

you wanted to leave behind an example for philosophers of how one must compose defenses regarding shameful accusations and difficult causes. Even if you did not know it before, I think it is now clear to you that someone would be rescued sooner by saying nothing than by making a defense in this way. [49] Moreover, it is also clear that philosophy, which is already greatly resented and in mortal danger,<sup>31</sup> will be hated even more because of speeches of this kind.

If you listen to me, you certainly will not compose worthless speeches in the future; and if you do, you will strive to say things that will not leave you with a worse reputation, will not corrupt your imitators, and will not debase education in public speaking.<sup>32</sup> [50] Do not be surprised that I attempt to advise you so forthrightly, even though I am younger and have no connection to you. I believe that to give counsel about such things is not the business of the oldest or those who are closest, but of those who know the most and want to help.

<sup>31</sup>This may be an allusion to Socrates and thus to Polycrates' epideictic speech attacking him.

<sup>32</sup>Lit. "paidensis concerning *logoi*," a circumlocution for what we call "rhetoric."

## 13. AGAINST THE SOPHISTS

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### INTRODUCTION

This short work gives a quick, opening snapshot of Isocrates' career as a teacher of politics, culture, and public speaking. It was probably written about 390. Its program shows a remarkable similarity to that of *Antidosis* (15), which was written thirty-five years later, but the goals of the two works are different. Later on, Isocrates will be on the defensive, defending his career and pleading for the importance of his contribution to Athenian life and politics. In this work he is more polemical; he wants to open up a space for himself and his teaching and distance himself from other teachers.

Unlike *Encomium of Helen* (10), to whose beginning this work is also similar, *Against the Sophists* does not name names—no doubt a conscious rhetorical strategy. But we can sometimes reconstruct the teaching systems of some of Isocrates' competitors from his criticisms: their use of mock debates, model speeches, and so on. Clearly Isocrates is assuming—perhaps he is also developing—some of the technical vocabulary that is used by other sophists, such as *kairos* and *prepon* (13), *idea* and *enrhymēma* (16), and *etide* (17), although he disdainfully rejects other terminology (19). It has generally been thought that his statement of his own teaching method, which seems to be introduced in the final chapter, has been lost. This view has recently been challenged by Too, who argues that Isocrates purposefully did not express it; see also Papillon 1995.

### 13. AGAINST THE SOPHISTS

[1] If all those who undertook to teach were willing to speak the truth and not make greater promises than they plan to fulfill, they

would not have such a bad reputation among the general public. But as it is now, those who dare to make boasts with too little caution have made it appear that those who choose to take it easy are better advised than those who apply themselves to philosophy. Who would not hate and despise first and foremost those who spend their time in disputes,<sup>1</sup> pretending to seek the truth but attempting from the beginning of their lessons to lie? [2] I think it clear to all that it is not in our nature to know in advance what is going to happen. We fall so far short of this intelligence that Homer, who enjoys the highest reputation for wisdom, has written that the gods sometimes debate about the future—not because he knows their thoughts but because he wants to show us that this one thing (i.e., knowledge of the future) is impossible for human beings.<sup>2</sup> [3] Now these people have become so bold that they try to persuade the young that if they study with them they will know what they need to do and through this knowledge they will become happy.<sup>3</sup> And once they have established themselves as teachers and masters of such great goods, they are not ashamed to demand only three or four minas for them. [4] If they were selling some other property for such a small fraction of its worth, they would not dispute that their reasoning is faulty. And although they value all of moral excellence and happiness so little, nevertheless they still claim to be sensible teachers of others. They say they have no need for money, disparaging wealth as “mere silver and gold,” but in their desire for a little profit they almost promise to make their students immortal. What is most ridiculous of all is [5] that they distrust those from whom they have to get this small profit—those to whom they intend to impart their sense of justice—and they deposit the fees from their students with men whom they have never taught. They are well advised to do this in regard to their security, but it is the opposite of what they teach. [6] It is all right for those teaching anything else to be careful over important

<sup>1</sup> I.e., eristic arguments. Plato discusses several kinds in *Sophist* 225–226.

