the discourse this theory presumably organizes and explains. Friedrich Solmsen's 1941 essay "The Aristotelian Tradition in Ancient Rhetoric" is the *locus classicus* of the dichotomy between Aristotle's "theory" and Isocrates' "practice," and as such it underwrites the privileged position of Aristotle's systematization of rhetorical proofs, commonplaces, and genres as a rationale for the analysis of practice. Isocrates' corpus, viewed from this vantage point, is but a series of models of speechmaking (or speechwriting), akin to the teaching of shoemaking by dangling in front of students representative examples of various styles of shoes (according to Aristotle's own analogy in the *Sophistical Refutations*).

Lately, some scholars have come to Isocrates' rescue by proposing that his writings, despite his insistence on not professing an "ordered art," contain both prescriptive and paradigmatic elements, in other words, both precepts and examples.[2] Isocrates, then, is an implicit, rather than explicit, theorist. This, of course, is better than counting Isocrates as a mere practitioner who supplied Aristotle with handy examples for his treatise (and Aristotle does indeed put Isocrates on display as a literary stylist, especially in the third book of the *Rhetoric*).

Still, the implicit theory position does not carry us far enough, I believe, because it does not delve into the respective attitudes of Isocrates and Aristotle towards the culture of imitative performance. Isocrates does not simply profess eloquence by example, but furnishes an early model of a political identity constructed and sustained

through literary performance. Isocrates' performative model rests upon an understanding of language that Kenneth Burke would call "dramatistic"—language is a continuous and repetitive action that shapes both individual and collective identities, that constitutes speakers' political authority and calls audiences into being. To train oneself in all the genres in which "logos expresses itself," to immerse oneself in a variety of culturally significant speech, is for Isocrates a way to become an active member of a political community. Performance implicates the speaker (or writer) in a relationship with an audience, and the speaker's reputation is intimately tied to this audience's approval or disapproval. The audience's response is not simply a matter of agreement or disagreement with the statements about the past or future, or judgments about the rhetorician's ability to use words (as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* would have it); rather, it either ratifies or invalidates one's very position within the political sphere. In Josiah Ober's words, elite rhetors in fourth-century Athens were engaged in "a highwire act with no net" (104).

Aristotle does not embrace this performative approach to citizenship. Following in Plato's steps, he disengages the conditions of virtue and citizenship from the messy context of democratic interdependence and performative contingency. Thanks to Plato, the term *mimesis*, associated with training in verbal and bodily excellence, acquired a derogatory connotation of unreflective mimicry, of "monkey see monkey do." Impersonation of someone else's speaking style is tantamount to taking on that person's character, and if performance is enacted in front of an audience, the audience, too, becomes emotionally involved in the image created by the performer. To Plato, this scenario exhibits the epistemological and political dangers inherent in imitative pedagogy: not only does it replace truth with simulacra; it also creates social chaos by confusing people about their proper roles in the political hierarchy. Plato's attack on the poetic tradition was absorbed by Aristotle who approved of imitative training only at an early stage of education (for, as he put in the *Politics* 1338b4, education is to be in habits before it is in reason). In his model of *paideia*, Aristotle acknowledges the impact of imitation on the moral habituation of the young (providing that imitation follows proper models), but insists that performance is not becoming to a gentleman once he reaches adulthood. Aristotle envisions leisured pursuits and a life of learning (*mathesis*) as more appropriate pastimes for educated aristocrats (at least in his ideal state).[3]

The highest form of leisured pursuits is *theoria*, a life of contemplation, to which practical arts of politics and ethics and productive arts of poetics and rhetoric are subordinated. Whereas today many refer to

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* as a *theory*, he calls it a *techne*, an art that occupies he lowest run of philosophically legitimate pursuits.[4] It is a *techne* precisely because it should not, in his view, be confused with substantive politics and ethics, the domains of deliberation supposedly unfettered by discursive practices of a democracy. Therefore, the tripartite hierarchical division of *theoria/praxis/techne* permits Aristotle to regard hetoric as a kind of systematic knowledge (rather than just a "knack") without granting it too much intellectual, political or moral legitimacy.

. *Rhetoric is concerned with persuasion.* This assumption is perhaps the most pervasive, if not unchallenged, in contemporary discussions of the subject, and it can be traced to Aristotle's formulations of rhetoric as "seeing the existing means of persuasion in each case" (*Rhetoric* I.1.14) or a "faculty of observing the possible means of persuasion in each case" (*Rhetoric* I.2.1). Although it may appear that hypothetically rhetoric can be applied to a limitless number of situations in which the lack of certainty calls for a symbolic intervention, Aristotle reduces the number to three, represented by generic division of deliberative, forensic, and epideictic occasions. This gesture, while seemingly reflecting the historical scope of public speaking in Athenian public culture, is an imposition of procedural roles upon speakers and audiences. Speakers select their means of persuasion to influence judgments about a fixed list of possible propositions. Likewise, audiences' exercise of judgment is fairly limited. In other words, persuasion is not a means of generating knowledge about politics and culture; rather, it is an agency of influencing the opinions and actions of those who don't know better by those who do. As such, it works as an appendage to substantive intellectual pursuits (of scientists, political theorists, and legislators).

