

Drop Dead, Gorgias: Isocrates on Beauty and the Failure of Aesthetic-Mimetic Rhetoric

Because of his reputation as a rhetorician rather than a philosopher (in the Platonic sense), Isocrates' philosophical ideas have until recently received little scholarly attention. This paper seeks to add to the body of work on Isocrates' philosophical program (e.g. Timmerman 1998, Livingstone 2007, Timmerman and Schiappa 2010) by addressing the issue of beauty and how it relates to Isocrates' theories of language, knowledge, human nature, and education. Through his school of philosophy Isocrates sought to set himself apart from other prominent intellectual groups such as the Sophists, the eristic schools, and the Socratics. I argue that one way he does this is by formulating a theory of beauty that attempts to defeat the relativist and paradoxological rhetoric of the Sophists and eristic schools, as well as the Socratics' claims about precise knowledge of virtue and truth. Since beauty is a natural quality that cannot be imitated or taught, it provides a foundation for Isocrates' essentialist views on education in virtue.

Isocrates' theory of beauty is developed primarily in his *Helen*. In the *Helen*, Isocrates claims that a prior *Encomium of Helen* (most likely by Gorgias) was not an encomium but a defense speech. Isocrates corrects this error by praising her for her beauty and its power, which surpassed both the muscles of Hercules and the mind of Theseus. The bulk of the discourse centers on Theseus' accomplishments as a hero and civic leader in Athens to make the argument that, if Helen could overcome someone like Theseus, then the power of her beauty deserves praise.

Isocrates thus makes the argument that, since beauty has power over people and things, it is a necessary component in the formation of virtue in individuals. This theory ultimately rests on two ontological and an epistemological premises. First, virtues such as justice and moderation are part of one's nature (*physis*), which is immutable, and cannot be taught; for those who do not have such a nature, they can only approach virtue through training of their character (*tropoi*). Second, since we do not always have access to absolute truths (*episteme*), we must rely on our perceptual and intellectual judgment (*doxa*), which must be trained through philosophy so that one can "conjecture

reasonably about useful things” (*Helen* 5). The gilded phrases of the philosophers and Sophists are aesthetically pleasing and easy to imitate but do not lead to virtue because they merely dazzle one’s *doxa* without producing any useful knowledge or development of one’s character. The same goes for the aesthetic quality of symbolic objects like statues. Isocrates advises Nicocles that beautiful language can better lead one toward virtue than a statue because “it is easier... to imitate the character of others and the thought behind what is said” rather than their physical form (*Evagoras* 75). Thus educators should strive to harness the power of beauty because it endows language with protreptic power. The Sophists and other philosophers fail to do this in Isocrates’ eyes.

Scholarship has largely neglected the importance of beauty to Isocrates’ philosophical program. Typically, studies of this discourse focus on Isocrates’ relationship to other intellectuals (Eucken 1983, Too 1995), the unity of the discourse (Kennedy 1963, J. Poulakos 1986, Papillon 1996, Blank 2013), the *Helen*’s Panhellenic associations (Kennedy 1958). John Poulakos (1986) has highlighted the centrality of beauty in the *Helen*, but he sees Helen’s beauty as a representation of Isocrates’ stance in a debate between polarized concepts of a rhetorical “love of beauty” (*philokalia*) versus philosophical “love of wisdom” (*philosophia*). Papillon 1996 has shown this position to be problematic because there is little evidence to support the existence of such a debate, but he takes the counterargument too far in suggesting that the *Helen* does not argue for rhetorical education at all. I suggest instead that we view Isocrates’ theory of beauty as an attempt to unite these seemingly disparate intellectual disciplines.

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