The Role of Doxa in the Philosophical Pedagogy of Isocrates and Plato

This paper explores the function of doxa as a pedagogical and philosophical concept in the contemporary Greek authors Plato and Isocrates, with special attention to the relationship between epistēmē and doxa. The term doxa (‘notion, opinion, judgment’) derives from the verb dokew (‘to think, suppose, imagine’) (Held 117). By the time of Plato and Isocrates, doxa had acquired at least two different significations. In the political sphere it denoted an imprecise, secularized form of situational decision making, while in the philosophico-religious tradition it signified judgments about the world which could be true or false (Poulakos 2001: 66-67; Poulakos 2004: 44-48).

To uncover the place of doxa in Isocrates’ thought and Plato’s, the paper begins with an examination of the different historical and theoretical associations of the term current at the time. Next, a comparison is made of the ways Isocrates and Plato use the concept of doxa within the broader context of their philosophy and pedagogy. Plato’s much-debated reference to Isocrates in the Phaedrus is examined briefly, with special attention to Howland 1937 and Brown and Coulter 1971. Plato’s understanding of doxa and its relation to epistēmē is elaborated through a close reading of The Republic Bk. 5, 471a-480a, with reference to several other dialogues (e.g. Theatetus 194b; Meno 97b-c; Gorgias 11-13). By drawing together Isocrates’ comments in the Antidosis (e.g. 183-84,271) and Against the Sophists (esp. 2-8,17-18), it is shown that Isocrates, unlike Plato, places doxa above epistēmē (cf. Held 118-119).

An explanation for this divergence is offered in the last part of the paper. Isocrates conceives of more highly of the pedagogical value of doxa largely because of his specifically rhetorical framework, while Plato’s negative evaluation of doxa as probabilistic knowledge reflects the unique philosophical contours of his thought (Lanfrance 1981; cf. Mojsisch 21-22),
particularly his objections to the philosophy of Parmenides and other Presocratics (Turnbull 1983). The different roles of *doxa* in Isocrates and Plato can be accounted for partly by divergent understandings of the role of *logos* in education. Isocrates, like the Sophists, relates *logos* to political deliberation, but through his nuanced appraisal of *doxa* as an integral part of *phronēsis* or practical intelligence (cf. Poulakos 2001: 68-70), he provides a grounding for political oratory which aims not at mere persuasion but at practical wisdom in the context of the *polis*.

Bibliography


