



The Rhetorical Education of Isocrates and the Exemplary in Teaching: Overcoming the “Learnification of Education”

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Abstract • This article argues that the rhetorical education of Isocrates can serve as a vital alternative to today’s dominating trend of outcome-based education, or what Biesta calls “the learnification of education.” According to Biesta, “the learnification of education” represents an individualising discourse separating the content, purpose and personal aspects of education. This article analyses “the learnification of education” primarily as a crisis of authority, with the political thinking of Hannah Arendt as a point of departure, suggesting that educational theory need to rediscover the roots of the didactical tradition in rhetorics. Thus the rhetorical education of Isocrates, based on examples and exemplary teaching, may rediscover an ancient conception of authority still relevant for our post-traditional and multicultural society.

Keywords • rhetorical education, exemplary teaching, authority, outcome-based education

Introduction

There are many assumptions at the very heart of the knowledge society that are not fully founded. One common assumption is that education in the knowledge society is an economic investment and that education contributes to the Gross National Product.¹ Another assumption is that education is well suited as a tool for solving an increasing number of societal problems.² In sum, such assumptions are the cause of an ever-growing importance given to the task of education worldwide. Norway is no exception in the array of countries, which give education the tasks of preventing social inequality, boosting cultural integration, maintaining and expanding the welfare state and preparing the citizens for the great challenges of our times, such as migration and climate change. A common denominator in these tasks is to direct education to a point in the future. The task of education is mainly the realisation of

1 As Myhre writes: “There are remarkably few studies addressing the economic benefits of education for society and the so-called externalities (unintended consequences) of education.” Jan Eivind Myhre, *Universitetet i Oslo 1811–2011: Bok 8, Akademikere mellom universitet og samfunn* (Oslo: Unipub, 2011), 287 (my translation). See also Knut Kjeldstadli, “Fra kapitalistisk samfunn til kunnskapssamfunn,” in *Universitetets ide gjennom tidene og i dag: En samling Oslo-foredrag*, ed. Egil A. Wyller (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1991).

2 See in particular Anders Bakken “Kan skolen kompensere for elevens sosiale bakgrunn?” in *Utdanning 2009 – læringsutbytte og kompetanse: Statistiske analyser 111* (Statistisk sentralbyrå, 2009); Anders Bakken and Kirsten Danielsen, *Gode skoler – gode for alle? En casestudie av prestasjonsforskjeller på seks ungdomsskoler* (NOVA Rapport 10/2011); OECD, *Education at a glance 2014* (OECD Indicators 2014).

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an unknown future society, leading to an elaborated guesswork directed at what the generations of the future might need. Thus, the main task of education is no longer mainly the transition of values of the past generations to the current generation. This necessarily leads to distrust of whether the past or the history of education can tell us anything at all, and the fear that the content may be outdated. This fear of outdated knowledge makes the far-reaching shift from content knowledge to learning, skills or competences not linked to any specific subject content, fully understandable.³

Gert Biesta has given an adequate and influential description of this shift by naming it “the learnification of education.”⁴ According to Biesta, learning has not only become an independent category of education, it has become *the most important* category. “The learnification of education” is a well formulated diagnosis of our time which highlights the learning discourse as an individualising discourse separating the “what,” “why” and “by whom” of education. As a response, education needs to reconnect with the question of purpose in order to be fully educative.

The aim of this article is to complement and expand Biesta’s analysis with the political thinking of Hannah Arendt, claiming that “the learnification of education” is a sign of a loss of authority and crisis of culture. Connecting Biesta’s critique with Arendt’s concept of authority – a concept she develops by going back to the fundamental Roman experience still present in the word’s etymology (*auctoritas*) – makes it possible to redirect education towards the past and our history of education in order to search for solutions to the problems of today, thus reconnecting with the question of purpose in education. We often tend to regard our current problems as unique in the course of history, but if we take a closer look, we find that problems of authority and common values have been addressed and dealt with before. In this regard, the rhetorical education of Isocrates based on examples was a program intended to solve a crisis of authority in the Athenian city-state, a crisis resembling our current situation in many respects. I argue that the exemplary teaching of Isocrates and his core concepts *doxa* (δόξα), *phronesis* (φρόνησις) and *kairos* (καιρός) are still relevant today. Although the world of Isocrates and the society the Roman experience of authority was embedded in are long gone, they still speak to us as citizens of a post-traditional and multicultural society. Even though exemplary teaching as a research subject is widely covered by the so called German Didaktik-tradition⁵, the topic is best addressed by going back to the roots of didactics⁶ in rhetoric. I will now first (a)

3 This shift is already described by William G. Spady, *Outcome-Based Education: Critical Issues and Answers* (Arlington: American Association of School Administrators, 1994). In Norway this shift was implemented in higher education with the Quality Reform in 2003 and in primary and secondary education with the Quality Promotion in 2006.

4 Gert J.J. Biesta, *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy* (London: Boulder, Co, Paradigm Publishers, 2010).

5 See mainly Bjørg B. Gundem and Stefan Hopmann, ed., *Didaktik and/or Curriculum: An International Dialogue* (New York: P. Lang, 1998), represented by scholars like Eduard Spranger, Wilhelm Flitner, Theodor Litt, Wolfgang Klafki, Roth, Josef Derbolav, Martin Wagenschein. See especially Berthold Gerner (ed.), *Das exemplarische Prinzip: Beiträge zur Didaktik der Gegenwart* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963); Martin Wagenschein, “Zum Begriff des exemplarischen Lehrens,” *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*, bd. 3 (1956); Martin Wagenschein, “Zum Problem des Genetischen Lehrens,” in *Verstehen lehren: genetisch – sokratisch – exemplarisch* (Weinheim: Beltz, 1999) for an elaboration.

