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# **The Critical Servant: An Isocratean Contribution To Critical Rhetoric**

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In recent years, rhetorical theorists (McGee, 1990; McKerrow, 1989, 1991) have called for a redefinition or renaming of their practice. Rather than focus attention on criticism of rhetoric as Black suggested with his phrase "criticism is what critics do" (1965, p. 4), they call for a turn to critical rhetoric: "*rhetoric is what rhetoricians do*" (McGee, 1990, p. 279). This switch announces that "our focus is more on the performance of discourse than on the archaeology of discourse" (p. 279) and celebrates a "reliance on contingency, on doxa as the basis for knowledge, on nominalism as the ground of language meaning as doxastic, and critique viewed as a performance" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 109). Critical rhetors thus offer not a detached and impersonal critique, but a critique focused on some current, local contingency. While I am encouraged at the prospect of reuniting rhetorical theory and practice, I am also concerned about potential dangers in the present conceptualization of critical rhetoric. My worries were expressed well by Bertrand Russell:

In all this I feel a grave danger, the danger of what might be called cosmic impiety. The concept of "truth" as something dependent upon facts largely outside human control has been one of the ways in which philosophy has hitherto inculcated the necessary element of humility. When this check upon pride is removed, a further step is taken on the road towards a certain kind of madness—the intoxication of power ... to which modern men, whether philosophers or not, are prone. I am persuaded that this intoxication is the greatest danger of our time, and that any philosophy which, however unintentionally, contributes to it is increasing the danger of a vast social disaster. (1945, p. 828)

In quoting Russell, I am not equating critical rhetoric with social irresponsibility; nor am I suggesting that rhetoric needs to find Truth. I realize that the project of critical rhetoric emphasizes the dissociation of rhetoric from dogma. Nevertheless, a similar danger in critical rhetoric, as now constituted, is the danger of arrogance. Pride comes when we as critics speak to the community words of critique from either dogmatism or relativism. Speaking from dogmatism, the critic is intoxicated by the belief that he or she is the sole possessor of the

Truth. I applaud critical rhetoric for moving away from this position. But speaking from relativism may be equally dangerous. If left completely unchecked, radically relativistic critique can slip into ungrounded self-expression. Part of the difficulty, as McKerrow (1991) has noted, is that critical rhetoric has paid insufficient attention to the relationship between the critical rhetor and the audience, and this lack of reflection could lead to a radically personal critique. This relationship must be specified; otherwise, critical rhetoric denies its own position as a practice within a culture. That the guide for the critic's vision of how the community ought to be *in this moment* is still unspecified is clear from McKerrow's (1991) comments in his earlier essay. Charland has also noted the importance of specifying the relationship between rhetor and audience. He suggested that Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, which "seeks to locate the contingent good for a particular community at a particular time and place" (1991, p. 73), offers a possible perspective from which the critical rhetor could share power with the audience. However, Charland recognized that Aristotle's *phronesis* "unproblematically follows the community standard" (p. 73), and this slavery to doxa can lead to dogmatic critique.

While scholars sympathetic to the project of critical rhetoric have made significant theoretical advances, they still have not examined a practical application of the theory, i.e., a critical rhetor addressing an audience. The rhetor has remained a politically vacant form or face, as a doxastic communicator of critique, leaving open the potential for self-expressive and arrogant discourse. McKerrow is quick to point out that the face of the rhetor "projected toward the world in the act of critique" is not "that of a social prophet speaking with reference to universalized truths" (1993, p. 63). Beyond this negative definition, the face has few characteristics; however, McKerrow hints at sites where we may learn more about the practical application of critical rhetoric: "[the] face may be as social actor engaged in political action or as 'specific intellectual' ... engaged in commentary on a scene" (pp. 62-63). A careful study of a politically active intellectual should help us better visualize the practice of critical rhetoric in order to manage the dialectic between doxa and self-expression.

Instead of looking to Aristotle, as Charland (1991) has done, I would anchor critical rhetoric to a different figure in history. Isocrates is arguably one of the original critical rhetors. In his writings and life we can see how one critic balanced the demands of the community with the demands of critique. Isocrates lived at a time when particular exigencies led him to see the polis as a contingent phenomenon in danger of collapse. He practiced rhetoric in a time when solutions had to be proposed, when he had to offer visions of how his community should be. In this essay I offer Isocrates as someone who links the theory and practice of critical rhetoric. Isocrates is a particularly appropriate example; as many have noted, the practice of critical rhetoric has more in common with the sophistic tradition of rhetoric than with the Platonic/ Aristotelian tradition (McGee, 1985, 1990). Through this exemplification I hope to make explicit an implicit premise of the project of critical rhetoric.

