

Isocrates on Political Discourse & Civic Education

I. Isocrates, Introduction/Background

- Biography
 - Long life & “3 careers”
 - Relations with contemporaries (Plato, Aristotle, etc)
- The works of Isocrates
 - Notes on the translation of Isocrates’ works
- Points on the literary form of Isocrates’ works
- Interest in Isocrates in rhetorical studies today

II. Isocrates: Central Points

- His “discipline”; emphasis or aims of his teaching
 - Philosophia* How related to Platonic “Philosophy”?
Doxa vs. *epistêmê* (see pp. 63, 240, 254)
 - Paideia tôn logôn* (= “Education in discoursing”)
Civilizing effect of *logos*
 - Rhêtorikê*? Isocrates NEVER uses this term to describe his teaching or field of study. *Why?*
- Philosophy of education (pp. 65, 165, 239-244)

Nature/Talent	Training	Practice/Exercise
		“ <i>Imitatio</i> ” (of suitable “paradigms”)
		(pp. 65, 165)

 - Relative importance of the three variables
 - Isocrates’ method(s) of instruction(?)
 - How to move “theory” into “practice” (see pp. 239-240)
 - Isocrates on *kairos* (e.g., p. 240 – Compare to Plato, *Phaedrus* & *Alcidamas*)
- Criteria for Discourse (cf. Rummel)

Purpose	Content/Subject	Style
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- Rhetorico-Ethical Ideal
Speaking well = Thinking well (sound advice, prudent deliberation)
- Social/Political philosophy
Panhellenism: Unity of Greeks – historical and mythological antecedents
Greek cultural hegemony
Civic engagement: By a “quietist”? (*See below, “Orality/Literacy & Speaking/Writing: The Case of Isocrates” sec. (a)*)
Paradox, Inconsistency, or Other?
- Prose style: The Isocratean “Period” (*See below for discussion/illustration*)
Other notable stylistic features
- Isocrates’ importance in Western *intellectual history*
- Isocrates’ importance in Western *literary history*
- Isocrates’ importance in the history of *education*
- Isocrates’ importance in the history of *literacy*
(*See below, “Orality/Literacy & Speaking/Writing: The Case of Isocrates”*)

The Style of Isocrates: The “Period”

For classical rhetoricians, the “periodic” style was a manner of composing that sought to combine the matter and form of a thought and its expression in such a way as to delight a listener with sounds – echoes, rhymes, rhythms – or achieve effects of suspension or rapidity in order to compliment and augment the sense of the idea being presented. A classical *periodos* typically contains one main idea (subject and predicate) with the predicate often found at the end for a sense of climax or finality. Numerous phrases or clauses could be inserted to develop, qualify, restrict, extend, etc. the main idea. Depending on the idea and the ability of the writer/orator, these phrases and clauses could be arranged relationally (correlative, oppositional, disjunctive, etc.) with an equal number of syllables in each unit. Other figures of sound (alliteration, rhyme, etc.) could be common.

Isocrates was considered a master innovator of this style. Unfortunately, our translators (Mirhady & Too) do not often attempt to reproduce Isocrates’ periodic style in English. Here is one attempt, George Kennedy’s rendering of a sentence from Isocrates’ *Panegyricus*:

Isocrates, *Panegyricus*, 47-50. [Translated by George A. Kennedy, in *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), p. 36]

Love of wisdom, then,
 which has helped us *to discover*
 and helped *to establish* all that makes Athens great,
 which *has educated us for practical affairs*
 and made gentle our relations *with each other*,
 which *has distinguished* misfortunes of ignorance
 from those of necessity
 and *taught us to guard against the former*
 and bear up against the latter,
 [this love of wisdom] OUR CITY *made manifest*
 and honored Speech,
 which all *desire*
 and *envy* those who know,
 recognizing, on the one hand
 that this is the natural feature distinguishing us from all animals
 and that through the advantage it gives us we excel them in all other things,
 and seeing, on the other hand,
 that in other areas fortune is troublesome
 so that in those areas the wise fail
 and the ignorant succeed,
 and that there is no share of noble and artistic speech to the wicked,
 but *it is* the product of a well-knowing soul,
 and that the wise and those seemingly unlearned most *differ* from each other in this
 and that those *educated* liberally, right from the start, are not *recognized*
 by courage and wealth and such benefits,
 but most by what has been said,
 and that those who *use* speech well are not only *powerful* in their own cities,
 but also honored among other men;
 and
 to such an extent has OUR CITY outstripped the rest of mankind in wisdom and speech
 that her students have become the teachers of others,
 and she has made the name of the Hellenes seem no longer that of a people,
 but that of an intelligence,
 and that those rather are called Greeks
 who share our education
 than those who share our blood.

