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Author(s): David Roochnik

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DAVID ROOCHNIK

Is Rhetoric an Art?

Abstract: This essay discusses four pivotal moments in the consideration of whether rhetoric is an art. Section I sets the stage by briefly discussing the charge against rhetoric found in the *Gorgias*. Section II sketches the arguments of Sextus Empiricus and shows how they can be traced back to a single objection implicit in the Socratic charge, namely that the putative subject matter of rhetoric is indeterminate. Section III reviews several arguments presented by Quintilian, most of which can be usefully formulated as responses to Sextus. Section IV shows how Quintilian in fact reflects a line of thought first presented by Isocrates in *Against the Sophists*. The essay articulates what is common in the “common stock” of arguments about whether rhetoric is an art, and why the argument is one of intrinsic importance.

My title reiterates a question that has been debated since Plato wrote the *Gorgias* (in approximately 385 B.C.E.) and Isocrates *Against the Sophists* (at around the same time).¹ Both works treat the epistemic status of rhetoric and revolve around the issue of whether it is a *technē* (an “art,” “skill,” “craft,”

¹The exact dates of these works are difficult to ascertain. Chronology is important, however, because it bears directly on the question, did the *Gorgias* influence Isocrates in writing *Against the Sophists*, or is it the other way around? Werner Jaeger, for example, has the *Gorgias* composed between 395 and 390, and sees *Against the Sophists* as a response written some years later (*Paideia* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986], 3:302). E. R. Dodds dates the former between 387–385 and the latter around 390; obviously, then, he rejects the notion that the latter is a response to the former (*Plato's Gorgias* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959], pp. 24, 27). In the most recent, and technically sophisticated, attempt at chronology, Gerard Ledger, *Re-Counting Plato* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), dates

"profession," "expertise").² For centuries afterward, this question was regularly, and at times furiously, disputed. Indeed, it was pivotal in shaping the "old quarrel" between rhetoric and philosophy that has figured so prominently in the history of western thought. If Plato's Socrates began this quarrel by accusing rhetoric of *atechnia* ("artlessness") in the *Gorgias*, the most recent retort was probably offered by Brian Vickers in his *In Defence of Rhetoric*, some fifty pages of which is devoted to rebutting Socrates' charges.³

My title is unoriginal in a second sense: in 1986, Jonathan Barnes published a masterful essay, "Is Rhetoric an Art?", in which he offered an overview of the debate as it took place in antiquity. Barnes focuses mainly on Sextus Empiricus, who argues that rhetoric is not an art, and Quintilian, Cicero, and Philodemus, who argue that it is. In discussing these authors he says, "There are the closest similarities among these texts, and it is plain that they are all drawing on a common stock." According to Barnes, this "common stock" of arguments can be traced back to Carneades, Critolaus, and Diogenes working in the middle of the second century B.C.E., and then back to the seminal works, the *Gorgias* and (probably) Aristotle's *Gryllus*.⁴

Apparently unknown to Barnes, Harry Hubbell had reached many of the same conclusions in the "Excursus" to his translation of "The Rhetorica of Philodemus." Here he surveys several of the same passages from these same four authors—Philodemus, Cicero, Quintilian, and Sextus Empiricus—and, like Barnes, concludes, "A comparison of the arguments used by our four authorities will reveal that they drew from common sources, some of which can be identified, but most of which must be classed as part of a store of commonplaces which were familiar to all educated people."⁵

the *Gorgias* at 386.

²I will use "techne" to translate the Greek *technē*, and "art" as a translation of *ars*. I have titled this essay with the latter because it is more familiar than the former. Because my argument ultimately hinges on Greek texts, "techne" will actually be my preferred term throughout.

³(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 85–143.

⁴*DARG Newsletter*, 2 (1986), 2–22. The quotation is on p. 4. Further references to this article will appear in the text.

⁵"The Rhetorica of Philodemus," in *Transactions of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1920), p. 368.

While Barnes and Hubbell have successfully demonstrated the extraordinary persistence, as well as the frequently repeated patterns, of this debate throughout antiquity, their work requires elaboration. First, neither comments at sufficient length about the foundational roles of Isocrates and Plato in instigating and setting the terms of this question. Second, and more importantly, neither Barnes nor Hubbell offers any real insight into the possible significance of this debate. In other words, they do not explain why it could possibly matter whether rhetoric is a *techne* or not. Barnes describes his topic as “interesting” mainly because he takes rhetoric to embrace not only public speaking, but public writing as well. For him, the question boils down to “Is there—or can there ever be—an organized body of knowledge, mastery of which will ground the ability to write well?” (p. 8). This matters because of the great proliferation, as well as the sad quality, of writing today. Hubbell says only this about the significance of the question: “In all its ramifications it is an interesting and oftentimes puzzling chapter in the history of human thought.”⁶

Both Barnes and Hubbell seriously understate the point. The purpose of this paper is to show why it really does matter whether or not rhetoric is a *techne*. There are at least two reasons. First, however it is ultimately defined, rhetoric is concerned with *logos*, with “civic discourse,” the essential medium of human, political, or “practical” life.⁷ Second, to describe something as the subject matter of a *techne* is, even if implicitly, to make an ontological claim. A *techne* (at least given a “standard” conception of it) is a determinate body of authoritative knowledge.⁸ As a result, only a specific kind of entity, namely that with stable and intelligible limits, i.e., which is itself determinate, is capable of receiving technical treatment.⁹ When, in rhetoric, the object becomes *logos*, the *techne*-question strikes beyond the ontological, for it broaches ethical issues as well: Does human, political life have a fixed structure? Is it a determinate entity capable of becoming the province

⁶Ibid., p. 365.

⁷George Kennedy subtitles his translation of Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric*, “A Theory of Civic Discourse” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Hereafter I shall not italicize “logos.”

⁸Exactly what a *techne* is will be a critical point of contention in the debate to follow.

⁹For an excellent discussion of these features of *techne* see F. Heinemann, “Eine vorplatonische Theorie der *Techne*,” *Museum Helveticum*, 18 (1961), 105–30.

of a "technician?" Are rational, dependable procedures available to determine how the life of logos should be lived? Is there some expert (a *technitēs*) to whose judgments "laypeople" should defer? In sum, to what extent can human life be mastered and controlled by rational expertise?

These are questions alive even today. Consider, for example, our many disagreements concerning the nature of "practical knowledge," or the human/social sciences. This paper does not aim to resolve such nagging debates. Instead, it will concentrate on the question itself. By discussing four pivotal moments in its history, it will show how a seemingly arcane and academic question is actually the source of rich and general controversy.

Section I sets the stage by briefly discussing the charge against rhetoric found in the *Gorgias*. Section II sketches the arguments of Sextus Empiricus and shows how they can be traced back to a single objection implicit in the Socratic charge, namely that the putative subject matter of rhetoric is indeterminate. Section III reviews several arguments presented by Quintilian, most of which can be usefully formulated as responses to Sextus. Section IV shows how Quintilian in fact reflects a line of thought first presented by Isocrates in *Against the Sophists*.

As mentioned above, both sides of the *techne*-question were, in their basic outline, set by 385 B.C.E., and, as Barnes and Hubbell have shown, the subsequent debate drew on a "common stock" of arguments. For this reason the organizing principle of this paper need not be chronology. After beginning with Plato, it jumps to Sextus, and then works its way "backwards" to Isocrates. The purpose of the following pages is, first, to articulate what exactly is common in this "common stock" of arguments, and then to explain why it is an issue of intrinsic importance.

I

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates asserts that rhetoric is not a *techne*, but merely an *empeiria* and *tribē*, an empirical knack that produces gratification and pleasure (462a). Like cooking, it is a species of "flattery" and therefore has no "share in what is admirable":

Δοκεῖ τοίνυν μοι, ὦ Γοργία, εἶναι τι ἐπιτήδευμα τεχνικὸν μὲν οὐ, ψυχῆς δὲ στοχαστικῆς καὶ ἀνδρείας καὶ φύσει δεινῆς προσομιλεῖν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις· καλῶ δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐγὼ τὸ κεφάλαιον κολακειάν.