Circumscribing the domain of the rhetorical in this way allows ristotle to insulate loftier forms of deliberation, exercised by persons ho possess practical wisdom, from the pedestrian rationality of the *oi polloi*. This, I have argued, is a reaction to Isocrates, who describes gos as a guide in *both* public deliberation and private reckoning. By oupling the terms *phronein* and *legein*, Isocrates refuses to separate ie conditions of thought and knowledge from the culturally ntrenched verbal means of articulating this knowledge. Perhaps most nportant, Isocrates proposes that logos *constitutes* a social comunity out of division, rather than simply ratifies the already existing olitical relationships. It is Isocrates who offers us a classical antecedent of the concept of *identification*, championed by Kenneth Burke ore than half a century ago.

5. *The neutrality of techne rhetorike*, its value as an instrument that can be used for both good and ill, is an article of faith in many rhetoric and communication classrooms. Aristotle indicates this neutrality by using the term *dunamis*, capacity or faculty, in his definition of rhetoric. In Aristotle's conceptual vocabulary, *dunamis* is an opposite of *energeia*, "activity." Conceptualized as a potentiality, rather than actuality, rhetorical capacity is useful insofar as the political agent has to confront those who are unlike him—never to address his equals. Rhetoric is not a discourse that is useful for constructing intersubjective bonds among like-minded aristocrats and philosophers. If we take into account, following George Kennedy, that *The Art of Rhetoric* is the most Athenian of his works, and that in the *Politics* democracy is a corrupt form of government, then we can begin to understand the reason why rhetoric is a *dunamis*.

To be sure, some scholars have tried to re-theorize Aristotle's formulation of rhetoric in order to avoid the charge of instrumentality associated with the term *dunamis*. Eugene Garver in particular, in his books *Aristotle: the Art of Character* and *For the Sake of Argument*, has reinterpreted Aristotle's rhetoric along the lines of internal ends. He proposes to treat rhetoric not as a *dunamis*, but as an *energeia*, an activity that is intrinsically good, that is, practiced well for its own sake. However, Garver ends up, as it were, drawing a magic circle around rhetoric within which it can be practiced as an intrinsically noble art, and his paradigmatic case study—the Warren Court's deliberation in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*—illustrates just how far above the fray rhetorical acts must remain in order to qualify as acts of moral reasoning.

Pedagogical Implications

Rethinking the teaching and application of "dead Greeks" is more difficult than criticizing long-held assumptions, because pedagogy is where our historical revisionism hits the bumpy road of contemporary educational practice, with its political, institutional and curricular constraints.

As someone with "skin in the game," I certainly do not propose that we abandon the so-called canon altogether. Nor do I wish to banish Plato and Aristotle from it in favor of other figures. Indeed, I would call for adding more items to the Plato and Aristotle reading lists; if we are to understand what's driving their conceptualization of rhetoric, we need to read more than the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus* for

ato and the *Art of Rhetoric* for Aristotle. This said, we *do* need to allenge the perception of homogeneity and historical transcendence presenting the rhetorical tradition to our students. A potentially uitful approach would be to consider the canonical texts alongside ch other as voices in a cultural debate that is situated in time and ace, rather than as points of interest on a historical trajectory from, y, some form of "proto-rhetoric" to "rhetoric proper."

In addition, it may be useful to ask how these canonical texts may ve assimilated (or subverted) existing genres and symbolic practices the historical period in which they were produced.[5] My contrastive udy of Isocrates and Aristotle (and to some extent, Isocrates and ato) is an effort to show how these authors' attempts to carve out d secure their intellectual and political space implicated them in rious types of relationships with their cultural resources and compe-ors. This kind of interpretive historical work accents the performa-e rhetoricity of canonical texts, an approach that looks at ways in ich these works implied or constructed their authors, audiences, d opponents.

Addressing the next related point, about the presumption of theory anscending historical context, I'd like to distinguish between trans-storical appeal, on the one hand, and relevance, on the other. To aim transhistorical value implies that such value is *inherent* in corded traces of discourse. This kind of claim, of course, is a thinly sguised conservative appeal to tradition. By contrast, relevance is notion that connotes a situation-specific context—relevance to whom d on what grounds. By introducing undergraduate and graduate dents to ancient texts we do not presume their self-sufficiency as ilestones of Western civilization. We bear the burden of proof. Per-nally, I find Richard Rorty's notion of "irony" as a mode of historical nsciousness rather appealing: someone who practices irony is "the rt of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own beliefs d desires—someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have andoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back something beyond the reach of time and chance" (xv).

