Isocrates and Aristotle on Rhetoric

William Benoit

Introduction

Accordingly when Aristotle observed that Isocrates succeeded in obtaining a distinguished set of pupils by abandoning legal and political subjects and devoting his discourses to empty elegance of style, he himself suddenly altered almost the whole of his own system of training, and quoted a line from Philoctetes with a slight modification: the hero in the tragedy said that it was a disgrace for him to keep silent and suffer barbarians to speak, but Aristotle put in “suffer Isocrates to speak”; and consequently he put the whole of his system in a polished and brilliant form, and linked the scientific study of facts with practice in style (Cicero, 1942, III.139; see also Philodemus, 1920, p. 329; or Quintilian 1920, III.i.14).

Cicero’s bias towards Aristotle is readily apparent, although Cicero was influenced by Isocrates in many places (Hubbell, 1914; Smethurst, 1953). Erickson recounts potentially confirmatory speculation of the rivalry between Aristotle and Isocrates, in that the Gryllus (one of Aristotle’s lost rhetorical works) was published at the time Aristotle began to lecture on rhetoric at Plato’s Academy, and that it contained attacks upon Isocrates (1976, pp. 231-32). That they were contemporaneous (Isocrates was, of course, older than Aristotle and Aristotle survived Isocrates, but they overlapped for many years) and that both lectured on rhetoric is certain; that they were rivals seems probable.

Each of these two important classical rhetoricians merits scholarly attention today. Isocrates is without question one of the greatest teachers in the history of rhetoric, if not the greatest. Cicero hails him as the “Master of all rhetoricians,” and exclaims that from his “school, as from the horse of Troy, none but leaders emerged” (1942, II.94). Quintilian reports that “the pupils of Isocrates were eminent in every branch of study” (1920, III.i.14) and that “It is to the school of Isocrates that we owe the greatest orators” (XII.x.22). Dionysius of Halicarnassus reports that “He became the outstanding figure among the famous men of his day, and the teacher of the most eminent men at Athens and in Greece at large, both the best forensic orators, and those who distinguished in politics and public life. Historians, too, were among his pupils” (1974, 1). Thus, in classical Greece, Isocrates was an influential rhetorical educator, and merits our attention today.

Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric is worthy of study as well. While Isocrates may have been the more successful teacher of rhetoric in classical Greece, Aristotle has been more important in the history of rhetoric. The claim that Aristotle’s Rhetoric is one of the most influential treatises on the art of persuasion is not controversial, and, accordingly, the literature on Aristotle’s rhetorical theory is extensive (Erickson, 1975).

The fact that these two important rhetoricians operated competing educational institutions is adequate reason to juxtapose their views on rhetoric. The anecdote that Aristotle’s lectures on rhetoric were stimulated by Isocrates’ teaching is another reason to compare their views. Furthermore, Aristotle’s Rhetoric...
employs more illustrations from Isocrates’ speeches than from any one else—in fact, there are more references to Isocrates in the *Rhetoric* than to any other single individual. Both of these figures have been studied separately, and of course the bulk of rhetorical scholarship focuses on Aristotle (see, e.g., Erickson, 1975; Benoit, 1981). While the relationship of Plato and Aristotle has been investigated (Hunt, 1920), as has that of Isocrates and Plato (Coulter, 1967; Howland, 1937; Perkins, 1984; De Vries, 1953, 1971), there is no adequate systematic attempt to compare and contrast the views of Isocrates and Aristotle on rhetoric.

Although it is important to note important concepts developed by one but not the other, this sort of undertaking entails risks. It is uncertain whether Isocrates wrote a textbook on rhetoric (Cicero, 1949, II.5; Quintilian, 1920, III.i.14; Philodemus, 1920, pp. 221-22; and Plutarch, 1976, 838F, all speak of one), but if he did, it does not survive today. Similarly, some of Aristotle’s rhetorical works—e.g., the *Synagoge Technon*, the *Gryllus*, the *Theodecta*—are not extant (Erickson, 1976). Hence, the absence of a topic from the surviving corpus of either of these rhetoricians is insufficient evidence for concluding that they failed to discuss it. It is therefore far safer to focus on topics and concepts addressed in the surviving works of each. While this approach of necessity offers only a partial picture of their differences, the picture that is generated should be a generally accurate one. Of course, other potential sources of inaccuracy remain. For example, there is the possibility their discussion of a topic in a surviving work is not their last word: they may have changed their mind or refined a topic in a later work which does not survive. Similarly, the fact that we have a textbook for Aristotle but only speeches (or pamphlets) for Isocrates makes certain distortions inevitable. Nevertheless, limiting this exploration to concepts treated in the surviving works of each rhetorician is a conservative, though reasonable, approach, as long as we remain cognizant of its limitations.