More significantly, however, Isocrates as practitioner of critical rhetoric enriches critical rhetoric with his understanding of service. Service needs to be combined with critique; critics offer to the communities they serve a provisional course of action. When understood as an integral part of critique, service checks the critic's slide into radical relativism by turning the critic's attention away from self-expression and toward the community. While retaining the contingent emphasis

of critical rhetoric, the perspective of service focuses on how critique and proposed courses of action will serve the community.[1] This view of rhetoric is found in the praxis and writings of Isocrates, where he articulated a perspective for rhetors that I call the *critical servant*. In this essay I reconstruct Isocrates's perspective of rhetors as servants of society, and I show how combining the acts of critique and service balances the demands of personal expression and community standards. In this balance we can find a way to check the slide to radical relativism possible in the practice of critical rhetoric.[2]

## **SERVICE AS OPHELEIA**

Throughout his writings, Isocrates consistently links rhetoric and politics to service. He uses many words to refer to service, but it is possible to divide the terms into two clusters, headed by the words *opheleia* and *douleia*. *Opheleia* meant help, aid, of service, or usefulness; *douleia*, as I will discuss later, meant servitude, subjugation, or bondage. Words in the category of *opheleia* signal an evaluation of what has been done. Besides *opheleia*, this cluster includes *chresim*) and *euergesia*. *Chresimos* is an adjective that implies aptness, fitness, and serviceability to the state. The noun *euergesia* means good conduct or deed, service, or kindness. As will be seen in his use of these terms, Isocrates's conception of the role of rhetors in society was inextricably linked to an understanding of practical, useful political service.

Politics for Isocrates was pragmatic; decisions had to be made, and policies had to be implemented. Because of this orientation, Isocrates urged the young king Nicocles to appraise advisors "in the light of conduct that is useful [*chresimon*]" (*To Nicocles*, 50). Isocrates's commitment to a pragmatic view of politics also provided a base for his educational program and his critique of other educators. The various philosophers could all agree that the result of training, in any discipline, should be the "ability to deliberate and decide" (*To Nicocles*, 51). But they could not agree on the best means of training or disciplining the soul and mind. Isocrates's theory of education placed a premium on those who "manage well the circumstances which 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" (*Panathenaicus*, 30). Isocrates denounced some of his contemporaries who pretended "to prove things by verbal quibbles" and urged teachers "to instruct their pupils in the practical affairs of our government and train to expertness therein, bearing in mind that likely conjecture about useful [*chresimon*] things is far preferable to exact knowledge of the useless" (*Helen*, 4-5).

In the Athenian world of pragmatic politics, Isocrates delineated a specific role for intellectuals. The best orators would point the government and the people in the direction of the greatest benefit and "give directions on good morals and good government" (*Nicocles*, 10). The highest oratory for Isocrates was "that which deals with the greatest affairs and, while best displaying the ability of those who speak, brings most profit [*ophelousin*] to those who hear" (*Panegyricus*, 4-5). Oratory was useful only when it concerned itself with political life, when it offered a direction for the polis to follow. Those who spoke on trivial topics were entertaining, but not benefiting, the people.

The connection between service and critique for Isocrates came with the realization that it was his duty "and the duty of all who care about the welfare of the state to choose, not those discourses which are agreeable to you, but those which are profitable [*ophelimos*] for you to hear" (*On the peace*, 39). The duty of critical servants was to toil "in private for the public good and [train] their own minds so as to be able to help [*ophelein*] also their fellow-men" (*Panegyricus*, 1), although they would more often be reviled than rewarded. Critical servants of society would help (*euergeteo*) others "advance in excellence" (*Antidosis*, 212), encouraging audiences to prefer

discourses which are composed for instruction and, at the same time, with finished art to others which are written for display or for the law-courts, ... discourses which aim at the truth to those which seek to lead astray the opinions of their auditors, and discourses which rebuke our faults and admonish us to those which are spoken for our pleasure and gratification. (*Panathenaicus*, 271)

Rather than maintaining a disinterested critical distance as a supposed means to validate decisions and arguments, the critical servant is a political agent who relies on practical wisdom to propose action. The ideal that useful rhetoric is not detached and impersonal, but critical of the present community and consequential, is shared by both this perspective of service and McKerrow's (1989) initial conceptualization of critical rhetoric. As Isocrates made clear, it was not enough for rhetorical service to be against something; to be serviceable, rhetoric had to propose a course of action for the good of the polis.

Knowing what to favor requires a combination of lived experience and learning. Isocrates made lived experience a necessary and vital part of the life and education of the critical servant in politics. He argued that it was far better to have probable knowledge about practicalities than certain knowledge about useless topics (*Helen*, 4). Purely disciplinary studies did have their place, but for Isocrates they were less important than studies that served "practical aims of civic efficiency and general culture" (Beck, 1964, p. 262). Isocrates was concerned with maximizing the potential in either oligarchies or democracies for beneficial, serviceable, and even happy political and private life. Critics who combined education and practice could offer visions that would maximize this potential.

