

JOANNA JANIK  
(JAGIELLONIAN UNIVERSITY)

## ISOCRATES AND SOME *TOPOI* RE-INVENTED

KEY WORDS: Isocrates, rhetoric, Plato

SUMMARY: Isocrates, a political commentator, writer and teacher, was usually praised for his style and erudition, but hardly considered to be an original author. This opinion, however, seems to be a little unjust; Isocrates was perfectly able to use his profound knowledge of the Greek tradition in order to support his views, not always in a way one might have expected. In the way Isocrates refers to the well-known motifs and personalities one may discover an original approach. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate this technique with reference to Solon's ethics and the person of Socrates.

If anybody thinks about great personalities whose presence had a decisive impact on the intellectual life in Athens in 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, Isocrates certainly does not come to one's mind as the most original author.<sup>1</sup> The general opinion referring to this writer describes him as an excellent stylist who had written a dozen of treatises almost entirely based on the ideas invented by others. His most popular concept, the Panhellenic union against the East, made him seek an appropriate leader outside his native polis and put his good name among his

---

<sup>1</sup> This short essay was prepared for the volume dedicated the late prof. Romulad Turasiewicz. As it was due to be published some time ago, I referred to it in my book on Isocrates ("Political Concepts and Language of Isocrates", Kraków 2012, p. 96). When the publisher's plans changed, I decided to leave this text in its original shape.

fellow-citizens in jeopardy. Apart from his literary activities Isocrates became famous as a teacher of rhetoric and a founder of a school which in the future was to provide a model for secondary education. The intellectual landscape of Athens in the first decades of 4<sup>th</sup> century BC offers a number of personalities whose influence on the contemporary public could not be denied. The posterity put them all in the hierarchy of importance, the leading place of which belongs to Plato. On the other hand, we should not forget that for the Athenians of that time the competition for greatness had not yet been decided. For some time and for the general public Plato and Isocrates could have shared the position on the top of this ranking. Both enjoyed great respect of their pupils, both were able to establish a sort of school designed according to their own rules. Isocrates himself would probably say that he is a master teaching something much more important than mere oratory technique. His task was to provide men with true *paideia* and to help them become good, decent human beings and virtuous citizens. To some extent these goals are similar to the aim of Plato's ethical teaching. It seems absolutely clear and does not demand a great deal of debate that there is no serious comparison between Isocrates' ethical reflections and Platonic comprehensive concepts rooted in the most sophisticated metaphysics. What is interesting, Isocrates seems to be fully aware of the presence of the rival and he does not fear the competition. The tone of his speeches does not evoke any sign of an inferiority complex. It can be argued that Plato did not underestimate Isocrates, even if he was not prone to admit it. The master of the Academy took rhetoric and its teachers seriously and it was not only Gorgias that he had in mind. Isocrates and his custom to call his own art *philosophia* must have been present somewhere in the back of Plato's head when he was presenting his concepts of true knowledge to the students. Some of them could have been tempted to chose a less complicated and more practical path.<sup>2</sup> The famous passage in *Phaedrus* (279 a) could be understood as the compliment or irony;

---

<sup>2</sup> Frank L. Vatai put it in a very simple way by stressing two main factors: a shorter time to complete one's education and a more practical approach, which enabled students to assume a political career without the tiresome discrepancy between theory and practice. Cf. Vatai, 1984, pp. 100-101.

no matter what interpretation prevails, we should not believe Plato had not noticed the figure of the respectable rhetorician.<sup>3</sup>

Fighting for his position on the intellectual Parnas, Isocrates had to face not only the great philosopher; he found the natural enemy in the sophists and some orators delivering bold speeches in public; the former deserved criticism for their way of treating the noble art of rhetoric, the demagogical methods of the latter seemed to him the most dangerous for the state and its citizens. It may seem a paradox that this well-known teacher of rhetoric became such a fierce critic of some of the most successful adepts of this art. Isocrates' attitude proved both to be more ethical than that of the sophists, and less metaphysical than this represented by Plato.<sup>4</sup>

Isocrates' profound knowledge of literature had provided him with a vast collection of ideas, clichés and traditional arguments responsible for the shape of his fellow citizens' minds for at least two centuries. He was not the only one who used them as a very practical and efficient tool; every educated person knew the basic rules of making the right impression: the Athenian audience was well accustomed to hearing all these tricks, they were expected and the reaction was more or less easy to anticipate. At the very first glance the prose of Isocrates suits the pattern, but the first impression can be deceptive. The most interesting observation refers not to the arguments used by Isocrates, but to the way they are used: Isocrates usually does not follow the same path as the authors before him; he gradually modifies the meaning of old arguments: the changes are subtle and the reader is supposed to absorb them as something known and well-established. This may be regarded as a more effective way of persuasion than any revolutionary provocation. When we look at the treatises of Isocrates in this way, the author of *Aeropagiticus* shows much more attractive features. To prove that such an opinion is right we will take into account two treatises composed in the form of speeches: *Antidosis* and *Aeropagiticus*. The content of both speeches makes us believe they were written within few years.<sup>5</sup> The

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Erbse, 1976, pp. 329-352.