Specifically, this essay will address their views on the nature of rhetoric, on the relationship of rhetoric and knowledge, criticisms of previous rhetoricians, and sources of proof. However, a brief description of these two important figures in classical rhetoric provides a context for situating the analysis which follows.

**Lives and Training of Isocrates and Aristotle**

*Isocrates was born in Athens in 436 B.C.* Internal and external evidence suggest that he studied with Prodicus, Gorgias, Tisias, Protagoras, Theramenes, and Socrates. Of course, the amount of time and energy devoted to these surely varied and we have little basis for precise assessments of the extent of his studies with a particular figure. After the Peloponnesian War, his family’s wealth was lost and he became a logographer (six forensic speeches survive today: *Against Lochites, Aegineticus, Against Euthynus, Trapeziticus, Span of Nurses*, and *Callimachus*). In 392 he opened the first stationary school of rhetoric in Athens (various sophists had taught as they traveled from city to city), publicizing this event with the publication of *Against the Sophists*, wherein he attacked his competitors, the traveling sophists. As suggested earlier, his school was immensely successful. In 355 he published the *Antidosis*, defending himself and his school (several other speeches or pamphlets survive as well). He died in 338 (for further details of his life, see Norlin 1968; or Benoit, 1984).

*Aristotle was born in 384 B.C., in Stagira, an Ionian colony in northern Greece.* His father was physician to the Macedonian court. He entered Plato’s
Academy around 367/6, and later began to lecture on rhetoric in the afternoon (as suggested earlier, anecdotal evidence identifies Isocrates’ school as the principle motivation behind this action). Upon Plato’s death in 347 (and the appointment of his nephew, Speusippus, as successor), Aristotle departed from Athens. In 343/2 Philip of Macedonia brought him to tutor his son Alexander (later, Alexander the Great). In 335 he returned to Athens and established a school at the Lyceum, where he taught for about twelve years. Alexander died in 323, and Aristotle fled to Chalcis in order to avoid the wave of anti-Macedonian feeling, “lest the Athenians should sin twice against philosophy” as he reportedly explained (i.e., put him to death as they had Socrates in 399 B.C.). He died the following year (for further details of his life, see, e.g., Ross, 1949).

Their differences appear to outweigh their similarities. Isocrates was older than Aristotle. He was also an Athenian citizen while Aristotle was a foreigner, significant to proud Athenian citizens. While Isocrates purportedly had many teachers, Aristotle appears to have only studied with Plato (although he collected the treatises of many others, which served as the basis for his Synagoge Technon). He also served as a logographer, a profession Aristotle never attempted. Aristotle tutored young Alexander the Great for a time. What similarities that do emerge from this cursory examination are not, however, especially striking. Isocrates apparently studied with Socrates, and Aristotle definitely studied with Plato, who was one of Socrates prominent pupils. Both established schools in Athens, and both taught rhetoric at their school. These similarities justify a comparison of their views would be appropriate, but they do not necessarily suggest that we ought to expect similarities in their doctrines. With this background, we can turn to the heart of this analysis, the comparison of their conceptions of rhetoric.

The Nature of Rhetoric

Isocrates does not offer a formal definition of rhetoric in his surviving works. However, Quintilian suggests that he defined rhetoric as the “worker of persuasion” (II.xv.4), and Sextus Empiricus observes that “Isocrates asserts that orators pursue nothing else but the science of persuasion” (1949, p. 52). Aristotle writes that “Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (1355b25). Later, he explains that

It is clear, further, that it’s function is not simply to proceed at persuading, but rather to discover the means of coming as near such success as the circumstances of each particular case allow. In this it resembles all other arts. For example, it is not the function of medicine to make a man quite healthy, but to put him as far as may be on the road to health; it is possible to give excellent treatment even to those who can never enjoy sound health (1358b9-14).

Thus, both see rhetoric as the study of persuasion. Aristotle offers a finer distinction, characterizing it as the art of identifying the available means of influence in particular cases.

For Isocrates, rhetoric is a tool of of influence: “With this faculty we... contend against others on matters open to dispute” (Antidosis, 256). Rhetoric “is of use in the practical affairs of everyday life and aids us when we deliberate concerning public affairs” (To Alexander, 4). Similarly, Aristotle writes that “Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which therefore we inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions that we deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity” (Rhetoric, 1357a24-27). Aristotle stresses in
several places that “The use of persuasive speech is to lead to decisions” (1391b8; 1377b21; 1357a23-26), it is a practical art. Hence, both see rhetoric as a practical tool of decision-making influence in public affairs.