6 The term «didactics» or «didactical tradition» in this article refers to the Germanic and Scandinavian traditions stemming from The German tradition of «Didaktik».

address what Biesta calls “the learnification of education” and view it as the tip of an iceberg of a more profound problem concerning authority, suggested by Arendt. Then I will (b) show how this perspective makes the rhetorical education of Isocrates important for our current problems.

The learnification of education

Biesta has described “the learnification of education” on several occasions in his writings.⁷ This phenomenon is however most adequately formulated in *Good education in an age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education*.⁸ Here, Biesta describes the coming of a “new language of learning” expressing this underlying process:

This rise of what I have called the “new language of learning” is manifest, for example, in the redefinition of teaching as the facilitation of learning and of education as the provision of learning opportunities or learning experiences; it can be seen in the use of the word “learner” instead of “student” or “pupil;” it is manifest in the transformation of adult education into adult learning, and in the replacement of “permanent education” by “lifelong learning.” [...] The rise of the new language of learning can be seen as the expression of a more general trend to which I now wish to refer – with a deliberately ugly term – as the “learnification” of education: the transformation of everything there is to say about education in terms of learning and learners.⁹

“The learnification of education” is problematic mainly because it represents an *individualizing discourse* enabling a description of education detached from purpose, content and the person one learns from. As Biesta continues:

The point of education is that students learn *something*, that they learn it for a *reason*, and that they learn it *from someone*. Whereas the language of learning is a process language that, at least in English, is an individual and individualising language, education always needs to engage with questions of content, purpose and relationships.¹⁰

I would also add the isolation of the “how” of education in the quest of founding the “best practice” in evidence, as this in many ways represent an attempt to discover the best *method* of education independent of the “what,” “why” and “by whom” of

7 The term is coined in Gert J.J. Biesta, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (London: Boulder, Co, Paradigm Publishers, 2010), but as Biesta explains in Gert J.J. Biesta, “What is Education For?: On Good Education, Teacher Judgement, and Educational Professionalism,” *European Journal of Education* 50, no. 1 (2015), the term refers back to earlier analyses made in Gert J.J. Biesta, “Against Learning: Reclaiming a Language for Education in an Age of Learning,” *Nordisk Pedagogik* 23, (2004), in Gert J.J. Biesta “What’s the point of lifelong learning if lifelong learning has no point?: On the democratic deficit of policies for lifelong learning,” *European Educational Research Journal* 5, (2006); Geir Haugsbakk and Yngve Nordkvelle, “The Rhetoric of ICT and the New Language of Learning: A Critical Analysis of the Use of ICT in the Curricular Field,” *European Educational Research Journal* 6, (2007). The term is further elaborated in Gert J.J. Biesta, “Interrupting the Politics of Learning,” *Power and Education* 5, no. 1 (2013).

8 Gert J.J. Biesta, “Good education in an age of measurement: on the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education,” *Educational assessment, evaluation and accountability*, no. 21 (2009).

9 Biesta (2009), 5.

10 Biesta (2015), 76.

education.¹¹ Biesta is here describing a shift that has generated a broad set of literature, namely the shift from input and content in education to the focus on outcomes. In a Norwegian context, one can easily spot this shift in policy documents and classroom practices. Previous curricula stated that pupils ought to “get acquainted with” (“*bli kjent med*”) or ought to “have experienced” (“*ha erfaring med*”) the curriculum, such as the dramas of Ibsen or third order equations.¹² Now, the same documents and practices state in individualistic and behavioral terms what outcomes are preferred, also signifying the extended range of responsibility the educational institutions have regarding the results of the pupils or students.¹³ I suspect these curricula fear “passivity” or receptivity in educational practices, discarding techniques involving repetition, memorisation and imitation as old fashioned and outdated. Pupils and students ought now to constantly be “active” and produce observable output. Biesta suggests a plethora of factors contributing to the emergence of “the learnification of education:”

[...] It is important to see that the new language of learning is not the outcome of one particular process or the expression of a single underlying agenda. It rather is the result of a combination of different, partly even contradictory trends and developments. These include (1) the rise of new theories of learning that have put emphasis on the active role of students in the construction of knowledge and understanding and the more facilitating role of teachers in this; (2) the postmodern critique of the idea that educational processes can be controlled by teachers and ought to be controlled by them; (3) the so-called “silent explosion” of learning (Field 2000) as evidenced in the huge rise of informal learning throughout people’s lives; and (4) the erosion of the welfare state which has shifted the responsibility for (lifelong) learning from “provider,” to “consumer,” turning education from a right into a duty.¹⁴

However, one must not forget that the phenomenon Biesta is describing may have some positive consequences. Biesta mentions two desirable effects of “learnification.” The first: It “can help us to rethink what teachers can best do to support their students’ learning.”¹⁵ Secondly, “it can empower individuals to take control of their own educational agendas.”¹⁶ One can easily imagine further positive consequences: For instance, “the learnification of education” is well suited to meet the political demands of adapted education (*tilpasset opplæring*). This transition from input to output has further demanded that educators justify the choices and aims they have for educational practices, making education more transparent for both pupils and

11 For a discussion on evidence-based education, see Harald Grimen and Lars Inge Terum (ed.), *Evidensbasert profesjonsutøvelse* (Oslo: Abstrakt, 2009) and Biesta (2009).

12 Ministry of Church, Education and Research, *Læreplanverket for den 10-årige grunnskolen* (L97) (Oslo: Ministry of Church, Education and Research, 1997).

