

## ISOCRATES AND THE POWER OF LOGOS

Among the works of the Greek orators and sophists one frequently came across a eulogy to the power of 'logos', a term with a variety of meanings. In these eulogies logos signifies something like language and word, a series of words, a text, a narrative or speech. A well-known eulogy to logos can be found in the *Nicochles* of Isocrates, so well-known that it met with a response from many later authors and was constantly referred to in a variety of ways. On account of its importance and the fact that it may lead to a number of critical reflections, it is worthwhile to quote Isocrates at some length. "In most of our capacities we humans are not any different from animals. We are in fact even inferior to many animals with regard to speed and strength. But because we have the innate capacity to convince each other and express our opinions, desires and decisions, we not only surpass all wild life but have succeeded in forming a society, building towns, formulating laws and discovering all sorts of techniques. It is speech that has made it possible for us to realize nearly everything that we have devised. By means of law, speech makes a distinction between right and wrong, honour and shame. Without such distinctions we would not be able to live a decent life together. The word enables us to put the wicked to shame and commend the good, to educate the ignorant and to learn from the wise. We humans regard an appropriate word as the surest sign of a true insight, considering as we do, proper and correct language as reflecting a sound and reliable mind. Through the word we can discuss disputed matters and penetrate areas as yet unknown. The arguments we use to convince others through speaking are the same as those with which we convince ourselves through deliberation. An orator is one capable of delivering a speech before a crowd, while a wise man is one most able to think things over for himself. To summarize the characteristics of the ability to speak, we could say that nothing demanding intelligence and insight is done without language. The word directs all our thoughts and activities, our use of it being proportionate to the degree of

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our intelligence." Isocrates then adds the following: "Therefore all ridicule those dedicated to education and philosophy deserve the same cure as those who offend the divine laws." (*Nicochles*, 5-9.)

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