The next page, taken from Thomas Conley’s *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (2001), explains and attempts to illustrate the style in action:

It is difficult to convey in English the plasticity of syntax and the resources of assonance and alliteration possible in the Greek. But it is impossible to comprehend what periodic composition is capable of without seeing it in action. A sentence from Isocrates' *Letter to Archidamus* provides a reasonably good illustration of his style.²¹

I might have spoken passably about even these matters
 since I knew, in the first place
 that it is easier to treat copiously in cursory
 fashion occurrences of the past
 than intelligently to discuss the future
 and, in the second place
 that all men are more grateful to those who praise
 than to those who advise them—
 for the former they approve as being
 well-disposed,
 but the latter,
 if the advice comes unbidden,
 they look upon as officious—
 nevertheless,
 although I was already fully aware of all these considerations
 I have refrained from topics which would surely be flattering and
 now I propose to speak of such matters as no one else dares to discuss
 because I believe that those who make pretensions to fairness
 and practical wisdom should choose
 not the easiest subjects, but the most arduous,
 nor yet those which are sweetest to the ears of the
 listeners, but such as will avail to benefit
 not only our own states,
 but also all the other Greeks;
 and such is the subject, in fact, on which I have fixed my attention at the present
 time.

This is a rather long sentence by English standards, indeed even by Greek standards; but for all its length, it is carefully constructed and possesses considerable vitality. In the first section, Isocrates tells us what he is not going to talk about; in the middle section, what he refuses to talk about and what he feels he has to say; and in the final section, he tells us what he needs to talk about. There is a clear plan guiding what appears to be a rather meandering thought, in other words; and a carefully modulated tone of urgency that is enhanced, not obscured, by the artistry of the speaker. "I have not come here to tell you what you want to hear," Isocrates is saying. "I have come to tell you what you must do to save ourselves"; and then, at the very end, a note of emphasis capping the climax of the "not . . . not . . . but . . ." structure of the sentence up to that point. The structure of expectation and fulfillment

CONSIDER: Optional exercise: Compose a period of your own. You choose the subject. . .

The Style of Isocrates: More Examples

(a)

Many times I have wondered at those who first
convoked the national assemblies
and established the athletic games,
 amazed that they [*men*, on the one hand] should have thought the prowess of men's bodies
 to be deserving of so great reward,
 while [*de*, on the other hand] to those who had toiled in private for the public good
 and trained their own minds so as to be able to help also their fellow men
 they apportioned no reward whatsoever,
 when, in all reason, they ought rather to have made provision for the latter;
 for if [*men*] all the athletes should acquire twice the strength which they now possess,
 the rest of the world would be no better off;
 but if [*de*] a single man should attain wisdom,
 then all men will reap the benefit who are willing to share his insight. (*Panegyricus* 1-2)

(b)

For who, be he young or old, is so indolent that he will not desire to have a part in this expedition,
 an expedition
 (*men*) led by the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians (. . . *stratêgoumenês*),
 (*de*) gathered together in the cause of the liberty of our allies (. . . *athroizomenês*),
 (*de*) dispatched by all Greece (. . . *ekpempomenês*),
 (*de*) issuing forth to wreak vengeance on the barbarians (. . . *poreuomenês*)?
 And how great must we think will be **the name (*phêmên*) and the fame (*mnêmên*)** and the glory (*doxan*)
 which they will enjoy during their lives,
 or, if they die in battle,
 will leave behind them,
 they who will have won the meed of honor in such an enterprise? (*Panegyricus* 185-186)

(c)

And yet how could men be shown to be braver or more devoted to Hellas than our ancestors,
 who, to avoid bringing slavery upon the rest of the Hellenes,
 (*men*) **endured (*etlêsan*)** to see their city made desolate,
 (*de*) their land ravaged,
 (*de*) their sanctuaries rifled and temples burned,
 (*de*) and all the forces of the enemy closing in upon their own country? (*Panegyricus* 96)

(d)

For when that greatest of all wars broke out
 and a multitude of dangers presented themselves at one and the same time,
 (*men*) when our enemies regarded themselves as irresistible because of their numbers
 (*de*) and our allies thought themselves endowed with a courage which could not be excelled,
 we outdid them both, surpassing each in the way appropriate to each;
 and having proved our superiority in meeting all dangers,
 (*men*) **we were straightway awarded the meed of valor,**
 (*de*) **and not long afterward we obtained sovereignty of the sea**
 (*men*) by the willing grant of the Hellenes at large
 (*de*) and without protest from those who now seek to wrest it from us. (*Panegyricus* 71-72)

Orality/Literacy & Speaking/Writing: The Case of Isocrates

(a) Isocrates' admissions of weak voice & lack of confidence for public speaking

As regards a political career I was the citizen the least suited by nature, for I did not have a voice sufficiently strong nor self-assurance (οὔτε γὰρ φωνὴν ἔσχον ἱκανὴν οὔτε τόλμαν) to enable me to cope with the mob, to be reviled and to abuse those who parade on the speaker's platform. (To Philip 81)

