Professor Cooper has described the ideal dependence of oratory upon philosophy from Plato's perspective. He has assumed the Platonic model and asked Isocrates to respond to Plato's objections. He has rightly concluded that Isocrates does not answer Plato. My response to Professor Cooper will be general and complementary, not critical. I have decided to look at the issues he has raised from Isocrates' point of view because Professor Cooper's conclusions kept coming out with disconcerting predictability: Isocrates was not going to give the Platonist a Platonic answer, and he had said as much from the very beginning. Asked to be a Platonic dialectician, he simply refused. While his reasons would not satisfy Plato, and do not satisfy a philosopher today, still, they do have their own consistency, and behind that consistency lies an attitude to the world that finds the Platonist's answers equally unsatisfactory. I think this is worth pursuing, because, if I am right, we do not have a disagreement about details or particulars, but a disagreement about fundamentals, about the world, and about what is important in our life in the world. Plato and Isocrates do not argue; they do not recognize each other's positions and assumptions and consequently do not speak to each other.

First, however, we must grant that Isocrates does not offer any detailed or fixed methodology. What methodology he does offer has to be reconstructed from statements here and there, and at times a gap has to be filled in the most probable way. Even so, in
many of its aspects, it remains imprecise and, in those terms, unsatisfactory. However, the very fact that there is not any fully justified methodology, that the orator's right to speak on truth, beauty, and justice is not absolute, that Isocratean training does not lead to knowledge and unimpeachable credentials, is indicative of Isocrates' position. Systematic methodologies and logical proofs lead to necessary and certain conclusions. Such is their only conceivable justification. If the goal is uncertain and changeable, or uncertain and imprecise, the methodology must be commensurately flexible and contingent. Similarly, if the methodology is rigorous and fixed, it will yield absolute and fixed results; it will not respond to unforeseen contingencies. "But I marvel when I observe these men setting themselves up as instructors of youth who cannot see that they are applying the analogy of an art with hard and fast rules to a creative process. For, excepting these teachers, who does not know that the art of using letters remains fixed and unchanged, so that we continually and invariably use the same letters for the same purposes, while exactly the reverse is true of the art of discourse?" (Soph. 12).¹ In the world of political action and speech, the ambiguities of the occasions and the uncertainties of the future make both speech and action an exercise in probability and judgement, one that requires, first of all, talent, and, secondly, that most flexible and contingent ingredient, experience: "More than that, they do not attribute any of this power either to the practical experience or to the native ability of the student, but undertake to transmit the science of discourse as simply as they would teach the letters of the alphabet" (Soph. 10). Isocrates does not offer a science or a technē, and he does not hide that fact. He simply notes that there is no methodology which will predictably lead to success. "Those who follow their judgement (doxa) are more successful than those who profess to have exact knowledge (episteme)" (Soph. 14). Flexibility is the key. The standard is not truth (which does not exist for men), but the intelligent people who agree (Soph. 14) and those who know something about the elements of discourse (Soph. 16). Ultimately, however, the trained speaker has no greater right to speak than the untrained speaker, and training does not

---

¹ All Greek quotations are cited in the Loeb translation.