Isocrates is supposed to have said that rhetoric is a “branch of philosophy” (Quintilian, II.xv.33), and in the Antidosis he explains that he will explain “what philosophy, properly conceived, really is” (270). Philosophy is the ability to “arrive generally at the best course” of action (271). Aristotle, however, locates rhetoric in relationship to two other disciplines--dialectic and ethics or politics--“rhetoric is a combination of the science of logic and of the ethical branch of politics” (1395b10, see also 1356a25-27). He stresses the connection with dialectic, calling rhetoric the “counterpart of Dialectic” (1354a1, see also 1355b8-9). So, Aristotle could be considered more rigorous, linking rhetoric with dialectic and ethics or politics.

Both writers address the question of the worth of rhetoric. Isocrates stresses the importance of the power of persuasion to humanity and civilization:

For in the other powers which we possess we are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of speech has not helped us to establish. For this it is which has laid down laws concerning things just and unjust, and things base and honorable; and if it were not for these ordinances we should not be able to live with one another. It is by this also that we confute the bad and extol the good. Through this we educate the ignorant and appraise the wise (Nicocles, 9; see also Antidosis, 251-52).

In sum, “none of the things which are done with intelligence take place without the help of speech, but that in all our actions as well as in all our thoughts speech is our guide” (Nicocles, 9). This encomium of rhetoric provides high praise indeed.

Aristotle offers more of a justification of rhetoric than direct praise. He offers four arguments in support of the claim that “Rhetoric is useful”: “things that are true and . . . just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites,” there are some audiences we cannot instruct and hence must persuade, “in order that we may see clearly what the facts are, and . . . if another man argues unfairly, we on our part may be able to confute him,” and just as we ought to be able to physically defend ourselves, so too we ought to be able to do so verbally (1355a21-1355b7). Thus, both Isocrates and Aristotle hold rhetoric to be an important art, but Isocrates’ discussion tends toward praise while Aristotle advances several lines of reasoning. The contrast between encomium and reasoned argument reveals a great deal about their individual styles.

Rhetoric and Knowledge

Epistemology was an important issue in classical rhetoric, with the sophists and Plato occupying polar extremes. In order to provide a context for interpreting the views of Isocrates and Aristotle on this issue, I will sketch the positions of the sophists and Plato (this is not to imply that Isocrates and Aristotle both wrote afterwords: Isocrates opened his school shortly before Plato opened the Academy). Unfortunately, relatively little of the sophists’ works survive today. I will indicate the sophists’ view generally by examining the surviving writings of both
Isocrates and Aristotle on Rhetoric

Protagoras and Gorgias. While all of the sophists did not subscribe to a unified doctrine, this sketch will show the viewpoints of two prominent sophists. Protagoras is well-known for his thesis that “Of all things the measure is man, of things that are that they are, and of things that are not that they are not” (1972, pp. 18, 11). Thus for Protagoras, knowledge is subjective, different for each perceiver. Rhetoric is important, for it can make opposing arguments on any topic (p. 4), and it has the power of “making the weaker argument [appear] stronger” (p. 13). Hence, there is no absolute or objective knowledge, only that which individuals perceive. Rhetoric can make arguments on either side of any question and make the worse cause appear the better.

The three theses of Gorgias’ work On Nature reveal his conception of our ability to comprehend and communicate reality: Nothing exists; If it exists, we cannot comprehend it; If we could comprehend it, we could not communicate it (see Gorgias, 1972, pp. 42-46; or the discussions by Gronbeck, 1972; Engnell, 1973; or Enos, 1976). The second thesis supports the notion that rhetoric is epistemic, asserting that we cannot apprehend (know) reality. However, the last thesis is the most interesting. Gorgias explains his last thesis on nature in this fashion:

But even if it should be apprehended, it would be impossible of being conveyed to another. . . . For that by which we reveal is logos, but logos is not substances and existing things. Therefore we do not reveal existing things to our neighbors, but logos, which is something other than substances (p. 46).

Kerferd’s commentary on this passage is instructive, explaining that:

This is so because the means by which we communicate is speech or logos, and this logos is not and can never be the externally subsiding objects that actually are. What we communicate to our neighbors is never the actual things, but only a logos which is always other than the things themselves (1981, p. 80).