13 See especially St. meld.nr. 27 (2000-2001). *Gjør din plikt – Krev din rett. Kvalitetsreformen i høyere utdanning* [Do your duty – demand your rights. The Quality Reform in Higher Education] (Oslo: Ministry of Education, 2001); *Ministry of Education and Research, The School of the Future. Renewal of Subjects and Competences (NOU 2015:8)* (Oslo: Ministry of Education, 2015). Retrieved from: www.udir.no and Ministry of Education and Research, *The Knowledge Promotion Reform* (Oslo: Ministry of Education, 2006) Retrieved from: www.udir.no.

14 Biesta (2015), 5.

15 Biesta (2009), 18.

16 Ibid.

parents. The focus on outcomes in “the learnification of education” also represents more freedom and autonomy for educators, but also holds them accountable in a new way, making educators not performing their jobs in a proper manner more visible than before. Finally, some pupils, and even educators themselves, may find it a blessing when education is becoming less person-dependent.

However, although “the learnification of education” is a complex phenomenon with some positive effects, Biesta’s verdict is nevertheless negative. Despite the fact that “the learnification of education” is not the result of a single underlying process, Biesta nevertheless draws a unitary conclusion from it, which is “the language of learning is *insufficient* for expressing what matters in education, just as *theories* of learning are insufficient to capture what education is about.”¹⁷

My errand in this article is to move Biesta a step further by combining his analysis with perspectives from Arendt’s political thinking. We are then able to see that this learning discourse is not simply a neutral “error” unable to capture the essential about education. Arendt makes us realise that this learning discourse is not just about education as an isolated field, it signifies a more general crisis of authority in our culture in which the rhetorical education of Isocrates can make an important contribution. Let us take a closer look at this.

The learnification of education as a crisis of authority

When the “what” (“*something*”), the why (“*for a reason*”) and the by whom (“*from someone*”) of education are separated, a position is enabled where one can exclude normative questions (that is, the “what” and “why” of education) and replace them or cover them up with technical questions.¹⁸ As a consequence of this, I argue that education is moved from the heart of the culture as such, becoming a privative isolated field administered by specialists. Questions regarding education and upbringing thus are severed from how the culture in general transmits its values to the next generations. When *who* one is to be educated by is regarded as irrelevant, the role of the teacher shifts from that of a model and moral compass to a functionary, a replaceable and neutral initiator of “learning processes.” We can clearly see how this process is related to a crisis of authority if we supplement Biesta with Arendt.¹⁹

What is authority, according to Arendt? In the text *What is Authority?* Arendt explains the phenomenon by explaining the etymology of the concept.²⁰ As she states, the Latin *auktoritas* stems from the verb *augere*, which also give rise to the noun *augment*. “Authority,” according to Arendt, refers to and highlights or augments something existing in advance with a committing force. Thus, the concept of “authority” is closely related to the concept of “religion,” from the Latin *religare*, meaning “to bind.”²¹ What binds us is our cultural heritage, a heritage consisting of the *actions*

17 Biesta (2015), 76–77.

18 Biesta (2009), 36.

19 The treatment of Arendt on authority, Isocrates on the exemplary, and the chain of reasoning this represents, stems partly from Lars Petter Storm Torjussen, “Foreningen av visdom og veltalenhet – utkast til en universitetsdidaktikk gjennom en kritikk og videreføring av Skjervheims pedagogiske filosofi på bakgrunn av Arendt og Foucault” (PhD diss., University of Bergen, 2018).

20 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

21 Arendt (2006), 121.

of our ancestors still guiding our lives. This, in sum, is our tradition, literally what is transmitted to us (from *tradere* – “to transmit”).²²

According to Arendt, the Roman culture represents authority, religion and tradition at its strongest (a culture signified by what she calls “the Roman trinity of religion, authority, and tradition”²³). This particular culture is of course lost. As we are about to see, we can nevertheless ask whether this experience serves as an example for us today. Roman citizens experienced in their education a repetition of the founding of the city of Rome. Authority is directed towards this religious (that is, “religious” as in “binding” *religare*) foundation, which one seeks to repeat in tradition. This founding does not consist in abstract or general principles, but in visible and particular actions. Thus, the Roman citizen was given the task of translating these exemplary actions into his own life. In Arendt’s own words:

Those endowed with authority were the elders, the Senate or the *patres*, who had laid the foundations for all things to come, the ancestors [...] (*maiores*). [...] The deeds of the ancestors [...] were always binding. Adding, as it were, to every single moment the whole weight of the past [...] Anything that happened was transformed into an example.²⁴

Thus, Roman culture, as all culture does, consisted of *stories*, and it was an integral part of the Roman education to incorporate these stories and try to relive them in one’s own biography. To become a citizen of Rome entailed accepting the *burden* of culture. “*Gravitas*, the ability to bear this weight, became the outstanding trait of the Roman character.”²⁵ Nevertheless, even though answering to the demands of the ancestors implied taking on a heavy burden, this burden also was a ballast giving direction and purpose in life.

We have already seen that the *what*, the *why* and the *by whom* are separated in what Biesta calls “the learnification of education.” This separation clearly makes no sense in exemplary education. An edifying or educational story cannot consist of a dramaturgy (*what*) and a protagonist (*by whom*), but lacking plot or rationale (*a why*). Equally, it cannot have a dramaturgy (*what*) and a plot or rationale (*why*), where the protagonist (*by whom*) is lacking or representing an interchangeable nobody or anybody. Where authority is present all these three elements need to be present and correspond to each other. On the other hand, when these three are separated, authority is lost.

Although Arendt never explicitly connects her political thinking to Isocrates or even writes about him as a person, the rhetorical education of Isocrates nevertheless resonates quite well with Arendt’s conception of authority. Indeed, the rhetorical education of Isocrates was centered on the study and imitation of examples in order to counter a crisis of authority haunting the Athenian city-state.