I abstained from politics and oratory, for I had neither an adequate voice nor self-assurance (οὔτε γὰρ φωνὴν ἔσχον ἱκανὴν οὔτε τόλμαν). (Letter 8.7)

I knew that my nature was neither sufficiently tough nor hard for political action and that it was imperfect for speaking and altogether useless. . .for I doubt whether any other citizen was so lacking in the two attributes which have the greatest power at Athens, a voice strong enough and self-assurance (οὔτω γὰρ ἐνδεὴς ἐγενόμην τῶν μεγίστην δύναμιν ἔχόντων παρ' ἡμῖν, φωνῆς ἱκανῆς καὶ τόλμης). (Panathenaicus 9, 10) (All translations from Too 1995, 74-75)

(b) Isocrates on the difference between speaking and (oral) reading of a text

I do not fail to realize what a great difference there is in persuasiveness between discourses which are spoken and those which are read, and that all men have assumed that the former are delivered on subjects which are important and urgent, while the latter are composed for display and personal gain. And this conclusion is not unreasonable; for *when a discourse is robbed of the prestige and the voice of the speaker, and the variations which are made in the delivery* (ἐπειδὴν γὰρ ὁ λόγος ἀποστερηθῆ τῆς τε δόξης τῆς τοῦ λέγοντος καὶ τῆς φωνῆς καὶ τῶν μεταβολῶν τῶν ἐν ταῖς ῥητορείαις γιγνομένων), and, besides, of the advantages of timeliness and keen interest in the subject matter; when it has not a single accessory to support its contentions and enforce its plea, but is deserted and stripped of all the aids which I have mentioned; *and when someone reads it aloud unpersuasively and without investing it with any (sense of) character*, but rather as though he were simply counting out numbers (ἀναγιγνώσκη δέ τις αὐτὸν ἀπιθάνως καὶ μηδὲν ἦθος ἐνημαινόμενος ἀλλ' ὥσπερ ἀπαριθμῶν)—in these circumstances it is natural, I think, that it should make a poor impression upon its hearers. (To Philip 25-27)

(c) Ancient criticism of Isocrates' readerly ("voiceless") style**(From Philodemus)**

In fact, to judge from their writings, most of the sophists were miserable at delivery. For long sentences make delivery difficult, just as Demetrius too says about Isocrates' works.**

Hieronymous says that [Isocrates'] discourses are good for reading, but that it is absolutely impossible to declaim them as public orations in a rising voice and tone or to speak in this style with the requisite delivery (ἀναγνῶνα[ι μ]ὲν αὐτοῦ τοὺς λόγου[ς καλῶς] δυνήσεσθαι τιν[α], δη[μ]ηγορηῆσαι δὲ τὴν τε φ[ω]νὴν καὶ τὸν τόνον ἐπαίροντα καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ κατ[α]σκευῆ[ι μετ]ὰ τ[ῆ]ς ἀρμοστικ[ῆ]ς ὑποκρίσεως εἰπεῖν οὐ παντελῶς).

For he has dispensed with what is most important and most effective on a crowd: his style is unanimated, boring, and composed as though in a monotone ("in single *tonos*") (ἀψυχον γὰρ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀνυπάκο[υσ]τ[ο]ν εἶναι τὴν λέξιν καὶ οἰοεῖ πρὸς ἕνα τόνον πεποιημένην); he has eliminated breaks, variety, and the partitioning created by increasing and relaxing tension and by emotional crescendos; and he is a slave to smoothness throughout.

Therefore, he is easy to read in a relaxed voice (ε[ὐ]ανάγνωστον μὲν εἶναι [τ]ῆς φων[ῆ]ς ὑφειμένης) and when the voice is not too raised;

< . . . his style. . . > even chokes the speaker by its periods; and by eliminating delivery, it is almost the opposite of the style required in politics.

One who is going to manage political affairs should be steeped in a political and oratorical style, not a sedentary style that only whispers its speech (μὴ τὴν ἐπιδίφριον καὶ καταψιθυρίζουσιν τὸν λόγον).

Indeed, [Hieronymous] says, it is like someone putting on a big, bearded mask and then speaking in a child's voice (παιδίου φωνή),*** if you try to advise the Greeks and adopt the formal style and techniques of a public orator but then retreat to the voice of a boy trained to read who is incapable of supplying any tonality (volume?), emotion, or [rousing] delivery (μήτε τόνον [μ]ήτε πάθος μήθ' ὑπόκρισιν)

(Philodemus, *De rhet.* 4=PHerc. 1007 col. 16a5-18a8; trans. White adapted)
(cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *On Isocrates* 13)

** This Demetrius is usually supposed to be Demetrius of Phaleron. Dem. Phal. fr 169 Werhli.

*** Cf. "Longinus" on use of lofty diction: "Truly beautiful words are the very light of thought. However, their majesty is not for common use, since to attach great and stately words to trivial things would be like fastening a great tragic mask on a little child" (*Subl.* 30.2)