Thus in one sense of the word *opheleia*, the critical servant serves by proposing a practical, useful course of action to the community. Yet useful and serviceable proposals, as Isocrates well understood, are often not enough. While in optimal situations wise rulers made decisions based on utility, such considerations would not necessarily move the general populace. Practical politics meant that orators needed to persuade the people. Yet, Isocrates recognized that what was practical or prudent was not always persuasive. People often valued the beneficial less than the pleasurable. They did not "take pleasure in the food that is the most wholesome, nor in the pursuits that are the most honourable, nor in the actions that are the noblest" (*To Nicocius*, 45), but instead sought what delighted their senses. Thus, for Isocrates the politician who wished to "make a popular appeal should seek out, not the most profitable discourses, but those which most abound in fictions; for the ear delights in these just as the eye delights in games and contests" (*To Nicocius*, 48). People took "as much pleasure in listening to

this kind of prose as in listening to poetry" (*Antidosis*, 47), and esteemed those who excelled in eloquence. Through poetic and artistic persuasion, Isocrates himself offered ideals and aspirations for service. The slavery of Greek audiences to beauty was both understandable and honorable in Isocrates's eyes (*Helen*, 56-57). The appearance of beauty needed to be wed to the appearance of virtue; politicians also had to take care that they convinced "the people of their graciousness and human sympathy; since those who are careless of these matters are thought by their fellow-citizens to be disagreeable and offensive" (*Antidosis*, 132). An understanding of the inter-relatedness of beauty and virtue was crucial. Practical politicians who needed to persuade their audience recognized that "everyone does everything which he does for the sake of pleasure or gain or honour" (*Antidosis*, 217).

The wedding of beauty and virtue brings together other dissociations in the field of rhetoric: art and purpose, ornament and instrument. Combining the roles of critic and servant strengthens the ties between form and content. It is an attempt to emphasize the "deep and constitutive sociability" of rhetoric without creating "cynical connoisseurs of language" (Lanham, 1993, p. 146). Rather than decrying the persuasiveness of elegant language, the critical servant realizes the need to constitute society through rhetoric and accepts the possibility that such an act can be artistic. Beauty in language does not necessarily lead to ugliness in political action; while Hitler's aestheticized political discourse is rightfully decried, Martin Luther King Jr.'s artistic language is rightfully celebrated.

In providing an artistic, practical, useful, and critical position for community action, the critical servant's discourse becomes performative. Critical rhetoric as performance makes itself accessible to the people of its community, rather than solely to academics. With the perspective of a critical servant comes a return to beauty in rhetoric and critique; performances are written to be pleasing and beautiful to the community for which they are produced. This perspective discourages us from viewing art as aesthetic individualism or self-expression, or from locking it away in museum vaults. By merging the useful with the aesthetic, Isocrates expressed a central perspective of his culture. By all contemporary accounts, Athenians saw art as part of community life. They lived a life "that was manifested in war, worship, the forum, [and] knew no division between what was characteristic of these places and operations, and the arts that brought color, grace, and dignity, into them" (Dewey, 1934, p. 7). Buildings served political functions, yet were beautifully constructed and decorated. Rituals brought fulfillment to the communal life, and were filled with music and dance. For the Athenian, art was "an integral part of the ethos and the institutions of the community. The idea of 'art for art's sake' would not have been even understood" (Dewey, 1934, p. 8). The performance of critical rhetoric as a useful service to the community realizes the need for beauty in politics, the bond between art and utility severed in Western political philosophy. [3] As Isocrates understood, rhetoric could be pleasing and persuasive to the people and simultaneously serve a significant purpose. Aesthetically pleasing discourse could be politically valid; the two were not mutually exclusive. As exemplified in Isocrates's *Evagoras*, the rhetoric of a critical servant could be understood simultaneously as "telling the story of a virtuous man to audiences of all times or as contributing to the ongoing conversation of the day concerning alternative political institutions or educational principles" (T. Poulakos, 1987, pp. 325-326). The art of the critical servant "blends the universal and the particular inextricably" and interweaves "art and politics, fiction and history" (p. 326).

Critical service, then, is a purposive and artistic act. It understands its own power to propose a course of action and in so doing constitute the community through persuasive language; it embraces this expression/creation of the community as both necessary and useful. Yet if service were measured only in terms of usefulness, such a perspective could still fall prey to the snares of pride and arrogance; a discourse could be quite useful for the rhetor's desires yet harmful for the community. In Isocrates's writings, we find a check on the hubris that could result from a purely utilitarian conception of political service. The check lies in another word for service.

## **SERVICE AS DOULEIA**

Isocrates argued that in practical politics, decisions and actions ought to be critiqued by how well they served (*opheleo*) a purpose. But the *intent* of a critical servant was no less subject to critique than the action s/he proposed. When critiquing intentions, Isocrates used a group of words, the strongest of which is *δουλεία* (*douleia*). Other words in this cluster include *therapeia*, *melete*, and *oiketēs*. *Douleia* meant servitude, subjugation, or bondage. *Therapeia* had several nuances. In the medical sense of therapy, it meant nurturing, care, or medical treatment. It also meant waiting on or attendance, and when used with *theos*, divine worship. A final sense was that of paying court, either as a flatterer or as a consultant. *Melete* meant care also, but with the nuance of careful attention or practice. An *oiketēs* was a domestic servant. These words share the sense of waiting on or serving another.