22 Ibid., 121.

23 Ibid., 124.

24 Ibid., 123.

25 Ibid.

Two objections

At this point, however, there arises two objections we need to address before we can move on. The first is this: How can conceptions of authority from classical antiquity still be relevant for us living in a post-traditional and multicultural society?²⁶ After all, isn't our society defined by the lack of substantial cultural standards or privileged forms of life common to all members? It is furthermore no secret that the uniformity of values in the societies of classical antiquity rested on a small male elite of free citizens with the capacity to define their worldview as universal. Especially after the Generation of 68 our culture is permeated by an anti-authoritarian worldview stemming back to the Enlightenment's war against prejudice and heteronomy. The credo of our time is thus something like obey no one but yourself.

The second objection is: Why return to the rhetorics of classical antiquity when exemplary teaching – and also in a way authority – is addressed in the didactical tradition and in modern pedagogy?

To answer the first objection: Arendt stated very clearly that the solution to the problem of authority in modern society is not some sort of "return" to the societies of the past. Modern society, particularly after the Holocaust, has suffered a moral and cultural shipwreck. Arendt thus agrees to the fact that our society lacks a unitary and morally binding story of origin like the one Rome had. Arendt as a historical thinker always looked to the future. Clearly inspired by Walter Benjamin, she compares her historical "method" with that of "pearl diving," by means of which one "descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and carry them to the surface."²⁷ The sea clearly symbolises the past as it slowly erases and diminishes the value of everything. The pearls, on the other hand, have not gone through a process of disintegration, but on the contrary *gained value* over the years. But this is a value "that only can be brought to light by someone who takes the effort to find those forgotten fragments and discerns new meaning in them."²⁸ As Eva de Valk claims, Arendt rather sees the past as "a network of possibilities."²⁹

Arendt's project, then, is not at all an attempt to reinstate some sort of unitary collective authority in a post-traditional society. Our purpose of using Arendt thus has a much more modest aim. By referring to the Roman experience of authority highlighted by Arendt we seek to rediscover pearls of the past and maybe disturb og shrug the modern anti-authoritarianism present in Biesta's notion of "the learnification of education," which, after all, implies "the active role of students in the construction of knowledge" and contains "the postmodern critique of the idea that educational processes can be controlled by teachers and ought to be controlled by them". What we may rediscover by returning to the past is that the erroneous notion of authority primarily as *obedience* makes it difficult to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate authority in a posttraditional society, because it erects a dichotomy

26 Anthony Giddens, "Living in a post-traditional society," in *Reflexive modernization: politics, tradition and aesthetics in the modern social order*, ed. Ulrich Beck, Scott Lash and Anthony Giddens (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 56.

27 Arendt quoted in Eva de Valk, "The Pearl Divers: Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History," *Krisis Journal of Contemporary Philosophy* 1 (2010) 36–47.

28 de Valk (2010), 37.

29 *Ibid.*, 37.

between tradition or prejudice and critical thinking. This dichotomy presupposes a) unfree, conform obedience on one side, and b) free critical independence on the other as mutually exclusive categories. But if we look closer at the Roman experience of authority – and this is already contained in the etymology of the word *tradere* (“to transmit”) – this dichotomy is no longer self-evident. Tradition is what is received and that one is initiated into, implying that one needs to be initiated into a tradition in order to be able to take a critical stance towards it. Our tradition *is* reflexive and self-critical, so the critique of tradition is actually its continuance, because tradition constitutes the standing on which one can formulate critique meaningfully. In reality, there is no deeper conflict between critique and tradition. This point is perhaps made clearer if we consider Gadamer’s argument that authority and tradition are closely related, since the essence of authority is not at all obedience, but *insight*.³⁰ The essence of authority is thus the recognition of one’s own limitations and a confidence that others, both the living and the dead, represent a pool of valuable insight. Furthermore, tradition is not something one can reject or choose not to be affected by, but consists of an invisible background of pre-judices.³¹ In sum, Gadamer formulates tradition as (a) validity which is “unfounded.”³² Tradition thus binds us (*reli-gare*) whether we know it or not. Without this unveiling or rediscovery of the Roman experience – that is, without an adequate perception of what tradition really is – one risks unknowingly and conformly to reproduce tradition while attempting to reject it.

By returning to the Roman notion of authority, one also learns that the “objects” of tradition are not abstract values, but visible actions, thus revealing the intimate connection between tradition and narrativity. After all, Arendt is known to be a narrative thinker. Tradition is in essence a collection of stories. Although the post-traditional society has lost a common “grand narrative,” this does not entail the death of narrativity *as such*. As Barbara Hardy claims: “We dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.”³³ Arendt’s attempt to reach back to the notion of authority in classical antiquity thus represent a notion of history strikingly similar to this “rhetorical” view of history belonging to the very same period. Here, history was never perceived as a unitary linear process, but as a plethora of moral and educative examples one could imitate.

Now to the second objection: Why rhetorics and not didactics? The short answer to this question is: Didactics *is* rhetorics. It is widely agreed that didactics has its roots in rhetorics.³⁴ As Künzli writes: “What we know as the “German Didaktik” is a professionalized art of argument and deliberation – but in order to secure a deeper

30 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London, New Delhi, New York, Sydney: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

31 Gadamer (2013), 236–49.

32 *Ibid.*, 240.