([Rhetoric] seems to me, Gorgias, not to be a technical practice [*epitēdeuma technikon*], but instead a quality of an intuitive and manly soul, one that is clever by nature in dealing with human beings. In general, I call it flattery.)¹⁰ (463a)

To explain exactly what flattery is, Socrates first states that both body and soul have an inherently good condition (*euexia*, 464a), both of which are stable enough to be securely known and towards which body and soul can each be moved. Four *technai*, medicine and gymnastic for the former, justice and legislation for the latter, know the good condition of their objects and can move them toward it. In contrast to these genuine *technai*,

ἡ κολακευτικὴ αἰσθομένη, οὐ γνοῦσα λέγω ἀλλὰ στοχασαμένη, τέτραχα ἐαυτὴν διανείμασα, ὑποδύσα ὑπὸ ἕκαστον τῶν μορίων, προσποιεῖται εἶναι τοῦτο ὅπερ ὑπέδν, καὶ τοῦ μὲν βελτίστου οὐδὲν φροντίζει, τῷ δὲ αἰεὶ ἡδίστῳ θηρεύεται τὴν ἄνοιαν καὶ ἐξαπατᾷ, ὥστε δοκεῖ πλείστου ἀξία εἶναι.

(flattery perceives, I do not say that it knows but that it guesses [*stochasamenē*], that there are four branches [of *technē*], that always exercise their objects, namely the body and the soul, toward what is best, and then it [flattery] divides the parts, pretending that it is that which it has insinuated itself into. It does not care at all for what is best, but it always hunts out foolishness by saying what is most pleasant and it deceives those who are foolish by making it seem as if it is the most valuable thing of all.) (464d)

Socrates goes on:

κολακείαν μὲν οὖν αὐτὸ καλῶ, καὶ αἰσχρὸν φημι εἶναι τὸ τοιοῦτον, ὦ Πῶλε—τοῦτο γὰρ πρὸς σὲ λέγω—ὅτι τοῦ ἡδέους στοχάζεται ἄνευ τοῦ βελτίστου τέχνην δὲ αὐτὴν οὐ φημι εἶναι ἀλλ' ἐμπειρίαν, ὅτι οὐκ ἔχει λόγον οὐδένα ᾧ προσφέρει ἢ προσφέρει. ὅποι' ἄττα τὴν φύσιν ἐστίν, ὥστε τὴν αἰτίαν ἕκαστου μὴ ἔχειν εἰπεῖν. ἐγὼ δὲ τέχνην οὐ καλῶ, ὃ ἂν ἧ ἄλογον πρᾶγμα.

¹⁰Throughout, my text of Plato is Burnet's Oxford edition. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. The passage cited here is important because of its bearing on the question of Isocrates' possible influence on Plato (or vice versa). Note the similarity between Plato's phrase, "intuitive (*stochastikē*) and manly (*andreas*) soul," and Isocrates' description of the good student of rhetoric as one with a "manly (*andrikēs*) and intuitive (*doxastikēs*) soul" (*Against the Sophists* §17). For a discussion of these two texts, see Dodds, *Plato's Gorgias*, p. 225. Later in the *Gorgias*, and more prominently in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates does speak positively of a philosophical and "technical" rhetoric, but this issue cannot be taken up in the present essay.

(Flattery, I call it, and I state that such a thing is shameful, Polus—for I'm saying this to you—because it guesses what is pleasant without the best. And I say that it is not a *techne*, but an *empeiria* because it has no account [*logos*] of the things it applies, what sort of nature they are, and so it cannot state the cause [*aitia*] of each thing. I refuse to call anything that is irrational [*alogon*] a *techne*.) (465a)

With these comments, the long battle between rhetoric and philosophy begins. The Socratic attack can be compressed into a single statement—rhetoric is not a *techne*—but, at least as formulated above, it seems to have two distinct prongs. Rhetoric, Socrates says, cannot give a *logos* of the *aitia* it claims as a subject matter: it is thus epistemically deficient. Second, rhetoric aims for the pleasant, but not for the good: it is thus ethically degenerate as well.

These two distinct prongs of the attack, the epistemic and the ethical, no doubt were instrumental in shaping what became a widely used definition of *techne*. As Sextus Empiricus puts it, “every art is a body (*sustēma*) consisting of items of knowledge which are mutually cohesive (*ek katalēpseōn suggestumnasmenōn*) and having reference to one of the ends which are useful in life” (II.10; the translation is from Barnes, pp. 5–6). Even if presented in specifically Stoic terminology, and thus not identical to what was stated in the *Gorgias*, this definition (which Barnes notes can be “found in a dozen other texts” [p. 6]) nevertheless reflects the two general conditions that Socrates imposes upon a *techne*: epistemic adequacy, expressed by Sextus as being an organized or cohesive body of knowledge, and ethical responsibility, i.e., being useful.

Note that in the *Gorgias* itself, Socrates makes no explicit connection between these two conditions. In other words, he does not explain why rhetoric's epistemic deficiency leads or is equivalent to its moral degeneracy. Surely it is possible for any number of activities, say the simple act of walking, to be epistemically deficient and thus unable to give an account of itself, without being morally reprehensible. The most likely, but implicit, way of connecting the two prongs of the Socratic charge is to say that pleasure, the supposed aim of rhetoric, is intrinsically indeterminate. As Dodds puts it, what is pleasurable is not “determinable,” for “likes and dislikes are not predictable.”¹¹ Since a *techne* is a

¹¹Plato's *Gorgias*, p. 229.

rigorous and teachable form of knowledge with a determinate subject matter, rhetoric (as described by Socrates) cannot be a *techne*. J. C. B. Gosling makes much the same point: those *emperiai* that aim to please people “fail to be *technai* because no general account can be (or at least is) given of what pleases people, and so there are no general canons for ensuring success.”¹²

If these commentators are correct, then the two prongs of the charge coalesce: because its subject matter is pleasure, and because pleasure is indeterminate, rhetoric cannot be a *techne*. I shall argue in the next section that, even if they are not formulated in exactly these terms, subsequent attacks against rhetoric, specifically those reported by Sextus, reflect precisely this Socratic objection.

II

Sextus denies rhetoric is a *techne* for the following reasons:

(1) Rhetoric is not a *sustēma ek katalēpseōn*, for there can be no *katalēpsis* of something that is false, and the rules of rhetoric are false. A typical assertion, e.g., that the orator ought to excite anger or pity in the judges at a trial, is not true and so cannot be apprehended. It is no more true, Sextus claims, that a rhetor should excite anger than it is that one ought to steal (II.10–12).¹³

Barnes argues that “Sextus’ argument rests on an elementary confusion: he fails to distinguish between the technical ‘ought’ of the artist and the moral ‘ought’ of the preacher” (p. 13). Sextus thinks that just as there is a prohibition against stealing, and so it is false to say that one ought to steal, it is not true that one ought to excite anger or pity in the judges. While there may be no moral obligation to excite anger or pity, Sextus is wrong if “ought” is interpreted in a technical sense, for it may be perfectly true that in order to win a lawsuit orators should provoke judges to anger. As a result, Sextus fails to show there is no truth for rhetoric to apprehend; he does not explain why rhetoric cannot compile a “system” of instrumental rules on how to attain specific goals.

¹²Plato’s *Philebus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 153.

¹³My text is “Against the Professors,” trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1926), vol. 4.