<sup>4</sup> For an extensive analysis of Isocrates educational system in recent literature cf. Tuszyńska-Maciejewska, 2004, pp. 73-95.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ober, 1998, p. 277.

title of the first refers to the genuine cause brought against Isocrates by another citizen, who while allotted to the duty of trierarchy successfully challenged the famous orator to take this financial burden instead of him. The failure at the popular court must have come as a shock and it was at this moment when Isocrates became aware, that he had been misunderstood by a great part of Athenian population. In order to let them know the true image of his views and activities, he composed the oration in the form of a defence in court delivered during the fictional trial. The case mentioned in the title provided the excuse to present Isocrates' life and work on an almost monumental scale. The point of reference chosen by the author left no doubt that Isocrates intended to move the accusation against his own person to the higher level: instead of being oppressed for pure financial reasons he chose the persecution of free intellect, profound knowledge and original method of teaching. The accusation against Isocrates invented by the author himself referred to few issues, the most important of which was corrupting the youth, *diaphtheirein tous neoterous*.<sup>6</sup> The immediate association with Plato's *Apology* is no coincidence, this particular concept of Isocrates proves that at least in the opinion of some people Socrates had already become a martyr whose death cast a shadow on the Athenian democracy<sup>7</sup>. Isocrates pretends to suffer from comparable lack of understanding and jealousy on the part of his fellow countrymen. The alleged corruption of young men consists in teaching them arguments the use of which would make them capable of winning the case even against justice; the teacher himself is supposed to be able to "make weaker arguments stronger", *hettous logous kreittous poiein*.<sup>8</sup> Again, what we have in front of us is a teacher unjustly accused of being a cynical sophist who does not feel responsible for the morals of his pupils. Isocrates would like us to see him as an misunderstood wise man, whose intentions had been misinterpreted. Of course everybody might notice at once that charging this particular teacher with unscrupulous victories right after his defeat at the popular court would be unfair. Isocrates himself feels obliged to analyse the reason of his defeat; the mere fact seems to contradict the

<sup>6</sup> Isocrates, 1928, p. 202.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ober, 1998, p. 261.

<sup>8</sup> Isocrates, 1928, p. 192.

whole theory of efficiency provided by masters of rhetoric. There must be some intrinsic and hidden aspect of the relations between the orator and his audience that sometimes escapes even the best educated and trained man. In the case of Socrates the problem was obvious for anyone with an open mind: the philosopher was too addicted to the truth and too sincere towards his fellow citizens to earn the real sympathy of them all; some loved him, while the others could not bear his words. To some extent Isocrates seems to exploit this image: he lost his case, because of his inexperience in judicial practice and his straightforwardness. Such an attitude suggests that a just man might lose because of his being just and true-speaking. In addition, the connection with Socrates points our direction towards Isocrates' *philosophia*: perhaps the author of *Antidosis* could even prove that his work and his way of *paideia* deserve the same respect as the system of Plato. In his book on the critic of democracy in the classical Athens Josiah Ober put much stress on the competition between several critics of the popular rule: it took some time and struggle to let oneself be noticed among the others.<sup>9</sup> Isocrates had to invent something really interesting to claim the position among the best. The figure of the executed philosopher seemed to be the perfect choice provided that Isocrates would be able to add some new flavour in order not to be accused of imitating Plato's *Apology*. On the whole, he succeeded; he accomplished the task also by introducing one more paradigmatic hero, Timotheus, whose rise and fall was the best example of distraction between a great individual and a mass of citizens. This exceptionally gifted leader, first praised for his victories, was finally sentenced by popular court and ruined by the fine. Isocrates rightly diagnosed the reason of the sad lot of Timotheus: in spite of his great benefits for the city, the general was never able to win the people's favour at the public gathering. The Athenians saw not the independent, talented and honest leader, but a proud and elevated man, who hated democracy and despised his fellow countrymen.<sup>10</sup> Isocrates did his best to warn Timotheus and persuade him to change his attitude, but the character of this man made him an easy target for less ethical politicians. What Isocrates was trying to achieve was the goal of both