The strongest connotation of service urges the critical servant to place the good of the people first, to subjugate his or her will to the good of the people. By calling for subjugation, service in the sense of *douleia* acted as a check on hubris. In his writings to kings, Isocrates checked the prideful impulse in politics: "You must care for the people and make it your first consideration to rule acceptably to them, knowing that all governments-oligarchies as well as the others-have the longest life when they best serve the masses" (*To Nicociēs*, 15-16).[4] Although couched in practical language-"your government will last longer if you are nice to the peons"-this statement defined the role that people in political affairs ought to assume if they were devoted to the polis: the role of servant.

Isocrates regularly contrasted service to the polis with private gain, emphasizing that public life called for responsible, even sacrificial, actions and not abuses of power. In the *Areopagiticus*, he valorized the government of the years after Solon, when it was harder "to find men who were willing to hold office than it is now to find men who are not begging for the privilege" (25). Citizens in those days "did not regard a charge over public affairs as a chance for private gain but as a service to the state" (*Areopagiticus*, 25).[5] People who had sufficient time and resources would "devote themselves to the care of the commonwealth, as *servants [oiketēs] of the people* [italics added], entitled to receive commendation if they proved faithful to their trust, and contenting themselves with this honour, but condemned, on the other hand, if they governed badly" (*Areopagiticus*, 26-27). Commendable public service led to government at its best, where leadership was not insolence, liberty was not lawlessness, and happiness was not license (*Areopagiticus*, 20). For Isocrates, a democratic government by definition ought to serve

the people; even the reign of monarchs such as Evagoras could approach democracy if the monarch served the people (*Evagoras*, 46). Ruling through service was both politically practical and desirable.

It is in this sense of the word service that the critical rhetor takes on a more specific role than the "social actor" proposed by McKerrow (1991, p. 62). Servitude as *douleia* is a giving over of one's will to fulfill the important function of addressing the needs of the community. It is important to note here that service to the community is not slavery to the community. Service, unlike slavery, is a willing choice to relinquish the use of rhetoric for selfish purposes. Isocrates criticized equally those who used public offices and those who used oratory for personal gain. He noted that "the majority of the orators have the audacity to harangue the people, not for the good of the state, but for what they themselves expect to gain" (*Panathenaicus*, 12), while he and his students spoke on noble topics and even paid more into the public funds than they could afford. [6] Yet Isocrates did not deny that serviceable oratory could bring praise to the orator. This praise, however, was only justified when the speech was about the most important topics and served the good of the people. Advantage came not to those who took it from their fellow citizens, but to those who were "conscientious in their dealings with their associates, whether in their homes or in public life" (*Antidosis*, 282). Service manifests itself in actions, not passive attitudes. Nor is it pandering rhetoric done out of expectation for personal reward; it does not say, "I am serving you," or "I am liberating you," or "I am speaking for this or that minority community." Instead, service combines knowledge of the community with the desire to serve, and produces a corrective critique.

The agency of the critical servant is obtained by understanding the agent's subjectivity as a combination of the individual and the social. The rhetor is not merely an object, the passive slave of the demands of the community, a flatterer. Nor is the rhetor an entirely autonomous critic or subject: a discrete, self-sanctioning, detached observer who imposes a self-determined good on the community. Instead, the critic works with community givens, but also with possibilities entailed in the history of the community. By combining community history, critical possibilities, and rhetorical performance, the critic strives to arrive at a contingent good. Simultaneously, the servant acts to open possibilities within the community by throwing the self into the conditions already set in the community's history. When critic and servant are combined in constant interplay, the rhetor is a moral and political agent who sacrifices his or her self-interest to the community, and through this loss of self gains knowledge and power.

Knowledge and power come from the critic's reading, interpretation, and re-making of the community's history. As I show in the next section, Isocrates made these same three moves in his own critical interventions. To read the history of the community, the critic sacrifices his or her ego and becomes a student of the community. Gaining this historical understanding of the community is itself a service to the community. Here the critic learns and accepts that future actions of the community need to be grounded in its past. The critic interprets the history of a community, showing how past choices led to the present conditions. From this interpretation, the critical servant then points the way to a new course of action. Future actions are ones the community could have chosen in the past but did not (as the critical servant displays through the construction of historical choices). The critical interpretation of the community's history thus



remakes the past with an eye toward a brighter future. Using the knowledge gained from submitting to the constituting forces of the community, the critic constructs a new constitution of the community. This new constitution is powerful because it is grounded in a subjectivity that is actively both individual and social. In this critical service lies the possibility for ongoing transformation.