Barnes is probably right: Sextus does seem to collapse the moral into the epistemic by saying, in effect, that because the rules of rhetoric do not reflect moral obligations, they are not true. Does he mean that if something is not moral, it cannot be true? This would be very strange. Even if strange, however, it should be noted that this confused argument reproduces the two prongs of Socrates' attack against rhetoric in the *Gorgias*, namely the epistemic and the ethical. Socrates says that rhetoric is not a *techne* because it is *alogon* and because it aims for pleasure rather than the good. Sextus' complaint that rhetoric does not apprehend the truth dovetails with his objection that it is morally reprehensible. Even if neither explains it fully, both Sextus and Socrates, then, conceive of a link between the epistemic and ethical deficiencies of rhetoric.

(2) Rhetoric has neither a fixed (*hestēkos*) *telos*, nor one that holds for the most part; therefore it is not a *techne* (II.13).¹⁴ Since a debate can have but one winner, and it is entirely possible that both participants in the debate are trained orators, rhetoric cannot achieve its end on a regular enough basis to qualify as a *techne*. Of course, the force of this argument depends on how the *telos* of rhetoric is defined. If it is defined as persuasion (see II.61ff.), i.e., actually winning debates, then rhetoric does not regularly achieve its end. If, however, rhetoric is defined as the art of speaking well, as Quintilian will define it (see Section III below), then it is perfectly possible for the rhetor to attain the end of rhetoric and not win debates. As Barnes puts it, "success . . . is not a defining feature of art and the artists; what matters is that their success, when it is achieved, is caused not by luck but by learning" (p. 13).

This objection against the ill-defined *telos* of rhetoric alludes to an old distinction between two kinds of *techne*. As early as Plato's *Philebus*, Socrates distinguished those *technai* that are precise and firm, typified best by arithmetic, and those that are less precise or "stochastic" (*stochastikē*, 55e8) and whose results hold only for the most part, such as music (55e–56c). This division is not made fully explicit until Alexander of Aphrodisias, who formulates it in terms of the respective ends of the two different types of *technai*:

¹⁴At II.88 this conclusion is stated even more strongly: because it has no *telos* at all, rhetoric does not exist.

ἐπὶ γὰρ τῶν τοιούτων τεχνῶν οὐκ ἀπὸ τῶν ἐπιγινόμενων τελῶν ἡ κρίσις, ὡς γίνεται ἐπὶ οἰκοδομικῆς τε καὶ ὑφαντικῆς καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τῶν ποιητικῶν τεχνῶν, ἐφ' ὧν κατὰ τινὰς ὀρισμένας τε καὶ τεταγμένας ὁδοὺς ἢ κατ' αὐτὰς ἐνέργεια γίνεται πᾶσι, καὶ οὐχ οἶόν τε καὶ ἀπὸ τύχης αὐτῶν τὸ ἔργον γενέσθαι. . . ἐν δὲ ταῖς στοχαστικαῖς τῶν τεχνῶν οὐ πάντως ἐπὶ γινόμενοις τοῖς κατὰ τέχνην ἀπαντᾷ τὰ ὧν χάριν ἐκεῖνα γίνεται. αἴτιον δὲ τὸ ἐν ταύταις καὶ ἀπὸ τύχης τινὰ γίνεσθαι καὶ μὴ ὀρισμένα εἶναι δι' ὧν τὰ ὑπ' αὐτῶν γινόμενα γίνεται. διὸ οὐκ ἔστι τὸ γινόμενον ὑπὸ τῶν τεχνῶν τῶν τοιούτων τέλος τῶν τεχνῶν, ὥσπερ ἐν αἷς δι' ὀρισμένων τινῶν γίνεται τι καὶ χωρὶς τούτων οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο· ἐν ταύταις γὰρ τὸ ἔργον τέλος τε καὶ σημεῖον [ὄν], ὡς εἶπον, τοῦ πάντα κατὰ τὴν τέχνην γυγνόμεναι.

(For in these kinds of [stochastic] *technai* judgment does not emerge on the basis of the ends achieved, as it does in building and weaving and the rest of the productive *technai*. In these production occurs in all cases according to the same well-defined and fixed methods, and it is not possible for their result to come about by chance. By contrast, in stochastic *technai* things do not entirely come about according to what the *technē* is for the sake of. And the cause of this is that they come about by chance and the methods through which the things coming about from these *technai* actually do come about are not well defined. Therefore, that which comes about from these kind of *technai* is not the end of the *technai*, as is the case in those *technai* which come to be through well-defined methods and which, apart from these methods, would not exist. For as I said, in this type of *technē* the function is the end and the sign that something has happened according to *technē*.)¹⁵

In certain *technai*, the end is identical to function. In other words, if the *technitēs* exercises the *technē* well, performs its function, then the end will be achieved. So, for example, if a carpenter does his work properly, we fully expect a house, the end of his activity, to be built. If, after his work is done, a carpenter has failed to build a house, it is fair to accuse him of *atechnia*. By contrast, an orator may exercise his *technē* well, i.e., speak well, and yet fail to win his case. Such failure does not, however, disqualify him from claiming a *technē*, since, given its stochastic character, the end of rhetoric is not identical to the function.

¹⁵Alexander of Aphrodisias, *In Aristotelis topicorum*, edited by M. Wallies (Berlin: Reimer, 1891), 33.10–23. To rely on Alexander here is, of course, really to allude to Aristotle, who allows for a more flexible conception of *technē* than Plato.

Alexander's comments disclose the real issue lurking in this objection. Because the stochastic *technai* have a method neither "well defined" nor "fixed," it is much more likely that chance will intrude upon them. A carpenter knows how to build a house, and regularly does so. By contrast, the rules of a stochastic *techné* are far less well defined. Winning a debate, for example, may depend on the mood of the judges, and this is unpredictable. Sextus' objection (2) really focuses on the same issue as that in (1): the subject matter of rhetoric. In (1), Sextus describes rhetoric as having no truth, and therefore no subject matter, to apprehend. In (2), when discussing the absence of a fixed or even a "for the most part" *telos*, the issue is once again the nature of the subject matter, namely speaking well in the broadest possible sense. Is it a determinate and unified entity which is stable enough to be thoroughly mastered? Or are its apparent successes merely the result of chance? Sextus believes the latter, and concludes that it cannot be treated by a legitimate *techné*.¹⁶

It should be clear that Sextus' argument (as well as Socrates') presupposes a certain conception of *techné*, i.e., one specifically *not* stochastic. But no warrant is offered for this presupposition. As a result, it will properly be challenged by the rhetoricians. In Sections III and IV, we shall see that Quintilian does so explicitly, Isocrates implicitly.

(3) The study of rhetoric is not a necessary condition for becoming a good rhetor. Demades, for example, was an uneducated boatman, but he still became an excellent orator. Therefore, rhetoric is not a *techné* (II.16–17).

This argument has an "antistrophe": those who study rhetoric frequently fail to perform well in the courts and assemblies; therefore, rhetoric is not a *techné* (II.18–19).

As he consistently does, Barnes objects to both halves of the argument. To the first he rejoins: "Sextus supposes that an end which is sometimes achieved without art is never achieved by art. . . . Philodemus rightly rejects this supposition" (p. 9). To the second, he says: "Possession of the art is not sufficient for success—you need a good voice and practical experience. Failure on the part of the professors is due to their deficiency in the latter requirements; it does not indicate that rhetoric lacks the standing of an art" (p. 10).

¹⁶See also II.61–71.

The basic issue of (3), then, is teachability which, in turn, is essential to the basic Greek notion of a *techne*.¹⁷ Aristotle, who so frequently gives voice to traditional notions, says the following:

Ὅλως τε σημείον τοῦ εἰδότος καὶ μὴ εἰδότος τὸ δύνασθαι διδάσκειν ἐστίν, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο τὴν τέχνην τῆς ἐμπειρίας ἡγούμεθα μάλλον ἐπιστήμην εἶναι· δύνανται γάρ, οἱ δὲ οὐ δύνανται διδάσκειν.