33 Barbara Hardy quoted in Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 2007), 211.

34 See Rudolf Künzli, “The Common Frame and the Places of Didaktik,” in Bjørg B. Gundem and Stefan Hopmann, ed., *Didaktik and/or Curriculum: An International Dialogue* (New York: P. Lang, 1998); Walter J. Ong, *Ramus: Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1983); Yngve Nordkvelle, *Høgskoledidaktiske riss: momenter til en historie om undervisningsdialogen i høyere utdanning fram til 1900-tallet*, Arbeidsnotat (Lillehammer: Høgskolen i Lillehammer, 2003).

understanding of this aspect of Didaktik, we must recognize its often-overlooked and latent character as rhetoric.³⁵ Of course, didactics does not solely stem from rhetoric or can be “reduced” to rhetoric.³⁶ The connection between rhetorics and didactics is of course too complex to fully elaborate here, and represents a research topic on its own. We will focus on a minor theme highlighted by Künzli. According to Künzli, didactics rests on a separation of two closely intertwined elements of education, the separation of subject matter and the presentation of subject matter. These elements were closely integrated in the rhetorical tradition. According to Künzli, rhetorics

[...] begins with Isocrates’ program of the public use of reasoning and argument as a human ideal and is elaborated upon by Cicero and Quintilian. [...] Within this tradition of rhetoric, the rhetorical approach is seen as an ideal of human existence and as an ideal of teaching processes. [...] In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when rhetoric disappeared from the official curriculum as a university subject (at the same time pedagogy became established at universities), the two sides of the rhetorical competence (knowledge of the subject matter and its art of presentation) became divided institutionally into two tasks and two areas of responsibility: the selection and organization of subject matter worthy of educational processes became the task of universities and higher administration (*Lehrplanarbeit*); and the arrangement and presentation of subject matter became the essential task of teachers themselves. The freedom to teach became the well secured privilege of the teaching profession.

According to Künzli, didactics is still marked by this “often-overlooked and latent character as rhetoric.”³⁷ The didactical tradition as an institutional arrangement arising in Germany in the nineteenth century thus rests on a separation of the “what” or “why” of education (the selection of subject matter by the *Lehrplanarbeit* made by universities and higher administration) and the “how” or “by whom” of education (the arrangement and presentation of subject matter made by the teachers). Indeed, to use Biesta’s words, this separation can perhaps itself be considered a form of “learnification of education,” as it rests on a institutional separation between learning and the purpose of learning. One might even push things further and make a sweeping claim that even the modern notion of education as a separate field is also a sort of “learnification.” After all, as we are about to see, education was not considered a separate “field” at all in classical antiquity, but was simply a part of culture itself.

As we are using Arendt to flesh out the essence of authority we therefore see the need to return to a conception of authority *preceding* the division of labor represented by the tradition of didactics. This is the reason we focus on rhetorics and its

35 Künzli (1998), 30.

36 *Ibid.*, 31.

37 Künzli shows convincingly how rhetorics is still the backbone of the influential pedagogy of Johann Friedrich Herbart: “Herbart’s theory of educative instruction (*erziehender Unterricht*), and especially his model of articulation, became the most influential master plan for the professional arrangement of school instruction. His four steps of articulation and their affinity to classical rhetorics becomes apparent to anyone familiar with the rhetorical tradition: on one hand the steps of elaboration and preparation of a speech: *inventio* (discovery), *dispositio* (organization), *elocutio* (delivery), and on the other hand the dispositional parts of speech itself: *exordium* (introduction), *narratio* (narrative), *argumentatio* (argument) (with the two parts of *probatio* or *apodeixis* [proof] *refutatio* or *elenchus* [refutation]) and *peroratio* (conclusion).” Künzli (1998), 31–32.

heydays with Isocrates, an age where the “what” or the “why” of education and the “by whom” – and we can add, the “how” – were separated neither from each other nor from culture as such.

The exemplary teaching of Isocrates as a rediscovery of authority

Who was Isocrates? Isocrates (436–338 BC) is a key figure in the history of rhetoric. In spite of his profound impact, there is a surprisingly small body of literature on his life and works.³⁸ Isocrates was a contemporary of Plato. It is believed that Isocrates founded the first permanent and stationary school in ancient Greece, preceding the Academy of Plato.³⁹ Isocrates had a significant influence on both Plato and Aristotle. Isocrates and Plato were in conflict developing their distinct educational programs as responses to each other. Isocrates’ conception of rhetoric differs both from Plato’s and that of the sophists.⁴⁰ Isocrates held the conviction that rhetoric was something more than a technique of communication or persuasion. Rhetoric, according to Isocrates, is centered on civic engagement and the realisation of virtue.

Although Isocrates and Plato had different aims, they both agreed on the current state of affairs in the Athenian city-state. They agreed that the Athenian city-state had been hurled into a crisis after the golden age of their forefathers.⁴¹ Isocrates repeatedly refers to Solon and Cleisthenes – the legendary lawgivers and fathers of the Athenian democracy – who established a unitary and stable regime through rhetoric, personality and courage.⁴² However, after their demise, the politics of the Athenian city-state was reduced to squabbling over private interests. No one was pursuing the common good of the city. The rhetoric of the city-state accordingly degenerated into cowardice and flattery. No one dared to tell the truth or to put oneself at risk for a higher cause. Isocrates held in many ways Solon and Cleisthenes to be embodiments of the values of the city-state. Even though politics in ancient Greece was highly competitive and combative, they never pursued private interests.⁴³ Their firm characters (what rhetoricians would call their *ethos*) always represented what was best for the city-state as a whole. This represented the ideal orator for Isocrates, a perfect match between the ultimate concerns of the rhetorician and the ultimate concerns of the city-state.

38 The most important contributions are Michael Cahn, “Reading Rhetoric Rhetorically: Isocrates and the Marketing of Insight,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 7, no. 2 (1989) DOI:10.1525/rh.1989.7.2.121; Takis Poulakos, *Speaking for the polis: Isocrates’ rhetorical education* (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1997); Yun Lee Too, *The Rhetoric of Identity in Isocrates: Text, Power, Pedagogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); David Depew and Takis Poulakos (ed.), *Isocrates and Civic Education* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004); James R. Muir, “Is our History of Educational Philosophy Mostly Wrong?: The Case of Isocrates,” *Theory and Research in Education* 3, no. 2 (2005).