<sup>2</sup> That the gods deliberate about the future shows that they do not know the future, and if the gods do not, how can humans? Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 2.23.4) uses this argument to illustrate the *topos* of “the more and the less,” that is, *a fortiori* reasoning.

<sup>3</sup> According to Theophrastus, who is quoted by Athenaeus 567A, Cleomander of Cyrene promised to teach how to achieve good fortune (*eurychia*).

matters: nothing stops those who have become skilled at other things from being dishonest in their obligations. But isn't it irrational for men who impart virtue (*aretē*) and soundness of mind (*sōphrosynē*) to distrust their own students in particular? Surely men who were gentlemanly and just toward others would not wrong those who made them that way.

[7] When private citizens consider all these things and see that those who teach wisdom and impart happiness are themselves in great need and earn little from their students, that they are vigilant about inconsistencies in words but overlook those in actions, and further, that they pretend to know the future [8] but are incapable of saying or advising anything about what should be done at present, and that those who follow their own opinions (*doxai*) live more harmoniously and are more successful than those who claim to have knowledge (*epistēmē*), I think it is reasonable for them to despise such pursuits and to believe them idle and trivial and not a cultivation of the soul.<sup>4</sup>

[9] It is not only these teachers who deserve criticism, but also those who offer skills in political speeches.<sup>5</sup> They have no concern for the truth but think that their art (*technē*) 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, and they promise to make their students such good orators that they will miss none of the possibilities in their cases. [10] They do not attribute any of this power either to the student's experiences or to his native ability, but they say that the science of speeches is like teaching the alphabet. Although they have not investigated how either of these subjects works, they think they will be admired and that their teaching of speeches will appear to be worth more because of their exaggerated promises. They have a poor understanding that it is not those who make bold boasts about arts who make them great, but those who can discover the power there is in each art.

<sup>4</sup> Isocrates' views on opinion and knowledge run completely contrary here to those of Plato. See also 4.184, 4.262, and 5.9.

<sup>5</sup> Or “civic discourse” (*politikoi logoi*). See below, 20–21, 2.51, and 15.260.

[11] Rather than gaining great wealth myself, I would have preferred philosophy to have as much power as these people claim it does. Perhaps we would not have been left so far behind and enjoyed only the smallest part of its profits. But since it does not have such power, I wish they would stop talking nonsense. I see insults directed not only against those who are mistaken, but also that all the others who are connected in the same profession are attacked as well.

[12] I am amazed when I see these men claiming students for themselves: they fail to notice that they are using an ordered art (*τεταγμένη τεχνή*) as a model for a creative activity (*ποιητικόν πρᾶγμα*). Who—besides them—has not seen that while the function of letters is unchanging and remains the same, so that we always keep using the same letters for the same sounds, the function of words<sup>6</sup> is entirely opposite. What is said by one person is not useful in a similar way for the next speaker, but that man seems most artful (*τεχνικώτατος*) who both speaks worthily of the subject matter and can discover things to say that are entirely different from what others have said. [13] The greatest indication of the difference is that speeches cannot be good unless they reflect the circumstances (*καιροί*), propriety (*το πρέπον*), and originality, but none of these requirements extends to letters. So those who use such models would much more rightly pay than receive money, because they attempt to teach others although they themselves need much instruction.

[14] If I must not only criticize others but also clarify my own thought,<sup>7</sup> I think that every reasonable person would agree with me that many philosophers have remained private citizens, while others have become skilled speakers and politicians without ever having visited the sophists. Abilities in speaking and all the other faculties of public life are innate in the well-born and developed in those trained by experience. [15] Education (*παιδείσις*) 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.<sup>8</sup> But it cannot fashion either good debaters or good speechwriters<sup>9</sup> from

<sup>6</sup> I.e., *logoi*, which could also be translated as “speeches” or “arguments.”

<sup>7</sup> Isocrates cites the following sections in 5.194.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Arist., *Rhetoric* 1.1, where similar views are expressed.

<sup>9</sup> This expression, *λογῶν ποιῆται*, occurs often in the work of Alcidas, *Against the Sophists* 1, 4, 12. See Gagarin and Woodruff 1995: 276–289.

those who lack natural ability, although it may improve them and make them more intelligent in many respects.

