

2012

What is Talmud? The Art of Disagreement

David Metzger

Old Dominion University, dmetzger@odu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Metzger, David, "What is Talmud? The Art of Disagreement" (2012). *English Faculty Publications*. 17.
https://digitalcommons.odu.edu/english_fac_pubs/17

Original Publication Citation

Metzger, D. (2012). What is Talmud? The art of disagreement. [Book review] *Rhetorica*, 30(4), 454-457. doi: 10.1525/rh.2012.30.4.454

Review

Author(s): David Metzger

Review by: David Metzger

Source: *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Autumn 2012), pp. 454-457

Published by: [University of California Press](#) on behalf of the [International Society for the History of Rhetoric](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rh.2012.30.4.454>

Accessed: 16-03-2016 15:15 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



International Society for the History of Rhetoric and *University of California Press* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

speakers moved (along with a comic lexicon of abuse) from drama to oratory, surfacing also in the Platonic dialogue (although ignored for the most part by Aristotle) and proliferating in Theophrastus. Although for the sake of clarity I have focused in this review on the central opposition between the aggressive versus and the weak and decadent speaker, W. is clear that these two types exist at opposite ends of a continuum and that characteristics of one type can slide into another. Particularly welcome is her insistence that the iambic mode transcends genre. This enables her to make wide-ranging and successful connections between comedy, satyr play, tragedy, philosophy, and forensic rhetoric. One of the pleasures of the book is to trace the various instantiations of the paradoxical figure of Socrates from Aristophanes to Plato and Theophrastus. Socrates does not occur explicitly in the last of these, but the cumulative force of W.'s analysis compels the reader to give serious consideration to her suggestion that he is a shadowy presence in several of Theophrastus' caricatures, the product of "a tradition of characterization that wittily assimilates to intemperate types a teacher who used his famous recalcitrance to disparage and tease haughty, boastful elites" (317). Individual readers will, of course, find places where they could desire reformulation or areas where further questions arise. I, for example, am not entirely comfortable with the contention (22) that Plato *adopted* the language of insult from dramatic genres—this seems to me to be perhaps an overly reductive way of formulating a process that was surely more complex. This leads in turn to problems about how informal practices of insult bleed into and from the rhetoricized versions we find in our literary texts (a reading of the treatment of invective found in Plato's *Laws* 934-936 would be useful here). Yet it is no insult to suggest that the book presents opportunities for future reflection; some discomfort is a small price to pay for such thoughtful and productive work.

KATHRYN A. MORGAN

University of California at Los Angeles

Sergey Dolgopolski. *What is Talmud? The Art of Disagreement*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009. xii + 333 pp.
ISBN: 9780823229345

This book joins an increasing body of work devoted to the study of Jewish discourse. The study of Jewish rhetoric has found a place in the work of rhetoric and composition scholars who are turning their attention to the subject of non-Western or alternative rhetorics (Carol Lipson and Roberta Binkley's *Ancient Non-Greek Rhetorics*), as well as scholars who imagine that the conceptual integrity of the notion "Jewish perspectives" can be coherently expressed as a book (Andrea Greenbaum and Deborah Holstein's *Jewish Perspectives in Rhetoric and Composition*). *What is Talmud?*

also shares a concern with work in Jewish studies devoted to pedagogy (Simcha Assaf), rabbinic literary activity (Daniel Boyarin, Jeffrey Rubenstein, David Stern), historiography (Ismar Schorsch), systematic Hebrew rhetorics (Isaac Rabinowitz, Arthur Lesley) and the hermeneutical activity of text-based communities (Moshe Halbertal).

While there are resources enough from which to construct a course on "Jewish discourse," the idea of teaching and studying "Jewish rhetorics" is still problematic inasmuch as there is a sense that organizing the considerable scholarly activity devoted to "Jewish discourse" under the phrase "Jewish rhetorics" is at best an anachronistic projection and, at worst, an act of violent appropriation. One way to avoid the charges of appropriation or anachronism would be to treat "rhetoric" as a set of methodologies that could be productively applied to any "text." The problem with this approach is that often the methodologies that fall under the heading of rhetoric were produced in support of philosophical or historical investigations. For this reason, others have chosen to treat rhetoric as a set of concerns, or even a predisposition to ask certain kinds of questions. The idea of "Jewish rhetorics" might, in that instance as well, avoid the violence of appropriation, but "rhetoric," then runs the risk of simply being another name for something that is being productively and more accurately examined as "discourse" or "literary activity." The concept of "Jewish rhetorics" may encounter some resistance because, in avoiding the charges of anachronism or violence, "Jewish rhetorics" promise that they will say nothing new.

While rhetoric's ontological worries will be familiar territory for *Rhetorica's* readership, it is important to keep them in mind as Dolgopolski's work positions itself in and between the fields of Jewish studies and rhetoric. As the title of this volume suggests, Dolgopolski's project is to work through the question, "What is Talmud?" This is the question that Dolgopolski finds in the work and the practices represented by R.I. Canpanton's *The Ways of the Talmud*, a fifteenth-century work that directly affected Talmudic learning for the next two centuries. It is important to note that the question "What is Talmud?" is not treated as the opposite of those inquiries/projects associated with the question "What is the Talmud?" Dolgopolski does make the claim that "What is Talmud?" is a more fundamental question than "What is the Talmud?" because the former question opens up a discussion whose *raison d'être* is the expression of something new. Here, Dolgopolski runs the risk of evoking criticism. There would be no problem if he were simply to make the case that Canpanton's *The Ways of Talmud* should be revisited and appreciated through the application of concepts drawn from continental philosophy (namely Derrida and Deleuze). Dolgopolski's study would simply be another way of giving presence to the Talmud, as a book, leaving intact the Being of the book and the kind of histories that support it.