39 Henri-Irénée Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956).

40 See particularly Isocrates, “Against the Sophists,” in George Norlin (ed. trans.) *Isocrates: Volume II* (The Loeb Classical Library, London: William Heinemann, 1980).

41 Isoc. *Antidosis*, 280–87. For an account of the supremacy of Athens due to a superior education, see Isoc. *Antidosis*, 293–301.

42 Isoc. *Areopagiticus*, 16–18, Isoc. *Antidosis*, 232–35.

43 Isoc. *Areopagiticus*, 32.

Isocrates' rhetorical education takes this golden age of politics as a point of departure. This golden age of politics resembled the heroic knightly past of the city state, with the exception that politicians now had replaced warriors as the center of tradition: "Like Protagoras, Isocrates refers the concept not to the glory of would-be epic heroes but to the reputation of civic subjects, subjects who are willing to enter into *agon* on behalf both of their own self-worth and their contribution to the commonweal."⁴⁴

The Homeric *paideia*, stemming from the age of warriors, always held Achilles as an ideal figure. Achilles was trained to be both "a speaker of words and doer of deeds."⁴⁵ Thus, the ideal of the knight was both to be a rhetor and a warrior.⁴⁶ Achilles always knew which words and actions were appropriate when situations became messy. According to Marrou the Greek culture was an agonistic culture of honor in which education had but one goal: "To perform the great deed – *ἀριστεία* – that will make one pre-eminent amongst men – the living, and perhaps even the dead – that is why a hero lives, and why he dies."⁴⁷

The rhetorical program of Isocrates thus reached back to this golden age of authority. As mentioned previously, the what, the who and the by whom are not separable in examples of authority. It would be an error to consider Achilles as an instantiation or illustration of abstract competences or abilities such as courage. It is rather the other way around, where the understanding of courage present in that particular culture stemmed from the actions of Achilles. Homeric education was thus exemplary in the way the educand was given the task of asking himself in the midst of his life's turmoils: What would Achilles do? Compare with the description of exemplary education given by Isocrates, where the educand

[...] will select from all the actions of men which bear upon his subject those examples which are the most illustrious and the most edifying; and, habituating himself to contemplate and appraise such examples, he will feel their influence not only in the preparation of a given discourse but in all the actions of his life. It follows, then, that the power to speak well and think right will reward the man who approaches the art of discourse with love of wisdom and love of honor.⁴⁸

Isocrates also looked back to this golden age because it was an age where education was not yet considered as a distinct separate field. "Education" was rather a part of culture as such or perhaps more precise: education *was* culture.⁴⁹ Therefore, the political crisis of Athens was synonymous with a crisis of culture and a crisis of

44 Poulakos and Depew (2004), 9.

45 Hom. *Il.* 9.443

46 Marrou (1956), 8.

47 *Ibid.*, 12.

48 Isoc. *Antidosis*, 277–78, (trans. 1980) 339.

49 This is the central argument of Werner Jaeger in his fleshing out of the Greek *paideia*, both as a concept and a phenomenon: "It is impossible to avoid bringing in modern expressions like *civilization*, *culture*, *tradition*, *literature*, or *education*. But none of them really covers what the Greeks meant by *paideia*. Each of them is confined to one aspect of it: they cannot take in the same field as the Greek concept unless we employ them all together." Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture: Volume I Archaic Greece: The Mind of Athens* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), Foreword.

education.⁵⁰ This point is highlighted by Foucault in his great study *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*: “The criticism that Athenian education could not ensure the passage from adolescence to adulthood, that it could not ensure and codify this entry into adult life, seems to me to be a constant feature of Greek philosophy.”⁵¹

Interestingly, we find a very similar critique of Athenian politics if we turn to Plato, although he proposed a radically different solution to the crisis. Where Isocrates sought a revival of rhetoric, Plato suggested *philosophy* as the remedy to political crisis. These two different approaches were pursued in two conflicting institutions, Isocrates’ rhetorical school in Cius and the Academy of Plato. Marrou calls Isocrates and Plato “the two great educators,”⁵² representing “[...] two fundamental types of education”⁵³ fighting over the youth. The rhetorical education thus prepared for offices in the state service while the philosophical education represented a particular way of life one needed to convert to, where especially “the break with rhetoric [was] particularly emphasized.”⁵⁴ We know how Plato dealt with the problem of authority. He suggested that the philosopher-kings run state affairs. According to Plato, one had to establish a true and virtuous relationship to oneself before one could establish political relations to others. With this, Plato used an external and metaphysical measuring rod in order to judge politics. In other words, philosophy became an activity pursued *outside* of politics. It is thereby safe to assume that Plato and Isocrates had different types of human beings in mind as educational ideals. Plato wanted to educate philosophers capable of elevating themselves over political and rhetorical demands. Isocrates, on the other hand, represented a different approach. Where Plato had a *utopian* approach – he wanted to withdraw from politics altogether and give it a foundation on a higher ground, that is, philosophy – Isocrates represented a *conservative* approach: He wanted to save politics by returning to the essence of the cultural heritage.

One can argue that neither Plato nor Isocrates were “right” as such, and the most substantial way to evaluate their projects is to juxtapose them and use the conflict between them as the point of departure.⁵⁵ The conflict between Isocrates and Plato constitutes in many ways the conflict between two different ways of life; the *bios theoretikos/vita contemplativa* and the *bios politikos/vita activa*, at odds in the course of the following centuries.⁵⁶ However, the focus of this article is not the conflict between philosophy as *vita contemplativa* and rhetoric as *vita activa*, but how the rhetorical

50 “Now our forefathers exercised care over all the citizens, but most of all over the young. They saw that at this age men are most unruly of temper and filled with a multitude of desires, and that their spirits are most in need of being curbed by devotion to noble pursuits and by congenial labor; for only such occupations can attract and hold men who have been educated liberally and trained in high-minded ways.” Isoc. *Areopagiticus*, 43–44, trans. 1980), 131.

