

Miscellanea



The Ending of Isocrates' Against the Sophists

In paragraph 21 of *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates makes the paradoxical claim that the study of the type of philosophy he advocates, that is, writing λόγοι πολιτικοί, will sooner improve people's character than their rhetorical skills. Not that any art can really teach virtue to people who are bad by nature, he argues, but this type of study certainly helps. He seems to go on to substantiate this claim:

22. ἵνα δὲ μὴ δοκῶ τὰς μὲν τῶν ἄλλων ὑποσχέσεις διαλύειν, αὐτὸς δὲ μείζω λέγειν τῶν ἐνότων, ἐξ ὧν περ αὐτὸς ἐπίσθη οὕτω ταῦτ' ἔχειν, ῥαδίως οἶμαι καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις φανερὸν καταστήσειν.

But in order that I may not appear to be breaking down the pretensions of others while myself making impossible claims, I believe that the very arguments by which I myself was convinced will easily make it clear to others also that these things are true.¹

Here the treatise breaks off. At first sight it seems obvious that the text is incomplete. Indeed, in modern reference works on Attic rhetoric in general this seems to be the accepted view.² Many have argued, however, that Isocrates deliberately broke off the work at this point, and this remains the most popular view with modern specialists (Eucken 1983, 5-6; Too 1995, 151-99; Böhme 2009, 63-5). The high implausibility of this solution was demonstrated already by Drerup (1896; 1906, 129-30), but remarkably his arguments were passed over in silence by its advocates throughout the larger part of the twentieth century.

¹ The translation is Norlin's (1929), modified.

² E.g. Kennedy (1994, 43); Usher (1999, 296); Papillon (2007, 70).

Unfortunately, no one after Drerup ever took the effort to seriously argue against this view.³ On the other hand, the arguments put forward in favour of it by, especially, Zycha (1880; 1917), Münscher (1899; 1916), and Böhme (2009, 63-5), cannot stand. It is the aim of this article, then, to make a sustained argument against the view that the work is complete in its extant form. I will first briefly outline my own position and then try to refute the many counter-arguments that have been made.

In the first place, Isocrates had every reason to substantiate what he had said in 21: the theory that the study of the right kind of rhetoric sooner helps people make progress in ἐπιείκεια than in ῥητορεία was not only paradoxical and controversial, but also crucial to his view of παιδεία. Moreover, he had spent almost the whole discourse censuring others for making promises (ὑποσχέσεις) that they could not fulfill. Having now made a claim himself that could be perceived as impossible, he explicitly expressed his fear of seeming a hypocrite. Fortunately, he had arguments that could easily persuade the rest. Considering this position, to stop writing seems an unexplainable move.

Secondly, the phrase Isocrates uses here, ἵνα δὲ μὴ (δοκῶ), is repeated many times in his oeuvre and never is it followed by silence.⁴ If the discourse in its present form was meant to be complete, why did Isocrates choose to end it with a sentence that is in no way distinguishable from a legitimate signal that more is to come?

Finally, we know what the arguments are that Isocrates must have had in mind, for he gives them elsewhere.⁵ In *Antid.* 274-5, he repeats the points he made in *C. soph.* 21 almost verbatim.⁶ This is preceded by a rhetorical *dubitatio* (272-3), in which he notes that his view is extremely controversial (272 οὕτω γὰρ ἔστιν σφόδρα καὶ παράδοξα καὶ πολὺ τῆς τῶν ἄλλων ἀφεστῶτα διανοίας) and asks the audience not to convict him of madness beforehand, for he has strong arguments (273).⁷ In 276, he says he thinks he can easily prove the truth of his

3 So much for the fear expressed by Zycha (1917, 163) that Drerup's authoritative view "in die Zukunft irreführend nachwirken kann".

4 As has often been noted: e.g. Drerup (1906, cxxix); Mariss (2002, 54 n. 180).

5 Cf. Blass (1874, 220) and Drerup (1896, 672-3; 1906, cxxx), who refers to the 'anonymus interpre' of 1813 and Rheinhardt (1873, 30).

6 Cf. e.g. Drerup (1906, cxxx); Zycha (1917, 164).

7 One could argue that the fact that there is no such passage before *C. soph.* 21 may be a signal that Isocrates did not feel the need to elaborate on his views already in that work, as he seems not to have regarded them to be so controversial at that time. But the fear he expresses in 22, that he may seem to be making impossible claims, is a sure sign that he did (note that such a comment is absent, in turn, when he announces his arguments in *Antid.* 276). That Isocrates took more care to soften the audience to his views in the *Antidosis* can be explained by the