The ongoing transformation of the community is driven by the critical servant's bond to the community. The critical servant perspective pushes critical rhetoric to take "as one of its tasks an investigation of what the good is or might be" (Charland, 1991, p. 73). As a servant of the community, the critical rhetor seeks knowledge of the good from within that community. The rhetoric of a critical servant plays "rhetoric's high card in postmodern social theory" (Charland, 1991, p. 73), as it draws on and articulates the experience of the audience even as it moves them toward a new position. The role of the servant restrains pride, not through subservience to *episteme*, but through service to the *doxa* of the community. The subjective *doxa* of critical rhetoric is further checked by the community that maintains its legitimacy by remaining open to further challenges (Wellman, 1971) by its critical servants. Combining the recursivity of critical rhetoric with service to the community helps rhetors manage the paradox of proposing a course of action in an ever-changing world.

Pride is checked in yet another way. The art of the critical servant, like the art of argument for Isocrates, increases "the chances of developing a strong moral consciousness because advocates are constantly in situations where sensitivity to others' needs [as a servant] ... is the *sine qua non* of success" (McGee, 1985, p. 10). With this moral consciousness, rhetors articulate a potential position for the community and are responsible for making that position persuasive. At the same time, a critical servant realizes that the message cannot only pander to the tastes of the audience but also must align with the ethical convictions of the servant as a member of the community. The servant is duty-bound to strive for the best for the community, and critical rhetoric must reflect a dedication to both practical and normative concerns. Critical servants can, as Sartre (1991) noted in his analysis of Kennedy, play the "ethic card" without denying its role as an ethic. Ethical appeals can both win an election and reorient the audience toward an ethical position entailed in the community's history but not yet fully realized in everyday practice. It is this position that the critical servant offers as the best possible goal.

In appealing to ethics, the critical servant acknowledges the persuasive force of the ideals of a community. Plato sought ideals in Forms, inaccessible to the broader community, which intellectuals would discover for the community. McKerrow would call such a person a prophet, and would reject such a position since prophets speak "with reference to universalized truths" (1993, p. 63).[7] But using this criteria to place prophets and critical rhetors in binary opposition may blind us to the way speakers negotiate the tension between the universal and the specific. Critical servants situate their knowledge of possible actions within the history of the community. Some of the knowledge found in the history of the community may lay claim to universality. It is not a service to the community to render this knowledge *a priori* inaccessible, as Plato would, or *a priori* suspect, as some postmodern theorists would. Instead, critical servants work to ground this knowledge in the present community, as a resource for social critique. Since the knowledge

is tied to the community, it retains its persuasive force. However, it is always temporally relative, always situationally contingent, and always subject to further critique and revision.

The idea that knowledge must be tied to a historical moment is also encapsulated within the verb *douleo*. One meaning of the verb is to adapt oneself to the occasion; the critical servant realizes the contingent and temporal nature of the recommendations made to the people. The position that the critical servant offers to the community as the best is temporally relative. The critical servant operates from doxa and realizes that the goal of a rhetor is to locate a contingent good for a particular community in a particular time and place (Charland, 1991). This rehabilitates lived experience as a measure of action and encourages critical rhetors to rely on the community, which demands aesthetically pleasing discourse and requires more than criticism from its servants.

Reliance on the community means that the critic is bonded to the history of the community. For some, bonding oneself to a community may sound inherently conservative. Such critics might ask, "how can you improve society if it promotes inequality and you draw your standards from the very fabric you are critiquing?" The simple answer, which the critical servant embraces, is acceptance: we live in communities; rhetoric is fixed in them; and this is rhetoric's very source of power. Claiming that service means supporting the status quo and opposing change implies that the community's history is completely devoid of radical moments. In the past lies transformative potential for the present community, potential that can be used in radical ways. Using his or her critical skills, the servant tries to understand, express, serve, and critique the community. When the roles of critic and servant are seen as inseparable, the labels *radical* and *conservative* become unstable. By initiating a transactional interaction between past and present, the critic calls into question the good endorsed in the present as much as the good of the past. The critic offers a judgment on the past and, as such, draws on the history of the community for the good. Simultaneously, the servant offers a judgment for the future, proposing a course of action and change for the community that the critical servant serves. What is important is not whether the critical servant is conservative or radical, but whether the critique has positive transformative potential.

As we look to notions of the good that a critical servant may articulate, it is important not to confuse community history with community standards. All communities have a history of practices that can lead to new practices. In every act there is some unanticipated opening that the actor did not intend. Rhetors have the freedom to take up a past practice, explore its potential, and discover its previously unexplored use. Thus history can be seen as the resource of a potential that has yet to be actualized. Critical servants can transform local knowledge by drawing on the history of the community and the history of discursive practices that produced that knowledge. By looking to the past, critiquing it, refocusing and reorienting it, the critical servant can produce critical interventions and suggest courses of action with positive transformative potential.