In other words, as the general semanticists would put it centuries later, the word is not the thing. We cannot communicate reality because we communicate with words, and words are entities separate and distinct from the reality about which we seek to converse. The claim that we cannot communicate the truth through words also appears in Gorgias’ Defense of Palamedes, where he declares that “If then, by means of words, it were possible for the truth of actions to become free of doubt [and] clear to hearers, judgment would now be easy from what has been said. But. . . this is not the case” (p. 62). In his Helen, Gorgias explains that people do not possess “memory of things past,” awareness “of things present” and “foreknowledge of the future”, so “most men take opinion as counselor to their soul” (p. 52). Thus, Gorgias and Protagoras, while not without differences, illustrate the Sophists’ epistemology, which denies certain knowledge while declaring that rhetoric constitutes knowledge.

Plato, whose views stand in sharp relief against those of the Sophists, believed in certain knowledge, for he declares rather bluntly in the Gorgias that “truth, you see, can never be refuted” (473). In the Phaedrus, he declares that “a good and successful discourse presuppose[s] knowledge in the mind of the speaker of the truth about his subject” (259E; see also 237B-C; 261A; Gorgias, 508). It is on this very issue that he shows contempt for practitioners of the art of rhetoric, like Tisias and Gorgias, who realized that probability deserves more respect than truth, who could make trifles seem important and important points trifles by the force of their language, who dressed up novelties as antiques and vice versa” (Phaedrus, 261C-D).

Isocrates denies the possibility of certain knowledge in human affairs:
It is manifest to all that foreknowledge of future events is not vouchsafed to our human nature, but that we are so far removed from this prescience that Homer, who has been conceded the highest reputation for wisdom, has pictured even the gods as at times debating among themselves about the future—not that he knew their minds bent but that he desired to show us that for mankind this power lies in the realms of the impossible (Against the Sophists, 2).

So, humanity cannot expect to obtain certain knowledge. This distinguishes his views from Plato's approach. However, this does not simply place him in the Sophistic camp, for Isocrates did not argue that one opinion is as good as the next. He urges teachers of rhetoric to "pursue the truth" (Against the Sophists, 5), but not certain truth.

For since it is not in the nature of man to attain a science by the possession of which we can know positively what we should do or what we should say, in the next resort I hold that man to be wise who is able by his powers of conjecture to arrive generally at the best course, and I hold that man to be a philosopher who occupies himself with the studies from which he will most quickly gain that kind of insight (Antidosis, 271).

Isocrates also writes that rhetoric permits us to "seek light for ourselves on things which are unknown" (Antidosis, 256), "to form reasonably sound opinions about the future" (To Alexander, 4). He concedes that certain knowledge is possible, but not profitable, for "likely conjecture about useful things is far preferable to exact knowledge of the useless, and that to be a little superior in important things is of greater worth than to be preeminent in things without value for living" (Against the Sophists, 5; see Panathenaicus, 9). Thus, while rejecting the idealism of Plato, he attempted to steer a middle course between it and the relativism of the sophists.

Aristotle, in contrast, apparently sees no epistemic function for rhetoric. For him, science discovers truth, and dialectic tests particular statements (Topics, 100a25--30). Aristotle suggests that knowledge about the topic is acquired prior to rhetoric "we must know some, if not all, of the facts about the topic on which we are to speak and argue" (1396a6). However, this does not make him a Platonist, for he does not claim that rhetoric disseminates dialectically generated certain truth. He writes that "We should... base our arguments upon probabilities as well as upon certainties" (1396a4). Elsewhere he makes it clear that rhetoric deals with "what is in the main contingent" (1357a14), and that "The subjects of our deliberation are such as seem to present us with alternative possibilities; about things that could not have been, and cannot now or in the future be, other than they are, nobody who takes them to be of this nature wastes his time in deliberation" (1357a4-8). Hence, Aristotle declares that arguments based on probabilities are an important part of rhetoric, and that it deals with contingent affairs. However, he does hold that some arguments may be based on certainties, or on infallible signs (1357b4-7; 1402b18).

Neither Isocrates nor Aristotle accepts the conception of truth advanced by Plato. On the other hand, neither adopts the apparent unconcern for truth of the sophists. Isocrates explicitly repudiates those who "have no interest whatever in the truth" (Against the Sophists, 9). Thus, they tend to steer a middle course between these two extremes, a pragmatic or practical recognition that absolute truth is unattainable (except for trivial matters on Isocrates' view; and occasionally on Aristotle's view) but a desire to encourage rhetors to strive for the most desirable positions on important questions addressed by rhetoric. However, Isocrates does not acknowledge that certainties can play a role in rhetoric as Aristotle believed
(admittedly, Aristotle assigns the greater role to probabilities). In fact, Isocrates suggests that exact knowledge is only possible for trivial matters.