---

<sup>9</sup> Ober, 1998, pp. 249-255.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 270-271.

the competent orator and concerned citizen: the reconciliation between men like Timotheus and the people might bring nothing but advantage to everybody. Thus Isocrates finds a place for himself and his kind in the democratic city; in contrast to Plato he does not reject the whole system, because the popular court proved to be capable of unjust treatment of worthy men. Isocrates' practical approach made him seek the reasons of misunderstanding on both sides. The remedy for the deficiencies of the system could be found in rhetoric used as the necessary tool by just and decent men.<sup>11</sup>

Although he begins with the criticism of the mistakes of the popular courts and "Socratean" scenery, the remedy he provides is different from that offered by Plato: instructing students both in rhetoric and morals would bring the city the benefit of wise rule and reliable conduct of its leaders. And the leaders will always be needed. Isocrates' opinion seems to be quite clear: Athenian people owe all the best moments in history to great individuals who guided and instructed the mass; the echo of Thucydides views of Pericles is not distant; the difference consists in the way these opinions are presented: Thucydides was convinced that the rule of Pericles was democracy only by its name;<sup>12</sup> of course the fact that he had no illusions does not imply that he despised the situation, quite the opposite. On the other hand, Isocrates' definition of democracy does not exclude the strong position of a leader, in fact wise guidance appears to be the essential element of a successful popular policy. Someone a little bit malicious might say that in the *Areopagiticus* Isocrates puts a lot of energy in describing oligarchy as the model of popular rule.<sup>13</sup> Isocrates himself was perfectly aware of the difficulty of his task: convincing the Athenian audience that the rule of the best citizens should be regarded the most appropriate form of democracy does not come easy. In the first paragraphs Isocrates reminds that wealth combined with power are usually accompanied by lack of reason and moderation.<sup>14</sup> The public welfare and wise rule should be

<sup>11</sup> See Poulakos, 1997, pp. 40-41.

<sup>12</sup> Thucydides, *Historiae*, II 65, 9, [in edition:] vol. I, Lipsiae 1903, p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Isocrates emphasizes his respect for the people as a sovereign of the city, nevertheless his concept of election of magistrates points to the aristocratic or oligarchic sympathies. See Cloché, 1963, p. 85.

<sup>14</sup> Isocrates, 1928, p. 105.

supported by the principle of *sophrosune*. It is not the huge walls nor the great number of people that provide the real safety of a city: both these advantages are worth nothing when compared to the best and reasonable form of rule. The stress on the division between rich and poor citizens as well as the importance of security based on the quality of the political system and the society, which plays a more significant part than quantity of external measures, immediately directs the audience towards Solon's diagnosis of the moral condition of the state.<sup>15</sup> Isocrates, at least to the best of our knowledge, does not repeat Solon's views word for word; as was his custom, he touches the same subjects and provokes some associations, thanks to which his own concepts acquire an appropriate frame. Solon never underestimated the role of economy in the process of maintaining political order; on the other hand, he was convinced that the natural human tendency to improve one's financial status must be rooted in deep moral sense of justice. Justice as the principle of the behaviour of an individual as well as of a group is the key to success and the crucial condition of securing the state and its people. The moment when people cease to respect it marks the beginning of the decline. Isocrates would not be surprised if the reader of his treatise would remember this concept. Having alluded to the general idea of a well governed city Isocrates presents his negative opinion of the contemporary democratic state. In democracy people have never been governed so badly.<sup>16</sup> However, it is always the democratic system that he intends to discuss and no other option is taken into consideration. It can be inferred directly from the sentences Isocrates carefully chose. The problem begins when he goes into details: his definition of democracy seems to be wide enough to embrace the last two hundred and thirty years of Athenian political history. To make the whole speech sound plausible and not to be considered an oligarchy supporter, Isocrates practiced the technique of double meanings and two levels of significance.<sup>17</sup> The remedy for all the pathological aspects of Athenian politics that Isocrates offered was the return to the constitution of Solon

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 13, [in:] *ed. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 15, [in:] *ed. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Bons, 1993, pp. 160-171.

