

Isocrates



“the study of political discourse can help more than any other thing to stimulate and form such qualities of character”

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The quote is from “Against the Sophists” (Bizzell & Herzberg, 2nd ed, 75).

Some things to remember

- Lived 98 years, during the “Golden Age” of Athens and into Phillip’s reign
- His school was almost as popular as Plato’s—and more profitable
- Important political commentator in his day
- Very influential among Greek and Roman rhetors and educators

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- “more profitable”: Isocrates charged his students significantly above the going rate, but apparently didn’t have any trouble getting it
- “political commentator”: many works (eg *Areopagiticus*) are proposals for improving Athenian politics
- “influential”: though Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are better-known today, during the classical period Isocrates was widely studied and respected

Compared to his contemporaries

- Unlike both the other major Sophists and from Socrates and Plato, rejected metaphysical and other non-pragmatic issues
- Unlike many Sophists, saw an ethical aspect to rhetoric
- Unlike Socrates and Plato, did not believe in the search for absolute truth
- Like Aristotle, emphasized pragmatism and education, but had a stronger belief in natural talent and innate character
- Like Aristotle, believed in a broad education

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•“metaphysical and non-pragmatic”: recall the bit about the Sophists’ arguments over the number of elements in “Against the Sophists”

•“ethical aspect”: ie in the modern sense of social responsibility

•“absolute truth”: like the other Sophists, believed in seeking contingent, probable truth

•“talent and character”: I. felt that the student must already be of good quality to be improved by rhetoric, but felt that then rhetoric could produce not only a more capable citizen, but a morally better one

•“broad education”: differed from some of the Sophists in advocating knowledge of the subject at hand

Rhetorical theory and practice

- a poor orator, so published rather than delivered
- tends to keep to a single style, clear and relatively free of embellishment (but not particularly exciting)
- typically assembles parallel clauses into periodic sentences
- seems to rely primarily on logos and the enthymeme, rather than ethos and pathos

Now those who compose hortatory discourses addressed to their own friends are, no doubt, engaged in a laudable employment; yet they do not occupy themselves with the most vital part of philosophy. Those, on the contrary, who point out to the young, **not by what means they may cultivate skill in oratory, but how they may win repute as men of sound character**, are rendering a greater service to their hearers in that, while the former exhort them to proficiency in speech, **the latter improve their moral conduct.**

... I am going to counsel you on the objects to which young men should aspire and from what actions they should abstain, and with what sort of men they should associate and how they should regulate their own lives. For only those who have travelled this road in life have been able in the true sense **to attain virtue—that possession which is the grandest and the most enduring in the world.**

—from a letter to Demonicus

(<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/ptext?lookup=Isoc.+1+3>)

Isocrates and Pragmatism

Like the modern Pragmatists, Isocrates:

- is not interested in metaphysics
- advocates contingent, situational action
- seeks probabilistic good
- is concerned with politics and ethics
- favors education and critical thinking

Compare to ideas of Charles Saunders Peirce, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, and Walter Benn Michaels.

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•Peirce: “pragmatic maxim”: we conceive of things as the sum of their significant effects (“clarifies” metaphysics by discarding ideas that have no correspondence with perceived reality).

•Dewey: developed Peirce’s ideas into a philosophy of education; favored broad education including practical experience, and experimentation.

•Rorty: we have no access to eternal, absolute truth, but through observation, reason, and discussion can still find values that are relatively good.

•Michaels: there’s a correct interpretation of a text, and it’s the one the author intends; the proper use of language is to communicate an intended idea accurately.

Online Resources

- Perseus (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>)
Probably the best online source for Classical Greek texts in general; has lots of Isocrates in translation.
- Peithô's Web (<http://www.classicpersuasion.org/>)
Different translations of numerous texts, plus essays and other secondary materials.

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Perseus is a bit confusing at first, and can be slow (you see only a small fragment of a text on each page), but it's extremely useful if you're working on Classical Greek rhetors.

Peithô's Web is of mixed quality; it hosts significant material, but a lot of the content is actually links to other sites, some of them broken, and some of uncertain provenance or utility. Still worth checking out, for additional texts or to compare translations.