**Criticisms of Other Rhetoricians**

While Isocrates offers numerous such criticisms (see Norlin, 1968, or Benoit, 1984), one complaint is common to both of these writers. Isocrates states that “insofar as it can be taught, [rhetoric] is of no greater aid to forensic than to all other discourse” (Against the Sophists, 20). Similarly, Aristotle writes that:

> Although the same systematic principles apply to political as to forensic oratory, and although the former is a nobler business, and fitter for a citizen, than that which concerns the relations of private citizens, these authors say nothing about political oratory, but try, one and all, to write treatises on the way to plead in court (1354b22-27).

Hence, both Isocrates and Aristotle complain that previous writers and teachers of rhetoric focus too much on legal discourse. Given the fact that Corax and Tisias are believed to have invented rhetoric to aid in the disposition of property disputes after the overthrow of the tyrants on Sicily (see, e.g., Hinks, 1940; Verrall, 1880; or Wilcox, 1943), this emphasis should not be considered unusual, although they were correct that it was incomplete.

**Modes of Proof**

It is commonly understood that Aristotle developed the concept of the three modes of proof (1356a1-4). Isocrates discusses one of these, ethos. In the *Antidosis*, Isocrates makes it clear that he considers the speaker’s ethos, or prior reputation, to be more important than the substance of the discourse:

> The man who wishes to persuade people will not be negligent as to the matter of character; no, on the contrary, he will apply himself above all to establish a most honourable name among his fellow-citizens; for who does not know that words carry a greater conviction when spoken by men of good repute than when spoken by men who live under a cloud, and that the argument which is made by a man’s life is of more weight than that which is furnished by words? (278)

It is worth stressing that it is the speaker’s prior reputation which concerns Isocrates: “men of good repute,” “men who live under a cloud.” He even explicitly juxtaposes the “argument which is made by a man’s life” with “that which is furnished by words.” Elsewhere in the *Antidosis*, his meaning becomes unmistakable when he declares that probabilities and proofs and all forms of persuasion support only the points in a case to which they are severally applied, whereas an honourable reputation not only lends greater persuasiveness to the words of the man who possesses it, but adds greater luster to his deeds, and is, therefore, more zealously to be sought after by men of intelligence than anything else in the world (280).

It is clear from these statements that Isocrates considers ethos to be the most persuasive tool of the rhetor--more effective than probabilities and proofs--and he construes ethos to be the reputation a speaker develops throughout life and brings to the speech situation.

Aristotle also believes ethos to be an important aspect of persuasion, writing that “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others; this is true
generally whatever the question is, and absolutely where exact certainty is impossible and opinions divided” (1356a6-8). He stresses the importance of ethos when he declares that “It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses” (1356a10-14).

Notice that Aristotle’s praise here is qualified (“may almost be called”), and elsewhere he explicitly states that “Persuasion is clearly a sort of Demonstration... the orator’s demonstration is an enthymeme and this, in general, is the most effective means of persuasion” (1355a3-8). Thus, Aristotle, while acknowledging the importance of ethos, holds logos (or pragma) to be generally the most persuasive form of proof. Other passages conclusively rule out the “prior reputation” notion of ethos: “this kind of persuasion like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of him before he begins to speak” (1356a8-10).

Thus, they disagree about the fundamental nature of ethos. For Isocrates, ethos is the speaker’s prior reputation, developed during life. It is the most important mode of persuasion because it lends weight to all of the words of the speaker, and he explicitly declares that it is more useful than probabilities and proofs. For Aristotle, ethos is important in persuasion, but less so than the proof created by enthymemes. Explicitly rejecting the claim that it is the impression the audience has of the orator before the speech, he declares that it is created by the rhetor through skillful use of language.

Conclusion

Despite so many differences between the life and training, what we are able to reconstruct of important topics addressed in the surviving works of both Isocrates and Aristotle is surprisingly similar. Both considered rhetoric to be a practical art of persuasion that guides our actions on contingent affairs. Both adopted a middle ground between Plato and the Sophists on the question of the relationship of rhetoric and knowledge. They each attacked previous rhetoricians for emphasizing forensic discourse.

Still, important differences inhere in their respective treatments of rhetoric. Isocrates held rhetoric to be an epistemic tool, while Aristotle did not. Isocrates conceived of ethos as the rhetor’s prior reputation, while Aristotle was only concerned with the audience’s perceptions of the rhetor developed in the speech. While both consider ethos important, Aristotle believed that the enthymeme (whose theory he developed) was generally the most persuasive mode of persuasion.

William Benoit
Department of Speech and Dramatic Arts
University of Missouri, Columbia

Works Cited