## CRITICAL INTERVENTIONS

Throughout his life, Isocrates strove to intervene critically in the community of Athens. At one level, each of his interventions can be understood as critical service, as Isocrates read, interpreted, and re-made the history of Athens. While respecting the history of his community, Isocrates recombined past possibilities into new potentials. This reconstruction, revealed at the proper moment, was a unique course of action grounded in the history and experiences of his community. At another level, each of his interventions stressed the value of service for Athenian society. Here I examine three of his interventions: Isocrates's attempts to shift imperialism into alliance, tyrants into leaders, and avaricious politicians into responsible spokespersons for the polis.

To shift imperialism into alliance, Isocrates began with the history of Athenian hegemony in Greece. Classical Greece was prevented from achieving its full potential by the constant inter-city warring that sapped its resources and destroyed nascent alliances. Appeals for unification could potentially stop inter-city-state strife and form healthy alliances. Yet in the fifth century, Athens had used panhellenic arguments for its own imperialistic goals. Isocrates saw within the history of his community the myth of unification but also recognized that those prior attempts at unification were in need of critique. In his desire to serve the community, Isocrates critiqued Athens's failure to achieve panhellenism in his day. Isocrates read and reinterpreted Athens's history as a continual struggle for panhellenism rather than imperialistic expansion. From this interpretation of Athens's history, Isocrates proposed that the ultimate destiny of Athens as the birthplace of culture was to advance the unification of Hellas. Thus, Isocrates took ideas from the history of Athens, shaped them to fit the new moment, and proposed an original course of action tied to his reconstruction of the past.

Isocrates performed critical service for his community in both his *Panegyricus* and his life's work, the *Panathenaicus*. In these two works, service to the polis was not only the driving force, but also a major theme. In the *Panathenaicus*, Isocrates went to great lengths to distinguish between the governments of Athens and Lacedaemonia. He did this not simply to discuss forms of government but to suggest that Athens deserved the hegemony, since Athens had been "of much greater service to the Hellenes than has the city of the Lacedaemonians" (*Panathenaicus*, 112). In Isocrates's story, Athenian rule over Hellas was superior to Lacedaemonian rule since the Lacedaemonians typically *enslaved* the Hellenes, while the Athenians had *served* Hellas. No greater service, "nor one more generally beneficial to the Hellenes" (*Panathenaicus*, 168) ever had been rendered than when Athens defeated the Persians. Thus, the entire project of unification, if seen as a service to all of Greece, was the inevitable duty of Athens. Service to the polis, a strong theme present in the history of Athens, was converted by Isocrates into service to Greece.

Service to the state was also the theme of another of Isocrates's critical interventions: his attempts to remake tyrants into democratic leaders. Extending his gaze beyond Athens, Isocrates read and interpreted the histories of surrounding communities such as Cyprus. He uncovered in the history of Cyprus moments of democratic potential, despite its tradition of tyrannical rulers such as Evagoras. Rather than denying the power of a completely centralized

government—a form of government he deemed no worse than the irresponsible democracy he saw in Athens—he remade the history of tyranny into that of a limited democracy. This remaking of Evagoras's rule in the *Evagoras* was to serve as a guide for Nicocles's rule. In his discourses *Nicocles* and *To Nicocles*, Isocrates proposed that the best ruler was not the tyrant, but the leader who served the people. To drive home this point, Isocrates drew examples of polis-serving leaders from Athenian history: Theseus and Agamemnon. Theseus was greater than Heracles because his actions were in the service of the polis and not for personal glory, and because he shared with the people both pleasures and dangers (*Helen*, 36). Agamemnon united the people of Hellas in the expedition against Troy. Although people usually "delight more in stage-play than in services" (*Panathenaicus*, 78), Isocrates extolled Agamemnon's acts since they were in the service of all of Hellas. By transforming Theseus and Agamemnon from kings into benefactors, from rulers into unifiers, Isocrates held up service as an ideal for tyrants to follow into a new era of leadership.

Leadership was also the theme of Isocrates's school of rhetoric, established as a critical intervention into Athenian society. The goal of his *paedeia* was to recast self-serving politicians into responsible spokespersons for the polis. Isocrates felt it was his duty "to make sense out of his sophistic heritage, . . . compete with philosophy for cultural supremacy, battle against extreme forms of contemporary sophistry, and reshape public perceptions about sophistry, oratory, and philosophy" (J. Poulakos, 1995, p. 114). His examination of the history of education in Athens led him to find fault with both the philosophical and sophistic schools of his day. He sought to refine the sophistic tradition, since within the sophistic *paedeia* he saw moral indifference. Plato's writings, on the other hand, contained what Isocrates considered an unrealistic conception of politics. The educational system or *paedeia* he proposed was meant as a "middle way between highflown theory and vulgar penny-chasing technical adroitness" (Jaeger, 1944, p. 60). From this history of education, Isocrates constructed a new possibility: education as a way to produce practical politicians with moral bonds to the community. Isocrates recognized and valorized the practical and pragmatic character of rhetoric, and accepted that though absolute knowledge was impossible, the rhetor could, through careful study, articulate and argue for viable courses of action. To balance this practicality, Isocrates educated his students in the history of the community, and held up before their eyes examples of service to the polis. The products of this educational system were many prominent and successful leaders in both his lifetime and the years following his death.

