

## Chapter 4

### The Rhetorical Form of Antilogic

*"All things produced by our own reason and ability, the true as well as the false, are subject to uncertainty and debate."*

Montaigne, "Apology for Raymond Sebond"

*"When someone opposes me, he arouses my attention, not my anger. I go to meet a man who contradicts me, who instructs me. The cause of truth should be the common cause of both."*

Montaigne, "Of the Art of Discussion"

We can begin this examination of rhetorical form with an artificial but helpful distinction between antilogic as a *techne*, or set of practical skills, and antilogic as *praxis*, a more general capacity for action. We know from David Roochnik that the term *techne* was derived from the Indo-European root for "wood," and that a *tekton* was a woodworker (1990, 18). Over time, the Greek term came to indicate specific skills "uniquely possessed by one member of the community," especially those skills that required an ability for making intellectual calculations, so that the *technai* came to include arithmetic as well as carpentry. Roochnik concludes that all such skills are relatively precise (e.g., medicine), have a determinate subject matter (woodworking, numbers), and are value neutral (can be used for good or ill; 20-21). With this working description, we can posit certain features of antilogic that could be classified as "technical"; but we should be careful in doing so, for an over-scrupulous attempt to calculate the precise form of antilogic runs the risk of diverting attention to the peripheral and hypostatizing what in actual practice is dynamic.

Like *phronesis*, antilogic is basically unscripted and improvisational. By and large, it operates beyond the strict confines of a specific craft or *techne*

and abjures the determinate features of, say, the syllogism, or even of dialectic as defined in the *Phaedrus* or the *Topics* (see Ch. 2, sec. 2). After all, if antilogic is oriented toward people rather than propositions, if it is historical, situational, dialogic, and pragmatic, how are we to map those adjustments that develop as a result of the diverse times, places, persons, and purposes involved? And yet, as Eric Havelock notes, the general form and function of Protagorean rhetoric are not “wholly uncalculable” (1957, 200). So, while my goal in this chapter is to clarify the constituent features of antilogical form, I will try to do so with deference to the inherent fluidity of its actual function.

In the first part of the chapter, I focus on examples of early Greek antilogic from Thucydides, Euripides, the *Dissoi Logoi*, and Antiphon. Specifically, I intend to survey significant features and strategies in these historical texts in order to build a preliminary picture of the formal options that qualify antilogic (at least partly) as a *techne*, an art or skill whose form and procedure is stable enough to be identified and taught. It may be that the features we can discern in these early examples are especially pristine because they are nascent, appearing before later developments complicate what is fundamental.

These technical appraisals are brief, though I hope not too cursory. To extend the technical analysis of exemplary texts would, at this point, give the mistaken impression that the goal of antilogic is to create an artifact, something we can assemble according to appropriate technical procedures. To really comprehend antilogical form, we need to articulate these technical features dialectically; i.e., in relation to principles that inform antilogic as *praxis* (cf. V. Kahn 1997, 164). I intend *praxis* here to mean the capacity for action informed by logos, reason, reflection; and, by principles of *praxis*, I mean those guiding or internal ends that set a standard for effective action (see Garver 1994, 206-213). In arguing that antilogic is more than a compilation of technical skills, I attempt in this chapter to identify those guiding principles that predicate effective antilogical practice, distinguish it from other argumentative rivals, and constitute its standard of excellence. In brief, I posit the multivocal, oppositional, and dynamic elements of antilogic as its governing principles, those features that constitute its unique *praxis* and motivate its particular form. To clarify these principles, I appeal again to some early examples of antilogical form. This time, however, I complement historical review with modern theoretical commentary as a way of extending my analysis beyond the original form of antilogical practice. My hope is that by discussing the technical features and guiding principles of antilogical argumentation in direct relation to one another, we can a build

a comprehensive base for understanding the ensuing developments in antilogical genealogy.

But before we take up examples of antilogic in its Ur-form, let's summarize what we know about the rhetoric of our subject so far. In brief, antilogic operates within the context of Protagorean relativism, a theory of perception that places all knowledge claims in relation to people, discounts transcendental appeals as unavailable, and so assumes that multiple, conflicting claims will issue from diverse human perspectives. We also know that antilogic is a practical response to this epistemological theory, a discursive process that seeks workable knowledge by assuming the partiality of all single claims, rejecting any assertion of cognitive privilege, and insisting that all claims must be argued. Antilogic organizes the resulting arguments by placing opposing claims in direct contact with one another, calling attention to the pro and contra of their interaction, and attending to the evolution of ideas that follows from juxtaposition. We know, then, that antilogic emphasizes direct dialogue between interested parties as an unparalleled method for testing existing claims and inventing new ones. Of course, openness to dialogue typically signifies a common commitment to the issues at hand, and antilogic seeks to operate both as an agent of commonly accepted solutions and as an instrument of social and political virtue. Finally, we know that if scepticism, inquiry, and dialogue promote questions, antilogic will also seek answers in the common advantage of those involved. Antilogic thus finds its impetus in human "partiality" and endemic disagreement, its goal in the resolution of the common good, and its *raison d'être* in the dialogue of interlocutors whose diverse and multiform logoi are the materials out of which we measure all things.