(In general, the sign of someone who knows and someone who does not is the ability to teach, and for this reason we think that *techne*, more than experience, is knowledge [*epistēmē*]. For those [with *techne*] can teach, but those who do not have it cannot teach.)¹⁸ (*Metaphysics* 981b6–9)

There is something precarious in the teaching of rhetoric. The best instruction may fail to produce the desired outcome: even the well-trained student may get stage fright before a large audience. To prefigure the argument of Section IV below, and to cite its (i.e., Isocrates') primary example, this is in sharp contrast with the teaching of correct spelling (orthography). The alphabet is a paradigmatically determinate object capable of being broken into discrete elements whose recombination is governed by clearly stated rules. As a result, its teaching or transmission process is mechanical and reliable, and so it has an extraordinarily high rate of success: the vast majority of people learn how to spell correctly, and if there is failure, blame is typically placed on the student, not the teacher.¹⁹ By this standard, rhetoric falls short. Of course, it is hardly obvious that this standard is appropriate. Indeed, that it is not will be a pivotal move Isocrates will make.

(4) Rhetoric is not useful (II.20–42, 49). This argument begins by noting that cities do not typically expel practitioners of other *technai*, who are, after all, quite useful. They do, however, ac-

¹⁷See note 9.

¹⁸On Aristotle's relationship to this traditional notion, see M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 95.

¹⁹This is not to imply that the rules for correct spelling had been regularized in antiquity. As Rosalind Thomas puts it, "it is a comparatively recent development in modern Europe for a country to try to maintain a single system of 'correct spelling,' and dictionaries are an essential tool for that." Still, as she points out, there was a conception, even if not uniform, of correct spelling. Bad spelling in graffiti, for example, was "often taken to show that the writer was particularly ill-educated or slow" (*Oral Tradition and Written Records in Classical Athens* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], p. 47).

tively attempt to rid themselves of those who practice rhetoric. The conclusion: rhetoric is not a *techne* (II.21–25). Sextus then goes on to argue that if rhetoric is an art at all, it will be of use either to its possessor or to the cities, like the rest of the arts (II.26). It is, however, useful to neither, a thesis supported by arguments such as these: rhetoric injures its possessor because it makes him worried day and night about his battles in the courts (II.30); it is useless to cities because it erodes respect for the laws (II.34–38). Furthermore, the orator can argue either side of a question and make the lesser argument the greater. As such, he engages in contradictory (*enantia*) speeches in which injustice inheres (II.47).

Barnes makes two criticisms. First, Sextus ignores the historical fact that on some occasions trained orators have, of course, benefited their cities. Second, he “relies on the arbitrary stipulation that every art must have an end which is useful” (p. 9). In one sense, however, Sextus’ argument is not arbitrary at all: his conception of a *techne* is derived from Plato’s *Gorgias* and so reflects the Socratic coupling of ethical and epistemic objections in the attack on rhetoric.

(5) Sextus explicitly takes up the issue of subject matter (*hulē*) at II.48. Referring back to arguments made in *Against the Grammarians* (I.131), he states that since words do not exist, speech (*logos*) does not exist; since rhetoric is (or thinks that it is) about speech, it is in effect about nothing, and so itself does not exist. (See also II.88.) Of all his arguments, this is the most clearly Pyrrhonist. As such, for our purposes it is of least interest. Nevertheless, once again it is obvious that the principal charge being levelled at rhetoric has to do with its subject matter.

To summarize: Sextus Empiricus brings five objections against the proposition that rhetoric is a *techne*. Like Socrates’ charges in the *Gorgias*, they have both an ethical and an epistemic thrust. These two prongs can, however, be united. The putative subject matter of rhetoric—speaking well in the broadest sense—is terribly difficult to identify and to analyze into discrete and manipulable parts. This is what leads Sextus to deny that it is a body of mutually cohesive items of knowledge; this is what causes its teachability to become questionable and what allows the untrained to excel and the well trained to fail; this is what makes its *telos* difficult to recognize. Finally, the problematic, i.e., indeterminate, character of rhetoric’s subject matter leads to the charge that it is useless. The rhetorician can argue both sides of an issue;

as such, his is a contradictory *logos* that can be identified with no fixed and firm set of values.

III

Quintilian offers an extended defense of the thesis that rhetoric is an art. His argument has several parts which I will present as responses to Sextus' objections. To call them responses is, of course, not to make a historical claim, since Quintilian preceded Sextus by some one hundred years. Again, however, if Barnes and Hubbell are right, then both writers are drawing from a "common stock" of arguments and chronology is not essential in determining the order in which their arguments are presented.

(1) While it is true that rhetoric deals with falsehoods, this does not disqualify it from being an art. This is because it deals with falsehoods knowingly. Hannibal, for example, deceived his enemy into thinking that he was in retreat, while he himself knew the truth completely. "Item orator, cum falso utitur pro vero, scit esse falsum eoque se pro vero uti." ("Similarly an orator, when he substitutes falsehood for the truth, is aware of the falsehood and of the fact that he is substituting it for the truth," II.xvii.20.)²⁰

(2) Rhetoric does have a *telos* which it can meet for the most part: speaking well. "Tendit quidem ad victoriam qui dicit; sed cum bene dixit, etiam si non vincat, id quod arte continetur efficit." ("The speaker aims at victory, it is true, but if he speaks well, he has lived up to the ideals of his art even if he is defeated," II.xvii.23.) As discussed above, by defining the end of rhetoric in this manner, Quintilian avoids being burdened with the fact of the trained orator's failures.

(3) Rhetoric is teachable. Quintilian acknowledges that some men are naturally talented and become orators without explicit training in rhetoric. Like Sextus, he cites the example of the boatman-orator Demades. But he disputes the inference that, because of cases like this, rhetoric is not an art. First, he makes the point that "omnia quae ars consummaverit, a natura initia duxisse" ("everything which art has brought to perfection originated in nature," II.xvii.9). In other words, even if someone has natural

²⁰My text of Quintilian is the Loeb Classical Library edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), translated by H. E. Butler.

talent, the art of rhetoric perfects it. Next, he expresses some doubt that, in fact, Demades was actually untrained in rhetoric (II.xvii.12). Even if he was, however, he continually practiced speaking well, for "continua dicendi exercitatio potuerit tantum quantuscunque postea fuit fecisse; nam id potentissimum discendi genus est" ("continuous practice in speaking was sufficient to bring him to such proficiency as he attained: for experience is the best of all schools," II.xvii.12). Finally, Demades would have had even greater success had he studied rhetoric.²¹ Nature is the raw material for art, and so, "in mediocribus quidem utrisque maius adhuc naturae credam esse momentum, consummatos autem plus doctrinae debere quam naturae putabo" ("the average orator owes most to nature, while the perfect orator owes more to education," II.xix.2).

(4) Rhetoric, Quintilian insists, is quite useful. Cicero, after all, used it to crush the plots of Catiline. Even if it is often used badly, this is no more a strike against it than the fact that eating sometimes makes us ill is a serious objection to food. Given Quintilian's definition of rhetoric as the art of speaking well, "quem nos finem sequimur, ut sit orator in primis vir bonus" ("this implies that an orator must be a good man"), and as a result, "utilem certe esse eam confitendum est" ("there can be no doubt about its usefulness," II.xvi.11). Indeed, since the power of reason is what distinguishes human beings from the other animals and is responsible for their survival, and since reason without speech is ineffectual, the power of speech is extremely valuable/useful (II.xvi.13–19).

(5) The most critical argument is this: rhetoric does have a subject matter suitable for treatment by an art. And what is it? "Ego (neque id sine auctoribus) materiam esse rhetorices iudico omnes res quaecunque ei ad dicendum subiectae erunt." ("For my own part, and I have authority to support me, I hold that the subject matter [*materia*] of rhetoric is composed of everything that may be placed before it as a subject for speech," II.xxi.4.) Quintilian anticipates that his description of rhetoric as being able to talk about "everything" will meet with objections.²² Indeed, it will

²¹The Demades example is also cited by Philodemus. See Hubbell, "The Rhetorica," p. 371.