I think it is fair to say that many revisionist historians frame their ojects as politically interested arguments, rather than mere ercises in "historical reconstruction." A number of my colleagues rhetoric and classics, including myself, are involved in what may called the "diversification" of the rhetorical canon because we are mmitted to cultural, racial, and gender diversity as a contemporary mocratic ideal. However, the lens through which we choose to exam-e ancient rhetorics may lead us to see what we want to see and in the ocess lose sight of the historical context. I have been involved in a

couple of projects in which I offered a "re-reading" of texts where authorship was either unknown or attributed by later sources. Recently, for example, I contributed to a volume on "classical rhetorics and rhetoricians," which, according to its editors, "gives special attention to the contributions of women to ancient rhetoric." I wrote an entry on "Pythagorean Women," a title that united several figures from late 6th century BCE to 3rd century CE. Because the fragments attributed to these figures were compiled by later sources, the claims one could make about them had to be severely qualified. There were several recurring terms in those fragments that on their face could have been used to posit an alternative theory of rhetoric—for instance, the master term *harmonia*. Imagine what you could do with this term if you decided to interpret it as a center of ancient Greek women's rhetorical theory! It would be very attractive to posit it as an antipode of *agon*, or *dissoi logoi*. One could build up an entire theory of women's irenic rhetoric that runs parallel to men's mainstream belligerent, agonistic rhetoric. Doing so, however, would risk essentializing both the so-called mainstream classical rhetoric and its alternative, let alone naturalizing masculine and feminine discursive agency. My point is that, while we do need to go back to seek out authors and genres that became absorbed or subverted by the "canon" we ought to exercise caution when extrapolating "theory" from instances of discourse. Indeed, by doing so we only ratify the assumption of "theory" as superior to "practice."

Revising the last two assumptions—that rhetoric is concerned with persuasion and that it is a neutral instrument—is consequential not only for teaching classical rhetorical tradition but for rhetorical education in general. Perhaps to teachers of rhetoric it is self-evident that rhetoric is *not*(or rather, *should not be considered*) a mere arsenal of persuasive means that can be deployed when "knowledge" of substantive things needs to be aired in public, or when a first-year student of composition is required to express her innermost self in a three-page essay. With accent on persuasion, the assumption is that there is something that precedes it—thought, empirical research, epiphany, or what have you. Rhetoric enters the scene when all the intellectual and ethical heavy lifting has been finished and it's now time for a press conference. With accent on neutrality, the assumption is that it is this preceding process—of thinking, researching, or communing with spirits—that is responsible for the outcome of rhetorical transaction, providing that the agent of discourse displayed the requisite persuasive skills. As a consequence, rhetoric as an art is both exempted from moral responsibility and relegated to the subservient position of an instrument at the disposal of substantive fields of knowledge.

In contemporary institutions of higher learning, rhetoric as a discipline occupies precisely this peripheral spot. At the introductory level, it is not even labeled "rhetoric" but goes under the names of "public speaking," "first-year composition," or "elements of debate." My first teaching job as a graduate student was in the department of "Rhetoric" at the University of Iowa. At the time, however, a Ph.D. in "rhetorical studies" was offered in the department of Communication Studies, located in a newer and better equipped building. Rhetoric, by contrast, resided in the basement level of a grim-looking English-Philosophy Building, and was flooded whenever the Iowa River overflowed in spring. I am sure we can tell many similar personal anecdotes about the "habitation of rhetoric," to use the phrase of our distinguished colleague Michael Leff.

Yet it was perhaps this inauspicious setting that compelled me to present Isocrates' vision of rhetorical education as a precursor of the discursive turn in contemporary arts and sciences and as a reminder that logos *constitutes* our personal and communal identities, not simply serves us. Unlike Aristotle's taxonomy of persuasive techniques, Isocrates does not offer us a template that can be easily detached from its cultural context. On the contrary, Isocrates shows that it is by studying and critically imitating our own culture's discursive diversity we can become persons of practical wisdom.

Notes

[1]For recent works in English see, for example, Terry Papillon; Takis Poulakos; Takis Poulakos and David Depew; Robert G. Sullivan ("Eidos/Idea in Isocrates"); and Yun Lee Too. One must also mention a new two-volume translation of Isocrates' extant works by Mirhady and Too (volume 1) and Papillon (volume 2), published by the University of Texas Press.

[2]See articles by Rummel, Papillon, and Sullivan ("Eidos/Idea in Isocrates").

[3]For a more elaborate version of this argument, see chapter 2 in my *Logos and Power in Isocrates and Aristotle*.

[4]See David Depew's "The Inscription of Isocrates into Aristotle's Practical Philosophy" for a cogent explanation of Aristotle's hierarchical subordination of *praxis* to *theoria* and of *techne* to *praxis*.

[5]A good example of scholarship in this vein is Andrea Nightingale's study *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy*.

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