51 Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–82* (New York: Picador, 2005), 87.

52 Marrou (1956), xiii.

53 *Ibid.*, 91.

54 *Ibid.*, 206.

55 Torjussen (2018).

56 Isocrates considers subjects traditionally identified with the philosophical life important, like the study of nature and the study of geometry (Isoc. *Antidosis*, 265–69). Nevertheless, «the power to speak well is taken as the surest index of a sound understanding» [τὸ γὰρ λέγειν ὡς δεῖ τοῦ φρονεῖν εὐ μέγιστον σημεῖον ποιούμεθα] Isoc. *Antidosis*, 255 (trans. 1980), 327.

education of Isocrates based on examples preserved authority. As we are about to see, the key concepts of *doxa*, *phronesis* and *kairos* indeed represent such a preservation, making them viable alternatives to “the learnification of education” of our times.

Doxa, phronesis and kairos as an alternative to “the learnification of education”

Although Isocrates’ aims of reconnecting Athenian political culture to the glorious honor culture of the past warriors obviously is outdated, one can still argue his essential conception of education, culture and exemplarity is not. Isocrates’ understanding of exemplarity is maintained by three closely connected concepts *doxa* (δόξα), *phronesis* (φρόνησις) and *kairos* (καιρός).⁵⁷ These three concepts are still highly relevant and can give us valuable insights and serve as corrections to the crisis of authority represented by the “learnification of education.” Let us examine the concepts one by one.⁵⁸

In contrast to Plato, *doxa* for Isocrates does not mean merely “opinion,” or similarly something illusive covering or distorting true reality or true knowledge (*episteme*).⁵⁹ *Doxa*, according to Isocrates, simply signifies the current present in the community. As Poulakos explains:

Isocrates positioned *doxai* in the community without imposing an external standard. [...] Isocrates deploys *doxa* to sustain and perhaps recover the more rooted meaning of one’s *kleos* or fame. This conception of one’s *doxa* (unlike contemporary notions of one’s ‘image’) harks back to the heroic conceptions of virtuous deeds and words that forms the backbone of Greek poetic-performative education in all its settings [...].⁶⁰

Values are therefore not abstract or general entities, but in sum consisting of events and actions performed in the heyday of Athens.⁶¹ This contrasts with a Platonic view where examples are secondary illustrations of primary and universal rules. Thus, the rhetorical view is the opposite. Examples are primary and give rise to rules. Further, there is nothing “beneath” or “behind” examples according to Isocrates, thus he is rejecting a metaphysical urge to explain reality by using transcendent principles that in many ways can be ascribed to Plato. In order to recognise and understand *doxa*, that is the judgment present in past actions, one needs a shared system of values. Or to use other words: one needs judgment (*phronesis*) in order to comprehend *doxa*.

As the case with *doxa*, *phronesis* too has a different meaning in the writings of Isocrates. Knowledge or comprehension does not entail an ability to recognise eternal

57 It is important to note that an important part of the conflict between Isocrates and Plato was the conflicting ways of defining the very same concepts. Thus, Isocrates in fact calls his rhetoric “philosophy” (φιλοσοφία). In *Antidosis* (271), philosophy is explicitly defined as the study of practical wisdom or *phronesis*. [φιλοσόφους δὲ τοὺς ἐν τούτοις διατρίβοντας ἐξ ὧν τάχιστα λήψονται τὴν τοιαύτην φρόνησιν]. Compare with Isoc. *Against the Sophists*, 18–19. See also Torjussen (2018), 313–14, and Poulakos (2004), 56.

58 The relations between the concepts *doxa*, *phronesis* and *kairos* in Isocrates are originally treated in Torjussen (2018), 313–16.

59 Poulakos (2004), 47.

60 *Ibid.*, 61.

61 Isoc. *Antidosis*, 232–36.

and universal principles, but rather the ability to imitate deeds. *Phronesis* signifies an ability to make the right decision in situations where it is not possible to apply universal rules in a mechanistic manner. This is a two-way street and far from a simply intellectual or neutral comprehension. The knowledge present in *doxa* and *phronesis* is a knowledge connected to a certain way of acting. That is, the understanding of *doxa* by means of *phronesis* is confirmed in action. This action-oriented conception of understanding is most adequately described by Aristotle in his term *praxis*.

For our aim is not to know what courage is but to be courageous, not to know what justice is but to be just, in the same way as we want to be healthy rather than to ascertain what health is, and to be in good condition of body rather than to ascertain what good bodily condition is.⁶²

The aim of *praxis* is thus not intellectual knowledge, the aim is itself *praxis*. And to truly understand it, one needs in a way to *be it*. It is then easily seen that *phronesis*, according to Isocrates, is not a sort of interior competence or ability one can learn or develop as an isolated individual. *Phronesis* demands community and well-established practices. Moreover, we can likewise see the need for rhetorics, for these truths are not apodictic or self-evident in an axiomatic manner, they need to be argued. *Phronesis*, as imitation of tradition, thus demands a harmony between the *doxa* of the rhetor and the *doxa* of the community. Indeed, Poulakos even refuses to call it an ability at all in Isocrates, claiming it to be “not a discernible capacity, but a context-bound convergence of wisdom with statesmanship and oratorical eloquence.”⁶³

This shows not only that *doxa* and *phronesis* are closely knit together in Isocrates, but also the close connection with the third concept of *kairos*. As Isocrates writes: “oratory is good only if it has the qualities of fitness for the occasion [καίρων], propriety of style, and originality of treatment.”⁶⁴ Sipiora confirms this:

