

A Defense of “Jugglers’ Tricks”: Eristic as Ethical
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Isocrates often expressed his distaste for “eristic” rhetorics of “disputation,” from which he sought to distance himself and his pedagogy. He opens *Against the Sophists* by asking “who can fail to abhor, yes to condemn, those teachers . . . who devote themselves to disputation, since they pretend to search for truth, but straightway at the beginning of their professions attempt to deceive us with lies?” (§2). He refers here to practices of the Sophists, who concerned themselves not with knowledge claims, but with possibility, paradox, and weighing arguments against each other without obligation to resolution. In line with the practicality his teachings prioritized, Isocrates charges that “such curiosities of thought are on a par with jugglers’ tricks which . . . do not profit anyone yet attract great crowds of the empty-minded”; he therefore submits that “men who want to do some good in the world must banish utterly from their interests all vain speculations and all activities which have no bearing on our lives” (*Antidosis* §269). And in *Helen* we see Isocrates denounce a scare quoted “‘philosophy’ applied to eristic disputations,” which he considered the work of “rhetoricians who care nothing at all for either private or public affairs [and] take most pleasure in those discourses which are of no practical service in any particular” (§6). I include this last example to highlight George Norlin’s interesting footnote to the section, which describes eristic disputations as “wordy wrangling” or “mere disputation for its own sake.”

In short, if a rhetorical enterprise had no practical application to the daily operations encountered in everyday affairs, Isocrates thought it foolish. I want to challenge this alleged irrelevance of such pleasurable wrangling to a broadly defined political discourse first by examining a key assumption held by Isocrates on the nature of language and second by calling attention to modern juggler’s tricks as they appear in the speculative rhetorics of culture jamming. My aim is to temper the charge that eristics apparently divorced from institutionalized political discourse have “no bearing on our lives” and, in so doing, counter Isocrates’ ethical concerns that “such curiosities” pose.

Tracing the parallel between Isocrates’ gripes with sophists and the more recent conflict of rhetoric as epistemic vs. rhetoric as aesthetic offers a better handle on the issues in question. It is a “perennial” conflict, as James Hixson observes, a “centuries-old struggle” between epistemological rhetorics and those of an aesthetic variety (369-370). The question: does rhetoric bring forth knowledge at all? Or is rhetoric more properly construed not as an epistemological venture but rather, as Nietzsche thought, an artistic “imposition of aesthetic form on being” (Whitson and Poulakos 137)? Situating himself somewhere between the two positions, Hixson as a modern day Isocrates rebukes “Eristic rhetoric” as it appears in his conversation: “an *imaginative* art, driven by *strife and discord* and

characterized by *play* (as in playing a game), whose object or *telos* is the *momentary* securing of a *perspective*, that is, a transient realization of a *point of view or attitude*, typically expressed via *the modality of the sublime*” (357, original emphasis). That’s a lot. There are many connections between Hikins’ eristic and the eristic against which Isocrates positioned himself I reviewed in opening. Importantly, Hikins notes that “Eristic’s practice . . . does not proceed, as does classical dialectic, by opposing thesis with antithesis On the contrary, the principal goal of Eristic is *constructive* in its efforts to explore facets of the imaginable, alternative worlds, fictive domains erected *by means* of the Eristic” (357, original emphasis). It's not a dialectical debate!

Prior to any application or “particular,” then, the ancient conflict among the Isocrates, the sophists, and Plato first has to do with a conception of the nature of language and rhetoric. For Isocrates, “speech is our guide” (*Antidosis* §257), and consequently “the logos directs (is the *hegemon* of) all thought and action” (Ijsseling 19). This is a happy state of affairs, since “the art of discourse . . . is the source of most our blessings”; with it, humankind has “come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts” (Isocrates, *Antidosis* §253). Rosy as it sounds, this position has drawn Isocrates no shortage of historical criticism. H.I. Marrou characterizes his “unlimited faith in the power of words” as “naïve idealism” (89). Victor Vitanza notes that when Isocrates “places great trust in the *logos*, he does not seem to think at all that it might misguide him or others” (132). Space prohibits me from attending to the relevant issues concerning the potential issues of determinacy between language and the question of “Who Speaks?” But here I mention in passing the historically situated nature of rhetoric as a clue to the potential susceptibility of any discursive event to contextual pressures. Enter eristic as a counter balance—no! *a multiplicity of counter balances*—to the productions and practices instated in our everyday affairs. Eristic comes to provide a check. It “serves up a menu of alternatives” (Hikins 358).

Let’s see an example. [The Space Hijackers](#) are a UK-based group of “anarchitects” committed to “battling the constant oppressive encroachment onto public spaces of institutions, corporations[,] and urban planners.” The collective engages in “projects” of a performance art variety in which participants temporarily reclaim privatized space for a bit of merrymaking—and social critique. Two examples include their recurring “[Circle Line Parties](#)” and “[Midnight Cricket](#)” challenges in the subways and streets of London. These activities speculate, pose, and create playful scenarios in which subway cars become venues for disco dancing and the courtyards outside banking skyscrapers transform into arenas for impromptu sporting events. These and other Space Hijacker projects are socially critical in that they call attention to potentially limiting economic and social forces, and yet these stunts *explode* the debate and bring forth new, unthinkable propositions the pitting of antitheses against one another simply cannot foresee. I would see these acts as not merely

imaginative speculations and playful tricks, but *constructions* of what was previously inconceivable. In other words, the “possible” has entered the realm of the “actual” (Poulakos).

Isocrates was deeply concerned with ethics, and specifically ethical questions concerning community. He frequently championed his pedagogy as one that might bring about ethical behavior, but he always did so with an accompanying disclaimer. Though he boldly pronounced that “the study of political discourse can help more than any other thing” to bring about, for example, “honesty in character,” he typically took care to distance himself from a direct linkage to an essence: “let no one suppose that I claim that just living can be taught” (*Against* §21). Still, he felt that one might experience a kind of fostering of ethics in the practice of rhetorical study: “when anyone elects to speak or write discourses which are worthy of praise and honour, it is not conceivable that he will support causes which are unjust or petty or devoted to private quarrels, and not rather those which are great and honourable, devoted to the welfare of man and our common good” (*Antidosis* §276). Honor? Whose Justice? *Common good!*? What are these things? Would Plato know?

M.I. Finley says that Isocrates’ pedagogy “was designed for members of the ruling elite, a socially and culturally homogeneous group, whose common values were formed and repeatedly reinforced by their continuous association and shared experience” (208). Accordingly, I find the resulting Isocratean “idea of culture as the supreme good” (Marrou 87) highly dubious—there’s an awful lot of presupposition in this ethics! As The Space Hijackers and others tricksters suggest, culture’s “particulars” may guide us, but there’s no guarantee they will take us where we desire to go. When we find culture dehumanizing or deterministic, then, we might speculate upon alternative modes of existence that *necessarily* look nothing like the present arrangements. Cultural hacks and juggler’s tricks, far from being ends in themselves, promote a healthy reflexivity. Relegating the critical to irrelevance—that’s unethical.

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