To be sure, Dolgopolski's study provides both an angle of appreciation for Canpanton's *The Ways of Talmud* as well as an addition to the discussion of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric as seen from the position of Talmud. Taking Derrida's critiques of Heidegger as his starting point,

Dolgopolski asks us to consider that there must be a “nonphilosophical yet metaphysical side of the Talmud” (23), and that there are ways that “the Talmud may be rhetorical, not philosophical, and yet metaphysical” (24). After all, sages (the actors on the Talmudic stage) share with the philosopher a desire for the truth as well as a certain suspicion regarding the ideas and opinions offered by their students. But, unlike philosophers—at least the Platonic kind—the sages must also acknowledge the authority of a tradition. And, unlike rhetoricians, sages are not fixed on the actual or potential “here and now” of their audiences.

A sage’s acquisition of knowledge and their ability to transmit that knowledge requires that they know how the tradition can be true. Canpanton could have responded to the question of the tradition’s validity by simply inviting the tradition to stand before the court of reason. He could have treated logic as a tool for all that falls under the categories of exegesis and deduction. But Canpanton chooses another path by requiring that his students treat all Talmudic discussions as valid; his students are then put in the position to test the truth of their “reasoning” with the text by seeking out the “novelty” in their plain understanding of the Talmudic oration or the novelty in their understanding of the “exaction” of the text. This pedagogical choice reflects Canpanton’s understanding of the nature of Talmudic disagreement. Exaction is a kind of deduction which is supported/prompted by the necessity that there is a compelling reason for any statement to be made. Canpanton assumes that no authentic (“reasonable,” logically valid) disagreement could simply be explained away by identifying differences in the historical or psychological scene or agents in whose name the disagreement is expressed. Dolgopolski develops this point further by showing how “disagreement” did not take place historically in a past made present in history but in a “radical past,” a past that has never been present (84).

What is Talmud? is particularly strong in terms of its presentation of Canpanton’s methods of study, the specific tasks assigned to his students, and how a “radical past” is encountered by way of these methods of study. In addition, chapter five provides an analytical exposition of the theoretical parts of *The Ways of the Talmud*, which will make Canpanton’s work accessible to Anglophone readers. Dolgopolski’s study might then and should be welcomed as an informed and highly suggestive discussion of Canpanton’s working of the Talmud.

That being said, *What is Talmud?* would also ask us to see the following in this particular acceptance of his work: that the status of the Talmud is unchanged, and perhaps we, as readers and students, are unchanged as well; that the goal of our discourse of acceptance is agreement. Once we recognize that, then we might be more open to consider how the question “What is Talmud?” promises to offer an alternative to the discourse of acceptance and agreement. *What is Talmud?* is a way to situate the study of “Jewish rhetorics” by offering a place not in the diversity of others (perspectives, cultures, etc.) but in the differences expressed by us (rhetoricians) when we speak as others (historians, philosophers, Talmudists).

Disagreements are often treated as differing appearances or perspectives on a singular reality (after Perelman and Obrechts-Tyteka, for example) or as prompts for the invention of an agreement or unity to come. However, building on Canpanton's example, Dolgopolski's work develops a sustained and insightful construction of what might be termed Talmudic rationalism where the ontological entailments of expressions are drawn from the careful and charitable articulation of disagreements. As such, *What is Talmud?* is an important new contribution to the study of rhetoric. In addition, *What is Talmud?* is a necessary reorientation and elaboration on current studies of Rabbinic discourse and textuality, which has been dominated by praise for Rabbinic tolerance and appreciation of polysemy. *What is Talmud?* puts on the table the possibility that in accepting the Talmud as the historical anchor (if not the core symbol) for an appreciation of polysemy and multiple truths, we have done so at the expense of Talmudic understandings of disagreement.

DAVID METZGER

Old Dominion University (Norfolk, Virginia)

David M. Timmerman and Edward Schiappa. *Classical Greek Rhetorical Theory and the Disciplining of Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 192 pp. ISBN 9780521195188

Traditional accounts of rhetoric's emergence in fifth-century Greece have encountered many recent challenges and revisions. Among these challenges, Edward Schiappa's prolific scholarship on classical rhetoric has always been exceptional. In this vein, Schiappa has long argued for the importance of a later origin of rhetoric as a distinct discipline than has been presumed. It arose as a discipline, that is – something that could be studied – he says, in the fourth-century in the wake of Plato's invention of the term *rhetorike*. This latest volume, coauthored with David Timmerman, continues to provoke the reader to question accepted rhetorical histories and is located well within the scholarly trajectory of Schiappa's earlier work, in particular, the *Beginnings of Rhetorical Theory in Classical Greece* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999). However, by emphasizing the role of "terms of art," *Classical Greek Rhetorical Theory and the Disciplining of Discourse* adds a refined focus on discourse in the formation of rhetoric as a discipline.

Timmerman and Schiappa explain "terms of art" as bits and pieces of disciplinary jargon that have "specialized denotative functions" (p.1) for those within a distinct knowledge community. Their introductory chapter provides a nuanced theoretical and historical explanation of such terms in the context of the history of rhetoric. The authors contend that the emergence of this kind of technical vocabulary is evidence of the expansion of the available "semantic field" and of corresponding "conceptual possibilities" (p. 6) available to rhetorical practitioners. Terms of art, in this way, are a