But, of course, all this is hardly even a silhouette. Our next best step is to turn to the proto-forms, those early experiments in antilogical structure and purpose that appeared in the age of Protagoras. We will see what a few good examples and some hermeneutical investment can do to add a bit of color and depth to the picture.

## 1. EARLY FORMS OF ANTILOGICAL *TECHNE*

The simplest structure for antilogical discourse is undoubtedly the paired or parallel speeches of the kind we find in Thucydides. The great historian says that his own work has been complicated by "the want of coincidence between accounts of the same occurrences by different eyewitnesses, arising sometimes from imperfect memory, sometimes from undue partiality for one side or another." Under such circumstances, he believes it wise "to give the

grounds alleged by either side” as the best indicator of the complexities involved and as the soundest means for arriving at informed historical judgment (1.22-23). Echoes of Protagoras resound in this passage; in particular, the influence of the human-measure’s perspectivism and the role of contending arguments in the construction of history. We know that Thucydides, like Euripides, was a pupil of Prodicus, a Sophist slightly younger than Protagoras; and we know that throughout *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, the concepts and strategies of Sophism are at play (cf. de Romilly 1992, 76-78; Rankin 1983, 98-103; Solmsen 1975, 10-46). Specifically, Thucydides is inclined to describe events from a particular human vantage point, or to present different individual reports of the same event, or to provide testimony on the same topic at different historical moments, all of which foreground the specific human observer as the controlling historical perspective. Thucydides also notes that there are typically more than two sides in any political debate, but he selects the most contentious contrasts as indicative (3.36.6), a narrative choice that aligns his history with the two-sided public debates (or contests) made popular by Protagoras in Athens. Finally, there is in both Thucydides and Protagoras a belief that conflict is a natural human tendency (2.61.1), a view both men appear to derive from empirical observation (cf. Ch. 2, sec. 3). Of course, the historian, especially the war historian, is less free to indulge in idealism than the philosopher; so there is also in Thucydides a tragic recognition that the resolution of conflict is too often the work of force, too seldom the result of debate (5.89).

Thucydides’ proclivity toward what will become known technically as *in utramque partem* (presenting both sides of a case) is on display immediately in his *History* in two sets of opposing speeches, the first pair addressed to the Athenian assembly (1.31-45), then a matching set addressed to the assembly at Sparta (1.68-78). For our purposes, the well-known debate over the fate of the Lesbian city of Mitylene is a good indicator of Thucydides’ ability to adopt antilogical method for historical work (3.36-48). The point at issue is whether or not the Mitylenean population should be severely punished for secretly cultivating a traitorous alliance with Sparta, Athens’ enemy. Thucydides presents two speakers on the Mitylene question from the Athenian assembly, one coming directly after the other. Cleon, the most influential statesman in Athens following the death of Pericles, argues that democracy must occasionally act harshly in order to maintain the hegemony of its own “good laws” (3.37-40). As Rankin points out, Cleon echoes Callicles in Plato’s *Gorgias*, both of whom maintain that “power is more important than justice or democracy” (1983, 106). The oppressive militarism of this position is countered by Diodotus, who argues that the

opposite is the case—that a tolerant response to Mitylene treachery will prove more practical and advantageous to the Athenian cause.

Here are two antithetical speeches on the same topic, of the same relative length, delivered to the same audience, in the same venue, and which take up an almost identical set of concerns in a roughly symmetrical or parallel order. Both sides in this debate share considerable common ground: both agree on the importance of the Mitylene defection with regard to Athenian imperial power, and both are primarily concerned not so much with a forensic judgment regarding the colony's crime as with a deliberative decision on what is best for Athens' future interests (3.44).<sup>1</sup> In addition, both speeches begin with discussion of theoretical points: first, should the Athenian assembly reconsider its previous vote on Mitylene; and second, what is the value of political oratory to the state (the particular topic is the influence of Sophistic argument on public debate; and, interestingly, both speakers prove notably Sophistic in their own discourse; cf. 3.38 and 3.42-43). These parallel exordia are followed by parallel discussions of the issues involved, including Athens' prior treatment of her colony, the political repercussions of the situation, and the financial costs of the various options. Both speakers then provide a concluding recommendation: Cleon closes with an exhortation to protect the interests of empire by acting severely where severity is due; Diodotus argues that severity will only aggravate the situation and that mercy will yield greater benefits, including enhanced status for Athens. In other words, Diodotus reverses Cleon's claim and argues that self-interest in this instance demands that Athens adopt a more tolerant posture: "I consider it far more useful for the preservation of our empire voluntarily to put up with injustice, than to put to death, however justly, those who it is [in] our interest to keep alive" (3.47). Throughout this debate, Diodotus is more patient and deliberative in his analysis, more principled and less passionate in his ethos, so that it is not just the arguments but also the character and manner of the orators that are antithetical in this instance.

There is, of course, much about this rhetorical encounter that is outside the scope of our present interest. As noted, both speakers argue from expedience: Cleon that retribution is the practical way to prevent further rebellion, Diodotus that excessive repression will itself prove impractical. Rankin points out that there is little in the way of epideictic flourish; the fate of thousands hang on this debate, so expedience dominates (110). For our own purposes, the Mitylene debate is a classical presentation of arguing *in utramque partem*, first one side, then the other. It is just this kind of simple but clarifying strategy that we imagine characterized Protagoras' own two volumes of *Antilogies*, now lost. Thucydides allows the two contrasting

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