These Isocratean interventions were neither "thoroughly academic" nor detached; he engaged the vital issues of the time and offered both a critique and an affirmation of different versions of the community. These interventions combined theory and practice. Using a theory of critical service, Isocrates proposed ways for people to serve their communities, and thus he acted out his own theories. With Isocrates as an example of what critical rhetoric might look like, the critic can answer Hariman's charge that critical rhetoric has "little imperative to share power with the subjects of criticism, or to advance the interests of those outside the academic community" (1991, p. 68). When critical rhetors begin with the intention of serving the community, their critique must be judged on how well it does *serve the community*, and not on how it serves the rhetor. The critical servant, understanding the fragmentary nature of current discourse (McGee, 1990), recognizes that any further fragments added to the flow must have critical importance

and usefulness to the community and must offer the community an assumable position (even though it might be subject to further fragmentation and critique). The critical servant is concerned, as rhetoric ought to be, with empowerment, with "seeking to discover how and with what consequence *doxa* can be used to authorize a redress of human grievances" (McGee, 1990, p. 281). Instead of constructing power as a "discursive mediation between a leader and his people" (Gaonkar, 1990, p. 295), the perspective of Isocrates urges rhetors to become critical servants and return power to the community.[8]

Recognizing the uncertain nature of rhetoric and power, the critic needs an enormous amount of "Negative Capability": the ability to exist "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Dewey, 1934, p. 33). Living in what some call the postmodern condition, the critic relies more on intuitive capabilities than on consecutive reasoning. Fragments of discourse do not stand still long enough to allow themselves to be pinned down and arranged into facts. Yet in spite of this, or rather because of it, the critical servant must address what the discursive intervention is *about* for the community. Grasping and relating the *aboutness* of the text [9] is often a matter of intuition, an intuition that is derived despite the ever-present uncertainties, contradictions, and fluctuation of the postmodern condition. This intuition is "embodied in the object" or performance of the rhetor. As a performance, the text of the critical servant is not merely an explication of a position for the community. It in fact *constitutes* the position in a persuasive, aesthetic and creative fashion. With this constitution, the critical servant creates a corrective community in order to critique that community again.

## **CONTINGENT CONCLUSIONS**

The characteristics of a servant suggest one way of adding detail to the face critical rhetors may take. Serving the needs of the community stops the rhetor's potential slide to radical relativism and self-expressive critique, while critiquing the acts of the community keeps the rhetor from becoming a slave to dogma. The critic throws him- or herself into the community, learns from its history, experiences its beauty, and offers to that community an enriched vision. The critical servant blends the aesthetic and the political in this vision, recognizing that appealing to the tastes of the community requires by its very nature a call to practical action, and that making ideas accessible to the public through performance does not reduce their transformative potential. In calling for transformative action, the critical servant offers a practical and ethical position for the community to adopt. Yet the servant understands that since any message will be lost eventually in a sea of fragments, all critiques must address the present conditions and accept the contingent nature of judgment.

This essay is an attempt to do what I am saying critical rhetoric ought to do: reclaim or re-use the knowledge of the historically-situated community to propose change. As critical service, rhetoric brings to light both the possibilities and the limits of a text that is a part of the community being served. I have drawn the idea of the critical servant from Isocrates's texts, an idea that exists in the history of the academic community I desire to serve. I have tried to use that historical knowledge to propose a course of change in that community.

Some might criticize this perspective by focusing on the limits of Isocrates. The simplest task is to expose the texts of Isocrates as part of a system of inequality, even furthering that inequality. It is no news that Isocrates was politically conservative, and pointing this out does not constitute critical service. As I noted earlier, we cannot escape our communities, no matter how hard we may try. Rhetoric, as the voice of doxa, is located in time-bound communities. Proposing Isocrates as an example of critical service could be challenged by some: he didn't free slaves, or raise women to citizenship. But the perspective of the critical servant encourages us to look for the transformative possibilities in discourses, beyond the limited uses to which they had been put, just as Isocrates appropriated unification discourses for his panhellenic projects. Isocrates's critical service came in the openings he created as his discourse questioned some cultural givens (even as it accepted others). The revolutionary force of Isocrates's notion of critical service is that it considers inseparable the traditional binaries of critical and normative, freedom and order, intellectual and community. Critique issues from service; the two are parts of the same process. With this understanding, the critical servant proposes courses of action promising to secure the bonds of community, so all can continue to secure freedom. Without the polis, there was no freedom. Without service, there is no useful critique.