One of Isocrates’ important contributions to rhetorical history is his conjoining of *phronesis* or ‘practical wisdom’ and pragmatic ethics within the ‘situation’ and ‘time’ of discourse, an emphasis upon contexts that gives primacy to the kairic dimensions of any rhetorical act.⁶⁵

Sipiora even goes so far as to state that Isocrates’ system of education as such is based on the concept of *kairos*: “Isocrates [...] having built an entire educational system on the concept whose rhetorical *paideia* is structured upon the principle of *kairos*.”⁶⁶

Kairos is at the same time an ability for adequate timing and a sense of symmetry. *Kairos* reveals that the right thing to do varies with the specific situation and the specific moment. It signifies an ability to spot an opening and an ability to act before the window of opportunity closes, thus separating in a truly manner the educated from the non-educated. As Sipiora quotes Isocrates:

62 Aristot. Eud. Eth. I, 6 1216b 21–15.

63 Poulakos (2004), 58.

64 Isoc. *Against the sophists*, 13–14.

65 Phillip Sipiora, “Introduction,” in *Rhetoric and Kairos: Essays in History, Theory, and Praxis*, ed. Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 8.

66 Sipiora (2002), 1.

Whom, then, do I call educated? First, those who manage well the circumstances they encounter day by day, and who possess a judgement which is accurate in meeting occasions as they arise and rarely misses the expedient course of action [...].⁶⁷

This nearness to the specific situation and the specific moment, according to Cahn, leads to a certain point where Isocrates actually states that rhetoric, as an art, in reality becomes impossible.⁶⁸ Rhetoric thus shifts from being an “art” to becoming a way of life. The aim of the rhetorical education of Isocrates thus becomes “[...] a life based on *kairos*.”⁶⁹ Rhetoric is thus not a set of skills anyone can learn from anyone in an algorithmic manner. Rhetoric becomes bound to the particular context or situation to such a degree that it is not even considered a “technique” separable from life itself or the culture the rhetor lives in.

All this illuminates the particular figure of the *Orator perfectus* in the rhetorical tradition, a figure particularly common in the writings of Cicero and Quintilian.⁷⁰ Instead of presenting lists or algorithms of possible options, rhetoric draws a picture one can imitate. This is the reason why Isocrates does not write rhetorical recipes but gave his students rhetorical *exercises* [γυμνάζουσιν]:

Then, when they have made them familiar and thoroughly conversant with these lessons, they set them at exercises, habituate them to work, and require them to combine in practice the particular things which they have learned, in order that they may grasp them more firmly and bring their theories into closer touch with the occasions for applying them—I say “theories,” for no system of knowledge can possibly cover these occasions, since in all cases they elude our science.⁷¹

According to Sipiora, “Isocrates had no faith in ‘instant’ formulas: after a discussion of the ‘general themes used in speeches,’ he moved on to exercises, which were always related to practical situations.”⁷²

We can clearly now see why examples have always been central in the rhetorical tradition. The complexities of life make examples superior to explicit formulations of rules or concepts. Examples express universal truths without violating the situated and particular. In this way, examples are universal and particular at the same time. Interestingly, the figure of the *Orator perfectus* has always tended to be misunderstood.⁷³ As a living picture it always is in danger of degenerating to a sort of catalogue of skills or competences the educand ought to have at the end of his education. This is, of course, the dominant opinion in our culture signified by what Biesta calls “the learnification of education.” Isocrates’ rhetorical education with its reliance upon *doxa*, *phronesis* and *kairos*, thus represents an important alternative. His rhetorical education is able to point to common and universal human ideals, which at the same time rely on a particular way of life and a particular culture. In this way, the common and universal human ideals avoid becoming frozen idols disconnected from time and place.

67 Sipiora (2002), 14.

68 Cahn (1989), 124.

69 Sipiora (2002), 15.

70 Cahn (2009).

71 Isoc. *Antidosis*, 184.

72 Sipiora (2002), 10.

73 Cahn (1989), 125.

Conclusion

Let us repeat the points made by Biesta: “The point of education is that students learn *something*, that they learn it for a *reason*, and that they learn it *from someone*.”⁷⁴ As we have seen, Biesta criticises education as a set of skills or competences separating these three. We have connected this misunderstanding of education to a crisis of authority, using Arendt as a point of departure. To look for answers in the rhetorical education of Isocrates and his exemplary teaching is therefore an attempt to re-discover authority, since the “what,” the “why” and the “by whom” are inseparable in the example. According to the rhetorical worldview here presented, exemplary teaching is not an “illustration” of skills or competences. On the contrary, examples are original and a precondition for the possibility of formulating skills and competences as abstract entities at all. The valuable in education is thus most precisely expressed in examples. And where “the learnification of education” represents an individualistic discourse, Isocrates’ rhetorical education stresses the point that judgment (*phronesis*) is not at all an individualistic interior “ability,” but points to an interface between the individual and the cultural and normative community (*doxa*). We can thereby conclude that examples have a twofold mission. First, examples are to be imitated in order to transmit the values of tradition. Second, the imitations of examples in culture are not blind copies or thoughtless reproduction, but actually the only way to really confirm the open and complex nature of life and to say and do what is right (*kairos*) when the situations become fluid and the options for action uncertain. The rediscovery of authority in a post-traditional society is then not a nostalgic attempt to reinstate a dead culture of the past, thus closing one’s eyes to the significant differences between the past and now. On the contrary, the rediscovery of authority presents history in a new light, namely as a treasure chest of actions, episodes, deeds and occurrences we can pick out to imitate and write into our own lives.

74 Biesta (2015), 76.

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