²²Much of Quintilian's discussion takes up themes developed by Cicero in *De oratore* I and II.

have to confront exactly the objection Socrates implicitly offers in the *Gorgias*, namely that “everything” is indeterminate while an art must have a determinate subject matter: “Hanc autem quam nos materiam vocamus, id est res subiectas, quidam modo infinitam modo non propriam rhetorices esse dixerunt. . . .” (“But this subject matter as we call it, that is to say the things brought before [the orator] has been criticized by some, at times on the grounds that it is unlimited [*infinita*] and sometimes on the ground that it is not peculiar to oratory, . . .” II.xxi.7.) An art requires a peculiar subject matter in order to be distinguished from other arts, and this must be an object that is determinate rather than *infinita*. If the purview of rhetoric embraces any and every subject, if no specific object provides it with a peculiar subject matter, it cannot, it seems, be an art. Or, in other words, someone with an art is an expert, and no one can be an expert in everything.

Quintilian’s resolution of this problem is to argue that his subject matter is not unlimited, not *infinita*, but *multiplex* (“multifold,” II.xxi.8). He illustrates what he means through an analogy between rhetoric and four “minor” arts. Architecture embraces within it other arts and everything else that is useful for the purpose of building; engraving and sculpture work in different media (gold, silver, ivory, etc.); finally, medicine deals with exercise, normally conceived as the field of the expert trainer, and diet, the province of the cook (II.xxi.8–11).

His point is that each of these four arts is like rhetoric in not having a determinate and unique subject matter. But Quintilian fails to make his case with these four examples. While it is true that architecture is “architectonic” and so to it other building arts are subordinated, it nevertheless remains the case that the subject matter of architecture, i.e., building, even if complex, is determinate. Similarly with engraving and sculpture. They represent the mastery of basic techniques that can be executed in various media. But the fact that the media differ in no way compromises the unity of these basic techniques. Finally, even if medicine infringes on the provinces of the trainer and the cook, its subject matter is still restricted to the health of the human body.

In short, each of these four arts is radically different from rhetoric which, unlike them, can talk about anything, and so Quintilian’s argument by analogy seems problematic. There is, however, a sense in which this argument does indeed work. There are several ancillary arts about which architecture must be knowledgeable. The architect must, for example, know something

about masonry. He need not be an expert mason, but he must *know enough* about masonry to be able to converse with and direct the mason who works for him. As we shall see below, this reading of the analogy is defensible.

Quintilian asks, if rhetoric can talk knowledgeably about everything, does this imply that “omnium igitur artium peritus erit orator” (“the orator must be the master of all arts,” II.xxi.14)? Surely this is an impossibly encyclopedic demand, although one that seems to have been made by Hippias and Cicero.²³ Quintilian, at least, rejects the notion that the orator has to know all the arts:

Sed mihi satis est eius esse oratorem rei de qua dicet non inscium. Neque enim omnes causas novit, et debet posse de omnibus dicere. De quibus ergo dicet? De quibus didicit. Similiter de artibus quoque de quibus dicendum erit, interim discet; et de quibus didicerit dicet.

(I . regard it as sufficient that an orator should not be actually ignorant of the subject on which he has to speak. For he cannot have knowledge of all causes, and yet he should be able to speak on all. On what then will he speak? On those which he has studied. Similarly as regards the arts, he will study those concerning which he has to speak, as occasion may demand [*interim*], and will speak on those which he has studied.) (II.xxi.14–15)

This is the key passage. What the orator should know is not everything, but *what to study and when to study it*. So, for example, if the debate in the Senate is about foreign policy, the orator should know something about, say, naval technology. First of all, having such knowledge is required to meet the goal of persuasion. If the debate focuses on something about shipbuilding, the orator should learn enough to be able to speak effectively about shipbuilding. How much is enough? What it takes to avoid being “actually ignorant” and to “get the job done.” But isn’t it the case that the expert shipbuilder will speak better about shipbuilding than the orator? Only if the orator has not done his homework. If he has studied the subject at hand, he will do a better job representing the position than the shipbuilder himself.²⁴ Only if a specific technical point arises should the shipbuilder himself speak. (See II.xxi.16–17.)

²³Hippias is described in Plato’s *Hippias Major* while Cicero outlines such a view (although not in his own voice) in *De oratore* (see especially II.xxxiii).

²⁴This is a point made by Gorgias in Plato’s *Gorgias* at 456b.

The orator must know how to take up any subject and quickly learn its rudiments, at least those relevant to presenting his case. Of course, this requires being able to distinguish what is relevant from what is not. In this sense the orator is like the architect who masters what needs to be known about the ancillary art of masonry. Again, the orator must do this not only to understand the issue at hand properly, but also to speak effectively. He should know how much technical material to incorporate into his speech. Too much will alienate the audience; too little will impress the audience with the speaker's ignorance. The orator should be prepared to study anything: "Equidem omnia fere credo posse casu aliquo venire in officium oratoris: quod si non accidet, non erunt ei subiecta." ("For my part I hold that practically all subjects are under certain circumstances liable to come up for treatment by the orator. If the circumstances do not occur the subjects will not concern him," II.xxi.19.)

The *officium* of the orator is almost everything; it is indefinite, for he should be able to respond appropriately to any number of circumstances, to learn enough about any given subject in order to speak effectively about it. In this sense, and only in this sense, namely knowing *what to study and when*, can it be said that the orator can talk knowledgeably about everything.

What is rhetoric according to Quintilian? The art of speaking well whose subject matter includes everything that people talk about in public. Ultimately, then, the subject matter of rhetoric is *oratio*, or *logos*, understood in an extremely broad sense as the most basic medium of all political life. Indeed, "*oratio/logos*" comes extremely close to being political activity itself (which we might label "*praxis*"). Quintilian makes this point in two ways; first, by explicitly describing rhetoric as a practical art (but one that draws on both theoretical and productive arts, II.xviii). Like dancing, its end is realized not in knowledge alone, but in action. Second, he is confident that the good orator will be the good man (II.xx.4, 8–10 and, of course, Book XII).²⁵ In other words, he conceives of the project of rhetoric as thoroughly value laden. In sum, the subject matter of rhetoric is human political or "logical" life in its entirety.

²⁵A sentiment dating back at least to Cato the elder's *vir bonus dicendi peritus*. (Thanks to my colleague Jim Ruebel for this point.)

This crucial point must be understood in order to appreciate what finally is at stake in the question, is rhetoric an art? The following two passages, the first from Aristotle's *Politics* and the second from Isocrates' *Antidosis*, are meant to clarify.

οὐθεν γάρ, ὡς φαμέν, μάτην ἡ φύσις ποιεῖ· λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζώων. ἡ μὲν οὖν φωνὴ τοῦ λυπηροῦ καὶ ἡδέος ἐστὶ σημεῖον, διὸ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὑπάρχει ζῳίσι . . . ὁ δὲ λόγος ἐπὶ τῷ δηλοῦν ἐστὶ τὸ συμφέρον καὶ τὸ βλαβερόν, ὥστε καὶ τὸ δίκαιον καὶ τὸ ἄδικον· τοῦτο γάρ πρὸς τὰλλα ζῳα τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἴδιον, τὸ μόνον ἀγαθοῦ καὶ κακοῦ καὶ δικαίου καὶ ἀδίκου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων αἴσθησιν ἔχειν. ἡ δὲ τούτων κοινωνία ποιεῖ οἰκίαν καὶ πόλιν.

