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Classical Rhetoric
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Socrates's Ambiguous Exaltation of Isocrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*

Plato's *Phaedrus* works to find the definition of an art and whether or not rhetoric may be viewed as an art, or a good, for the people of Greece to learn. As with most of Plato's earlier dialogues, the *Phaedrus* does not conclude with any positive philosophy—that is he does not say any one way or the other definitively about Rhetoric—rather he suggests that there may be an alternative to, or a synthesis of, Philosophy and Rhetoric in the young Isocrates. The dialogue dates back to when Isocrates was older and in his practicing years as a speech writer and rhetor, so it is debated among scholars whether or not Plato is being facetious in his writing, since Isocrates did not grow up to be the philosopher Socrates (and Plato) perhaps wanted him to be. However, it is possible that Plato references Isocrates for not just tragic irony because he did not become the philosophical rhetor of Plato's dreams, but also for recognition that Isocrates's goals are not so different from his own and his means of speech are far more effective on the Greek people than Socrates's elenchus.

Although Isocrates used methods that Plato apparently finds repulsive (i.e., sophistry), the two ideally have a similar goal. According to Werner Jaeger's essay "The Rhetoric of Isocrates and the Cultural Ideal," Isocrates used his speech writing skills to try to unite Greece (125). Greeks already recognized their surrounding city-states as being of the same cultural background, yet they still fought each other in numerous wars, including the great Peloponnesian war, in which Socrates himself fought. In the fifth book of the *Republic*, Plato mentions that the city-states do indeed battle each other, but because they are all brothers by culture, they should treat their battles as civil wars which have different rules than other wars that are fought against

“barbarians.” Although he never explicitly calls for a uniting of the Greeks into one nation, he does believe that fellow Hellens should be treated better than non-Greeks. So, at the very core, Isocrates and Plato appear to have a common belief: Greeks are united by culture. Isocrates merely wishes to force this one step further and be united by nation.

If we may assume that Plato also desires for the Greeks to be a united people, then it is possible that Plato sees where he and Socrates as mere philosophers may be in a bind. Socrates has a hard enough time as it is making his fellow Athenians realize they are wrong or, at least, not cohesive in their beliefs, in the matters that do not necessarily affect the state directly. How will he be able to show an entire nation they are wrong in their relations across city-states? Plato likely realizes that despite his dissatisfaction with the irrational and non-rational arguments of the sophist, he knows that they have better effects on the people at large than straight reason and logic ever will. Earlier in the *Phaedrus*, Plato shows that emotionally based speech making works better than the elenchus and dialectic, when Socrates mimics Lysias’s speech making and moves Phaedrus with his words.

Although Plato recognizes the power of emotional and quasi-logical arguments have on the masses, it is impossible for him (and Socrates) to imagine using anything aside from rational argument and questioning to show a group anything their ignorance or where they should head instead. This Catch-22 is why it is possible his singling out of Isocrates is not meant to be a negative. At least, for Plato, Isocrates has a similar goal to Plato’s which allows his “evil” of eristic teachings and emotional speeches to be allowed, for it is not tricking the masses toward the bad, but rather persuading and assuaging them towards the Good.