Yet it would be pure folly to believe that critical service is always and completely liberating. Like the position of Isocrates, the position of the critical servant is "both revolutionary ... and yet not revolutionary enough" (T. Poulakos, 1994, p. 77). Future critics will find that all discourses, including those that have broken some bonds of domination, serve to strengthen other bonds. Pride comes from thinking we have helped the oppressed or spoken for the marginalized. We can never really know if we have served others. We might find that our grand rhetoric has played into the hands of the oppressors. Critical service thus is not an act done to speak *for* the community or help others in expectation of reward, since the critical servant recognizes the contingency of his or her proposal. Contingency however does not stop action; the critic continues to build society (and thus act as a servant) in order to critique it.

Finally, donning the role of critical servant will fill a void I sense in the practice of criticism today. Dewey expressed it well:

Wherever conditions are such as to prevent the act of production from being an experience in which the whole creature is alive and in which he possesses his living through enjoyment, the product will lack something of being esthetic. No matter how useful it is for special and limited ends, it will not be useful in the ultimate degree—that of contributing directly and liberally to an expanding and enriched life. The story of the severance and final sharp opposition of the useful and the fine is the history of that industrial development through which so much of production has become a form of postponed living and so much of consumption a superimposed enjoyment of the fruits of the labor of others. (1934, p. 27)

I believe critical service can wed the aesthetic and the practical in criticism and enrich the lives of people in our communities. By combining communal history, critical possibilities, and rhetorical performance, critical service joins other divorced terms as well. Past, present, and future come together in the critic's reading, interpretation, and re-making of the community's

history. The individual and the social, theory and practice, critique and service: all are bound together. And with this bond can come joy in life and labor, and the creation of beauty.

## NOTES

*Norman Clark is a graduate student in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Rhetoric in the Disciplines Conference at Temple University on April 21, 1995. The author extends special thanks to Takis Poulakos, whose enthusiastic and generous aid proved him to be a true critical servant.*

1 Ono and Sloop (1992) similarly argue that critique should be closer to the communities of its origin; yet they do not provide a concrete example of a practitioner of critical rhetoric. They describe the critic essentially at a theoretical level, as one who "dons the persona of one who has raised questions about culture and who has attempted to understand them" (p. 58). I am sympathetic to their commitment to telos, and hope to illustrate how this theory would look in practice.

2 The *potential* (note that I am not saying this is inevitable) toward ungrounded, self-expressive communication is present in *many* theories, including critical rhetoric.

3 Gadamer lamented the disappearance of the bond between aesthetics and politics in our age. In Part 1 of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1960/1989) traced that deterioration in Kant's writings and claimed that Kant intellectualized and depoliticized the idea of the *sensus communis* that for the Greeks and Romans was full of moral and political content. According to Gadamer's discussion of "The Subjectivization of Aesthetics through the Kantian Critique," Kant removed from the "taste" of the community any sense of the political, and abstracted judgment from any relationship to the community. For Kant, aesthetic judgment was only contemplative and could never be purposive; thus, aesthetics could not apply to political judgment which always must be concerned with ends.

4 Service here is *therapeuosin*, a verb that shares the nuances of *therapeia*. The verb means to care for, to tend, to heal; to serve the gods, to worship; or to wait on, to attend. Here the word is arguably used in the sense of care, since its position at the end of the sentence connects it to the verb *meleto*, meaning to care for, used at the beginning of the sentence.

5 "Service to the state" is *ten ton koinon epimeleian*, and could also be rendered "care for public matters." Good citizens of the polis watch over, manage, and pay attention to the things held in common, including the treasury.

6 Whether he and his students actually gave back their income tax refund is beside the point—he is using this as an example to stress the need for service in all areas of community life.

7 Critical servants do share some similarities with prophets. Both appeal to values present in their community, and both offer social critique. Critical servants are prophets in the sense that they are, as one of my reviewers pointed out, "radically open both to community and to what

'we' postmoderns-following Heidegger and our own Michael Hyde-might call 'the call of conscience' (Hyde, 1994)." However, inJudeo-Christian culture the prophet speaks from divine revelation and offers a final truth. Divine inspiration is not a prerequisite for critical servants.

8 I am grateful to one of my reviewers for pointing out that this tradition of critical service exists in other cultures and times. The reviewer suggested a number of other potential critical servants: Archbishop Desmond Tutu,John Dewey, Cornel West, and others. I agree with this reviewer that more examples would help the critical rhetoric project; however any example ought to have extended treatment. Rather than give a list of servants, which could never be exhaustive, I trust that this essay will encourage my readers to think of other examples. Explored on their own terms, these examples would add other characteristics to the face of the critical rhetor; 1 do not mean to argue that critical service is the only characteristic critical rhetoric can or should take.

9 The phrase "the aboutness of the text" is one I am borrowing from Michael McGee. In a class on rhetorical criticism, he used this phrase to critique student presentations, arguing that they did not address what the texts were really *about*. I am using the phrase in a slightly modified sense here.

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