[16] Now that I have gone this far, I wish to speak more clearly about these things. I contend that it is not all that difficult to gain a knowledge of the forms (*ἰδέαι*) that we use in speaking and composing all speeches, if a person surrenders himself not to those who make easy promises but to those who know something about them.<sup>10</sup> But to choose from these the necessary forms for each subject, to mix them with each other and arrange them suitably, and then, not to mistake the circumstances (*καιροί*) but to embellish the entire speech properly with considerations (*εὐθυμῆματα*) and to speak the words rhythmically and musically, [17] these things require much study and are the work of a brave and imaginative soul.<sup>11</sup> In addition to having the requisite natural ability, the student must learn the forms (*εἰδέ*) of speeches and practice their uses. The teacher must go through these aspects as precisely as possible, so that nothing teachable is left out, but as for the rest, he must offer himself as a model, [18] so that those who are molded by him and can imitate him will immediately appear more florid and graceful than others. When all these conditions occur together, then those who practice philosophy will achieve success. But if any of the points mentioned is left out, the students will necessarily be worse off in this regard.

[19] I am sure that all the sophists who have recently sprung up and joined in the boasting—even if they now do so excessively—will be brought around to my view. But there remain those who lived before us, who dared to write the so-called *Arts* (*τεχναι*),<sup>12</sup> whom we must not let go without criticism. They promised to teach lawcourt skills and picked out the most wretched of terms, which those opposing this education ought to have used, not those supporting it.<sup>13</sup> [20] In-

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 10.11.

<sup>11</sup> Plato may be ridiculing Isocrates at *Gorgias* 463a by having Socrates say that rhetoric is the activity of a “bold and conjecturing soul.”

<sup>12</sup> We often refer to these *Arts* as rhetorical handbooks. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1.1 1354b24) also criticizes the *Arts* for concentrating on forensic oratory. Cole has argued that the early *τεχναι* consisted principally of practice and demonstration texts.

<sup>13</sup> Presumably Isocrates has in mind the sort of terminology that Plato ridicules in the *Phaedrus* 266c–267a: “proofing” (*πίστισις*), “supplementary-

asmuch as it was teachable, these terms belong to a subject that could be of no greater help for lawcourt speeches than for any others. Those people were much worse than those who wallow in disputes. These people go through such useless theories that if anyone followed them in practice he would immediately be in deep trouble, but they do at least profess to teach virtue and soundness of mind in these matters. Those men, although they urged others to make political speeches, had no concern for the speeches' other benefits but undertook to be teachers of meddlesomeness and greed.

[21] Nevertheless, those who wish to follow the prescriptions of my philosophy may be helped more quickly to fair-mindedness than to speechmaking.<sup>14</sup> Let no one think that I mean that a sense of justice is teachable;<sup>15</sup> I contend that there is no sort of art that can convert those who by nature lack virtue to soundness of mind and a sense of justice. But I certainly do think that the study of political speeches can assist in encouraging and training these faculties.

[22] So that I do not appear to be destroying others' pretensions while myself claiming more than is within my power, I think the reasons by which I was persuaded will easily make clear for others also that these things are true.<sup>16</sup>

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proofing" (*epipistisis*), "refutation" (*elenchos*), "supplementary-refutation" (*epi-elenchos*), "covert-allusion" (*hypodolisis*), "indirect-compliment" (*parepainos*) and "indirect-censure in meter" (*parapoiogos en metroi*).

<sup>14</sup> Isocrates does not use the term "rhetoric" (*rhetorike*), which appears in Plato and Aristotle. Here he uses the word *rhetoreia* and appears to mean by it a rhetorical attitude of mind, speechmaking for its own sake. He clearly means it in an unflattering way, associating it with meddlesomeness and greed.

<sup>15</sup> The question of the teachability of virtue was one of the central questions for Plato. See especially his *Protagoras*.

<sup>16</sup> Since the last sentence seems to suggest that Isocrates is about to say something more about his own development of thought, it seems likely that the ending of our text has been cut off. The pattern here seems to follow one that Isocrates uses in 10.15 and 11.9. But see Too 1995 and Cahn 1989, who offer different explanations.