(For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose. And the human being alone of the animals possesses logos. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore it is possessed by other animals as well . . . but logos is for the indication of what is advantageous and what is harmful, and therefore also of what is right and wrong. For it is the unique property of human beings in distinction to the other animals that they alone have perception of good and bad and right and wrong and other such things, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a *polis*.) (1253a)

τοῖς μὲν γάρ ἄλλοις οἷς ἔχομεν, . οὐδὲν τῶν ἄλλων ζῳων διαφέρομεν, ἀλλὰ πολλῶν καὶ τῷ τάχει καὶ τῇ ῥώμῃ καὶ ταῖς ἄλλαις εὐπορίαις καταδεέστεροι τυγχάνομεν ὄντες· ἐγγενομένον δ' ἡμῖν τοῦ πείθειν ἀλλήλους καὶ δηλοῦν πρὸς ἡμᾶς αὐτοὺς περὶ ὧν ἂν βουληθῶμεν, οὐ μόνον τοῦ θηριωδῶς ζῆν ἀπηλλάγημεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ συνελθόντες πόλεις ᾠκίσαμεν καὶ νόμους ἐθέμεθα καὶ τέχναις εὖρομεν, καὶ σχεδὸν ἅπαντα τὰ δι' ἡμῶν μεμηχανημένα λόγος ἡμῖν ἐστὶν ὁ συγκατασκευάσας. . . εἰ δὲ δεῖ συλλήβδην περὶ τῆς δυνάμεως ταύτης εἰπεῖν, οὐδὲν τῶν φρονίμως πραττομένων εὐρήσομεν ἀλόγως γιγνόμενον, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἔργων καὶ τῶν διανοημάτων ἅπαντων ἡγεμόνα λόγον ὄντα, καὶ μάλιστα χρωμένους αὐτῷ τοὺς πλείστον νοῦν ἔχοντας.

(For in the other powers . . . 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 laws and invented technai; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man which the power of logos has not helped us to establish. . . . If I must sum up on this subject, we shall find that nothing done with intelligence is done without logos, but logos is the

marshall of all actions and of thought and those must use it who have the greatest wisdom.)²⁶ (253–54, 257)

Both of these passages suggest that *logos* is virtually coextensive with being human. It is what distinguishes us from the animals and makes us who we are. Aristotle puts this point in characteristically teleological terms. What makes the human animal unique is the ability to discuss what is right and wrong. It is just this ability to evaluate and to discuss such evaluations that makes us political animals; *logos*, according to Aristotle, is thus the essential constituent as well as the medium of political life.

Isocrates says something very similar, although he begins with a different emphasis, namely the ability to persuade, and then closes by taking Aristotle's point even further. For him, all cultural achievements are permeated by *logos*, and there is nothing intelligent that is not logical. Again, *logos*, specifically about human values, is the lifeblood of all human institutions; it saturates every uniquely human action. In short, *logos* is co-extensive with *praxis*.²⁷

By describing the subject matter of rhetoric as "everything," Quintilian holds to a conception of *logos* which is similar to those of Aristotle and Isocrates. And this is why the question of whether rhetoric is an art has such force: taking a stand on it requires taking a stand on the nature of human, of political, life. Can *praxis* be rendered determinate? Can it be regulated by hard and fast rules? Can its disputes be adjudicated by the voice of authoritative expertise? In short, can it become the subject matter of an art? To couch this in more familiar terms, is a human (social, political) science possible? If so, a corresponding epistemological question emerges: Is the rigid and formal sense of *techne* to which both Socrates and Sextus appeal the only possible model of it? Or is a stochastic *techne*, a set of informal and flexible "rules of thumb" rather than of mechanical or systematic rules, a viable epistemic option?²⁸ To ask these parallel sets of questions is, quite

²⁶This translation is by George Kennedy, in his *The Art of Persuasion in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 8–9.

²⁷See also Cicero, *De oratore* II.xvi.68.

²⁸My use of the phrase "rules of thumb" comes from Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 316. The best discussion of the stochastic *techne* in antiquity is James Allen, "Failure and Expertise in the Ancient Conception of an Art," distributed by the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy, April 1989.

simply, to ask who we, as knowers, doers, and speakers, are.²⁹

To summarize: Quintilian struggles with the *techne*-question. Achieving technical mastery of everything is surely impossible. But everything is what the orator must know. This means, however, that he must know what to study and when. He must know what is appropriate and relevant and how to “get the job done.” Implicit within his response, then, is a claim about the nature of political life: no, it cannot be rendered fully determinate nor become a matter of hard and fast rules. It can only be mastered through a sensitive awareness of what is needed at the moment. It requires the ability to know what is appropriate. In this sense, rhetoric should indeed be called an art.

To appreciate the coherence and force of this response, it is best to turn back to the author who, with Plato, initiated the whole debate: Isocrates.³⁰

IV

In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates discusses his conception of what he teaches. To begin, he criticizes those sophists who make exaggerated claims for themselves:

Θαυμάζω δ' ὅταν ἴδω τούτους μαθητῶν ἀξιουμένους, οἳ ποιητικοῦ πράγματος τεταγμένην τέχνην παράδειγμα φέροντες λελήθασιν σφᾶς αὐτούς. τίς γὰρ οὐκ οἶδε πλὴν τούτων ὅτι τὸ μὲν τῶν γραμμάτων ἀκινήτως ἔχει καὶ μένει κατὰ ταῦτόν. ὥστε τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἀεὶ περὶ τῶν αὐτῶν χρώμενοι διατελοῦμεν, τὸ δὲ τῶν λόγων πᾶν τὸ ὑναντίον πέπονθεν.

(I am amazed whenever I see these [sophists] setting themselves up as instructors of youth who fail to understand that they are applying the paradigm of a fixed [*tetagmenē*] *techne* to a creative process. For who except them does not know that, on the one hand, the writing

²⁹Fish, when discussing what he terms “anti-formalism,” which I would describe as a rejection of the Socratic formal model of *techne*, says “once you start down the anti-formalist road, there is no place to stop” (*Doing What Comes Naturally*, p. 2). His essays begin by challenging formalism and “end by challenging everything else” (p. 6). In other words, Fish appreciates well the enormous implications that arise in reflecting upon the epistemic status of rhetoric.

³⁰In Section IV, I repeat certain arguments that I made originally in “Stanley Fish and the Old Quarrel Between Rhetoric and Philosophy,” *Critical Review*, 5 (1992), 225–46.

of letters is stable and remains unchanged, so that we continually and always use the same letters for the same purpose, while on the other hand, when it comes to speeches [*logoi*], the situation is exactly the opposite.)³¹ (§12)

In this passage, Isocrates is probably criticizing the *artium scriptores*, those sophists who had written “handbooks” of rhetorical instruction. It is possible that these works bore the title *Rhētorikē Technē* (or *Technē Tōn Logōn*) and were probably systematic, and often mechanical, compendia filled with terminological distinctions and definitions.³² Isocrates uses the example of correct spelling, or orthography, to illustrate what he calls a “fixed” *technē*, i.e., a rigorous and teachable form of knowledge that includes strict definitions and conceptual divisions of its subject matter, and that issues in hard and fast rules. The correct spelling of a word allows for no variation or interpretation, and therefore its teaching is a highly reliable process, which is a critical benchmark of *technē* (at least of the sort assumed by Sextus and Socrates). Aristotle, too, singles out orthography, in order to contrast it with what he calls “deliberation”:

καὶ περὶ μὲν τὰς ἀκριβεῖς καὶ αὐτάρκεις τῶν ἐπιστημῶν οὐκ ἔστι βουλή, οἷον περὶ γραμμάτων (οὐ γὰρ διστάζομεν πῶς γραπτέον).

