Chapter Four


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One sometimes hears it said that the ancient rhetorical tradition -- the orators and teachers of oratory descending from the fifth century B.C. Sophists -- had a distinctive, reasonably well-developed theory of what constitutes sound argument on the subjects on which orators were expected to speak -- justice, human private and communal good, excellence of mind and character, and so on. The suggestion is that in the oratorical tradition one can find a powerful alternative to the ideas developed in the philosophical tradition on this same subject, ideas that involve a commitment to concepts of justice, goodness, excellence, and so on, that are supposed to derive their credentials from a relation in which they were thought to stand to the actual nature of things, to which philosophical reflection (and only philosophical reflection) could in principle lead us. Writers in the oratorical tradition are, by contrast, supposed to eschew any appeal to concepts of justice and the rest, access to which requires special philosophical insights, in favor of argument based on nothing more fancy than ordinary, everyday, traditional ideas on the subjects in question. Now there is I assume no doubt at all that the ancient orators and theoreticians of oratory did proceed in this way: when they argue
about justice or the community's good they develop their arguments by marshalling ordinary, every-day, traditional ideas about what something has to be like in order to be just or to be good for the community, etc. What is not so obvious is whether they (or any of them) ever elaborated any theory to explain and, according to some appropriate standard, justify this procedure. If they thought that sound argument on these subjects should proceed in this, rather than the philosophers', way, what basis, if any, did they actually give for so thinking? I believe that an examination of the evidence that is available to us does not support the conclusion that the orators did have any such theory. They argued exclusively by appeal to ordinary, traditional, common opinions, and they rejected the idea that there was any higher truth of such matters available to philosophers. But I do not find any good evidence at all that they developed a theoretical account of what constitutes sound argument on these topics to which they could appeal in defense of their procedures and against the claims of the philosophers. In this paper I will offer evidence for this conclusion drawn from an examination of Isocrates and Cicero, two of the most theoretically inclined writers in the tradition and so especially promising authors to consult to discover what foundations for oratorical argument their tradition developed.

Someone once asked Antisthenes, Plato's older contemporary and by tradition the immediate intellectual ancestor of the Greek Cynics, how he should educate his son. Antisthenes replied that if the son was going to live with gods the father should make him a philosopher, but if with men an orator.¹ As usual with such anecdotes, we are given no context nor any indication how, if at all, Antisthenes went on to develop this thought, or what theoretical or practical conclusions he drew from it. It seems likely, however, that it owes something to a striking passage of Plato's *Phaedrus* (273e4-274a5). There Socrates says that philosophical knowledge is worth acquiring because it enables one to speak and act in a way pleasing to the gods, though, as a side-benefit, it also makes one able to speak and act effectively in the eyes of human beings. Socrates' idea, as the preceding

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