(Concerning those sciences [*epistēmai*] that are precise and self-sufficient, like ‘orthography’ [*grammata*], there is no deliberation; for we are not uncertain about how a word ought to be spelled.)³³

That orthography is paradigmatic of a fixed *technē* is due to the nature of its subject matter. The sounds of the human voice constitute a determinate entity, a continuum of sound that can be counted as a single epistemic unit and analyzed into parts (e.g., vowels, labials, palatals). These, in turn, can be symbolized by written marks and then recombined in accordance with strict rules to form meaningful units. It is for this reason that teaching correct

³¹My Greek text is the Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

³²Kennedy argues that the best surviving example of such a *technē* is the *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum*, falsely attributed to Aristotle, but probably authored by Anaximenes. See *The Art of Persuasion in Greece*, p. 12. On the issue of the term *rhētorikē*, see Edward Schiappa, “Did Plato Coin *Rhētorikē*?” *American Journal of Philology*, 111 (1990), 460–73.

³³*Nicomachean Ethics* 1112b1–5.

spelling is a rather mechanical task whose success rate is extremely high.

By contrast, and as noted (damningly) by Sextus and (approvingly) by Quintilian, the success rate in rhetoric is not comparable. This is because its subject matter—logos or the entirety of praxis itself—is not a determinate unity that can be broken into parts and then recombined via a set of rules. Instead, it is a series of contingent events. Therefore, the appropriate response to praxis requires “creativity,” since the good speaker must invent novel responses to the many unpredictable occasions and subjects he faces:

οὗτος εἶναι δοκεῖ τεχνικώτατος, ὅς τις ἂν ἀξίως μὲν λέγῃ τῶν πραγμάτων, μηδὲν δὲ τῶν αὐτῶν τοῖς ἄλλοις εὕρισκειν δύνηται.

(This speaker seems to be the most skillful [*technikōtatos*] who speaks in a way that is worthy of his subject and is able to discover a unique way of approaching the subject.) (§12)

The use of *technikōtatos* here is striking, because it echoes the phrase *tetagmenēn technēn* used earlier in the first sentence of §12. Isocrates objects to those sophists (and perhaps to Plato) who describe their subject matter as analogous to the fixity of correct spelling, and he clearly denies having such a *techne*. But he also thinks it is possible for someone to become (or at least to seem to become) “most skillful” in speaking.

Is this a contradiction? If not, it is either because being *technikōtatos* does not require possessing a *techne*, or because Isocrates believes his own subject is a *techne*, but not a fixed one. Isocrates is largely silent about what sort of knowledge he has in mind here. Therefore, all we can safely infer so far is negative: teaching a student how to become most skillful in rhetoric is not a mechanical process analogous to teaching correct spelling. Instead, because a good speech responds to the occasion and is novel, and because good orators intervene into a course of unpredictable events, they must be sensitive and flexible enough to respond well to the contingencies and particularities of the moment. And there are no hard and fast rules on how to do this. The question is, can this capacity be taught, and if so, how?

After criticizing his competitors’ teaching methods and their choice of an inappropriate paradigm on which to model their knowledge, Isocrates explains his own conception of rhetorical

education. He admits that some men have become clever in speaking without formal training:

αἱ μὲν γὰρ δυνάμεις καὶ τῶν λόγων καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἔργων ἀπάντων ἐν τοῖς εὐφύεσιν ἐγγίγνονται καὶ τοῖς περὶ τὰς ἐμπειρίας γεγυμνασμένοις· ἡ δὲ παιδευσίς τοὺς μὲν τοιοῦτους τεχνικωτέρους καὶ πρὸς τὸ ζητεῖν εὐπορωτέρους ἐποίησεν. οἷς γὰρ νῦν ἐντυγχάνουσι πλανώμενοι. ταῦτ' ἐξ ἑτοιμοτέρου λαμβάνειν αὐτοὺς ἐδίδαξεν. τοὺς δὲ καταδεεστέραν τὴν φύσιν ἔχοντας ἀγωνιστὰς μὲν ἀγαθοὺς ἢ λόγων ποιητὰς οὐκ ἂν ἀποτελέσειεν, αὐτοὺς δ' ἂν αὐτῶν προαγάγοι καὶ πρὸς πολλὰ φρονιμωτέρως διακεῖσθαι ποιήσειεν.

(For ability, on the one hand, in both speeches and all other activities, is found in those who have good natures and who have been trained by experience. On the other hand, [education], on the one hand, makes such young men more skillful [*technikōterous*] and more resourceful in discovery, for it teaches them to take those things which they now chance upon in a haphazard fashion from a readier source. On the other hand, [education] cannot, on the one hand, make those who are inferior in nature good debaters, or makers of speeches; it can, on the other hand, lead them to self-improvement and to a greater degree of intelligence on many matters.) (§14–§15)

By acknowledging that there are those who, by virtue of their natural talent, succeed in speech-making, Isocrates seems to downgrade the value of his own pedagogical prowess. This may seem self-defeating, especially in a work that is often thought to be a “prospectus” for his own school.³⁴ Indeed, Isocrates himself here presents what we have seen is a standard objection to rhetoric’s claim to being a *technē*, namely that (to quote Sextus Empiricus again) “it is possible to make a speech quite successfully and well without having studied rhetoric. . . . Hence, rhetoric is not a *technē*.”

Immediately following such a disavowal, however, comes a strong positive claim: rhetorical education does make students more “skillful.”³⁵ More specifically, it can improve those who have good natures by systematically organizing what they intuitively and hence unreliably know. This would make Isocrates the teacher valuable indeed.

³⁴See Jaeger, *Paideia*, 3:55.

³⁵Note that, unlike the earlier passage, here Isocrates doesn’t say “seem to be.”

There is, however, another disavowal: even the best teacher cannot transform a student with a poor nature into a good debater or speech-maker. And then comes yet another antithetical response: with some education even such poor students can at least improve. Negation is followed by affirmation in an almost strophic/antistrophic fashion, and it becomes ambiguous what exact claim Isocrates the teacher of rhetoric is making.

Isocrates does grant that some portion of his educational program is “fixed” and “stable.”

φημι γὰρ ἐγὼ τῶν μὲν ἰδεῶν, ἐξ ὧν τοὺς λόγους ἅπαντας καὶ λέγομεν καὶ συντίθεμεν, λαβεῖν τὴν ἐπιστήμην οὐκ εἶναι τῶν πάνυ χαλεπῶν.

(For I state that, on the one hand, grasping the knowledge [*epistēmē*] of the forms [*ideai*] from which we articulate and compose all speeches is not terribly difficult. . . .) (§16)

It is not clear what “forms” means in this passage. Jaeger suggests “basic forms of orator,” Taylor “Gorgianic figures,” Hubbell “commonplace arguments,” and Lidov “thought elements.”³⁶ Fortunately, it is not necessary here to decide this issue. What is sufficient for our purpose is to note that Isocrates asserts that some dimension of his curriculum is “fixed,” and so is systematically, even mechanically, teachable. Not surprisingly, however, he follows this assertion with a disavowal:

τὸ δὲ τούτων ἐφ’ ἐκάστῳ τῶν πραγμάτων ἃς δεῖ προελέσθαι καὶ μίξαι πρὸς ἀλλήλας καὶ τάξαι κατὰ τρόπον, ἔτι δὲ τῶν καιρῶν μὴ διαμαρτεῖν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς ἐνθυμήμασι πρεπόντως ὅλον τὸν λόγον καταποικίλαι καὶ τοῖς ὀνόμασιν εὐρύθμως καὶ μουσικῶς εἰπεῖν, ταῦτα δὲ πολλῆς ἐπιμελείας δεῖσθαι καὶ ψυχῆς ἀνδρικῆς καὶ δοξαστικῆς ἔργον εἶναι.

(On the other hand, to choose [from the forms] those which should be chosen for each subject and to arrange and order [*taxai*] them properly, and furthermore not to miss the occasion [*kairos*] but appropriately to adorn the whole speech with striking thoughts and to clothe it in flowing and melodious phrases—these require much practice and are the work of a manly and intuitive mind.) (§16–§17)

To summarize: on the one hand, it is not difficult for the student to receive the fixed portion of knowledge Isocrates professes

³⁶Joel Lidov summarizes this material in “The Meaning of IDEA in Isocrates,” *La parola del passato*, 38 (1983), 273–87.

to teach. On the other hand, this portion includes only the "forms" of rhetoric, the fixed content of his teaching, whatever that might be. The ability to combine and "order" (*taxai*, of which *tetagmenē* is the perfect passive participle) the forms properly, i.e., to apply "creatively" what has been learned mechanically, is found only in the special student with a "manly and intuitive" mind, and for this there is no systematic instruction, no technical mode of instruction.

Isocrates vacillates in an almost dizzying fashion when he confronts the question, is rhetoric a *techne*?³⁷ But this is neither accidental nor, in an important sense, is it a defect. Isocrates conceives of human political life, of which logos is the essential forum and medium, as indeterminate and shot through with contingency. There are no hard and fast rules with which to master the life of praxis, for that life is a matter of the *kairos*, the opportune moment. Indeed, *kairos* is the pivotal term in the entire discussion. Human life, on this view, is never immune from contingent circumstance. An agent is always situated and must appropriately respond. The best orator is able to sniff out what is relevant to any given situation and what is not. On this view, there are no timeless ideals at which to aim, no fixed structures to govern political work. There are no Platonic Forms. Instead, all is flow and contingent happenstance.

But Isocrates is unwilling to abandon altogether his claim to a *techne*. This is because he *is* a teacher, and *techne* is the paradigm of teachable knowledge. Isocrates *does* have a subject to teach. But in expressing his views on his subject's teachability, he invariably reverts to speaking antithetically. Is rhetoric a *techne*? On the one hand, no, not if measured by the strictest paradigm of orthography. But yes, there is a subject to teach, one worth paying for. What is it? Rhetoric. But what is rhetoric? On the one hand, it is the "forms," i.e., the fixed portion of the curriculum. On the other hand, it is more than this. It is an acquired (or natural) sensitivity to the moment, the ability to enter a public debate and know what to do next. It is an informal ability to hit upon what is appropriate. As a result, there are no guarantees that Isocratean education will

³⁷A similar effect is achieved in his *Antidosis* 180–95. I should note here that my analysis does not directly refer to the much-disputed historical question of whether Isocrates actually wrote a *Technē*. On a strictly thematic level, though, my analysis leads me to answer, no.

succeed. Indeed, his is a school restricted only to the talented few who receive years of personal instruction in which the teacher becomes a "paradigm" (*paradeigma*, §18) who makes a lasting impression upon the student.³⁸

In short, the vacillating form of Isocrates' argument mirrors its content. The content: political life is composed of contingent moments. The form: an antithetical response to the question, is rhetoric a *techne*? This mirroring reflects the coherence of the rhetorical project. In other words, precisely because of its conception of political life/logos, the Isocratean response is appropriate, i.e., its form is adequate to its content. As a result, the Socratic/Sextean critique of rhetoric, which is based precisely on a *tetagemenē* model of *techne*, misses the mark.

In sum, in *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates effectively makes a dual claim: first, that he has something to teach, a kind of knowledge for which he can properly charge tuition. Second, his curriculum should not be measured against the standard of orthography. His teaching methods are not appropriate for every student, only for those naturally talented, and he admits the role that chance and human nature play in his students' achievements. Consequently, he cannot translate his curriculum into the form of a *tetagemenē technē*. But this does not compromise the integrity of his role as teacher. In fact, by making this series of negative claims he distances himself from his sophistic colleagues, the ones who make the lofty promises they cannot keep.³⁹

Isocrates' response to the question of whether rhetoric is a *techne* is thus fundamentally similar to Quintilian's. When Quintilian begins his discussion he says this:

Ac me dubitasse confiteor, an hanc partem quaestionis tractandam putarem; nam quis est adeo non ab eruditione modo sed a sensu remotus hominis, ut fabricandi quidem et texendi et e luto vasa ducendi artem putet, rhetoricen autem, maximum ac pulcherrimum . . . opus, in tam sublime fastigium existimet sine arte venisse?

(Indeed, I will confess that I had doubts as to whether I should discuss this inquiry [is rhetoric an art?], for there is no one, I will not say so unlearned, but so devoid of ordinary sense, as to hold that

³⁸See *Antidosis* 87–88.

³⁹Michael Cahn, in "Reading Rhetoric Rhetorically," *Rhetorica*, 7 (1989), 126–39, argues that Isocrates' denial of the technical status of rhetoric is itself a strategy by which to promote his own educational program.

building, weaving or moulding vessels from clay are arts, and at the same time to consider that rhetoric . . . has reached such a lofty eminence without the assistance of art.) (II.xvii.3)

That someone can learn rhetoric, and that it is a subject worth paying for, seem obvious. But what exactly is the subject matter of rhetoric? The answer Quintilian offers is, anything that can be placed before the orator as a subject of a speech. In defense of this assertion he states that the subject of rhetoric is not unlimited, only manifold. In fact, however, what the orator should know is what to study and when, what is relevant and what is not. In short, he should know how to respond appropriately to the *kairos*. And this unique sensitivity—as Isocrates knows well—is something that cannot be taught—at least not in a technical or formal fashion.

For Isocrates, then, rhetoric is and is not a *techne*. For Quintilian, it is manifestly an art, but one which makes the extraordinary claim to be able to talk about everything. As such, and even if he does not make this point explicit, for Quintilian, too, rhetoric is and is not an art. And this is because of the nature of its subject matter.

V

The question of whether rhetoric is an art has had a long and tenacious life. It was debated continuously throughout antiquity, from Plato's *Gorgias* and Isocrates' *Against the Sophists*, through the works of Cicero, Quintilian, Philodemus, and Sextus Empiricus. It was satirized by Lucian and discussed at great length by Aristides.⁴⁰ Recently it was the subject of a very nice article by Jonathan Barnes and a polemic by Brian Vickers. But this question has more than staying power, for within it lies a fundamental issue: Can human life, can the realm of politics and public speeches, of praxis and logos, be rendered fixed and stable? Is there anything in this world of human affairs that can be counted upon, that can be known with reliability? Is the political world in any way analogous to the alphabet, whose subject matter is the paradigm of determinacy?

⁴⁰See Lucian, "The Parasite," and Aristides, "In Defence of Oratory." Both are available in the Loeb Classical Library.

When Socrates says rhetoric is not a *techne*, he does so because of his conception of *techne* as a determinate body of knowledge, and what he takes to be the indeterminate subject matter of rhetoric. When Sextus Empiricus reports the standard objections levelled against rhetoric, it becomes clear they all derive from this basic Socratic objection. There is something about the effort of talking (and pleasing) everyone, something about the the real political world, that cannot, it seems, be rendered rigorously, rigidly technical.

In an important sense, the rhetorician agrees. Isocrates hedges on the *techne* question, saying both yes and no. Quintilian follows suit by describing the subject matter of rhetoric as *multiplex* but not *infinita*. The achievement of the rhetoricians is their ability to harmonize two potentially discordant themes. On the one hand, they acknowledge the contingent flow of occasions, and the consequent fact that practical knowledge, knowledge of how to speak well, is not an art, not a *techne* (or, at least, not a *tetagemē techne*, i.e., one with a determinate subject matter). On the other hand, yes, indeed, rhetoric is a well-formed and real subject, one that can be packaged, paid for, and delivered.

The fundamental issue lurking behind the question should now be clear. Do we have access to stable values and standards? Is there something to be known that can regulate our political lives? If so, what sort of knowledge would this be? If so, should a hierarchy be drawn in which the person having that knowledge is to be situated at the top and perhaps even granted political rule? If not, then should the question of rule be decided by public debate in a democratic forum? These are among the most basic and enduring questions concerning our moral and political lives. And they are latent in the apparently innocuous query: Is rhetoric an art?