and Claesthenes.<sup>18</sup> The introduction referring to justice and injustice certainly provides suitable background for the name of the first great lawgiver. The next step to be taken is to describe the measures of repairing the damaged foundations of the state: everybody should understand that only right education and clearly formulated rules can yield better citizens.<sup>19</sup> The teachers should focus on the most important truths in order to engraft them into the hearts and minds of the people. The good conduct of citizens is not necessarily guaranteed by the great number of particular paragraphs of the code, since it is not the precision of the law, but a well-defined basis known by the people, that has real impact on human behaviour. The emphasis put on education by Isocrates and the crucial position of teaching in Plato's *Republic* have much in common, even if the status of the latter is incomparably higher. Isocrates, like his great rival, believes that political power should belong to the best. It is needless to say that Isocrates would be much less demanding than Plato in his definition of "being the best". He has also something important to add: the citizens prepared to be magistrates and rulers should regard the people as their masters. Education, control and wise guidance are supposed to teach citizens *sophrosune* and make them better human beings and citizens. The constitution of Solon reserved this function for the council of Areopagus. The history of Athenian success proved the concept to be right and the decline of the power of Areopagus contributed to the general deterioration of morals. This diagnosis in the first place should be referred to the situation of the youth: young people cannot be blamed for the fact that the principles they were taught leave much to be desired. The list of faults mirrored by the behaviour of young Athenians could have been rewritten from Aristophanes' *Clouds*, had only the language of the famous comedy been a little less crude. Thus we might find the next source of inspiration: the conservative author of the Old Comedy. The paradox consists in the general conclusions both authors infer from the same observations: the positive hero opposed to the negative figure of the sophist in Aristophanes' play is a simple, but at the same time sensible Athenian peasant, whereas the positive paradigm for Isocrates would be someone with a better social back-

---

<sup>18</sup> Isocrates, 1928, p. 112.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 126-132.



ground. Isocrates was committed to the same concept of re-establishing the ideas of *patrios politeia*, which was so passionately propagated by Aristophanes a few decades ago, although the dramatist would have probably been satisfied with reviving the ideas and not the institutions of the great past. It must be emphasized that Isocrates does not mention Aristophanes as his predecessor, so all these remarks will remain hypothetical. There is one more point in the structure of the speech that makes us think of Aristophanes' technique: the whole work may be focused on describing the deficiencies of contemporary democracy, but the author is not going to lose the sympathy of its audience by a definitively critical approach: the spectators as well as the readers must know that the writer appreciates the popular rule in general, but the love of the people makes him a severe teacher. Isocrates focuses on the criticism of contemporary Athenian *politeia*, nevertheless, the last paragraphs offer an unexpected complement: when compared to the Tyranny of the Thirty, the present democracy seems almost perfect.<sup>20</sup>

It seems especially interesting to follow Isocrates' comments on wealth in the society; in the beginning of the speech we might have an impression that his views on the subject would coincide with Solon's opinion. However, Solon was determined to maintain the social balance in accordance with the principle of proportional justice, his texts imply a deeply-rooted aversion to greed and love of wealth. The fear of injustice marked his approach to making money and being rich in general. Isocrates, although equally concerned about justice in the city, offers a little different analysis of the mutual relation between the poor and the rich: the former should seek the sense of social security and insurance in the strong position of the latter. Such beneficial condition used to be characteristic for Athenian society some decades earlier, when the poor did not envy the rich and the rich were prone to take care of the fellow citizens.<sup>21</sup>

The way Isocrates used the association with Solon's concepts illustrates a methodology characteristic for this sophisticated intellectual: he takes full advantage of his knowledge of literature, but it does not mean that he barely repeats views expressed many times by others.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 142.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 122.

It would not be fair for Isocrates to deny him any creativeness and it takes some effort to analyse the method and structure, and not only the content, of his treatises in order to realise that he moves very freely in the space of cultural evocations. Of course, one must be cautious, when trying to track down and identify similarities and modifications, sometimes conclusions must remain hypothesis, nevertheless, this approach to Isocrates' prose makes our reading resemble an intellectual game, the participants of which try to find out in what way Isocrates managed to bring the reader to some unexpected conclusions without introducing any particularly new ideas. His approach to Plato, Solon or Socrates in two of his speeches, not to mention Aristophanes, whose influence one might only guess, proves that even repeating some widely known observations might be raised to the level of art.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Bons J. A. E., 1993, 'Amfibolia: Isocrates and Written Composition', *Mnemosyne*, Vol. 46, No. 2, pp. 160-171.
- Cloch   P., 1963, *Isocrate et son temps*, Paris.
- Erbse H., 1976, 'Platons Urteil   ber Isokrates', [in:] F. Seck, (ed.), *Iokrates*, Darmstadt.
- Isocrates, 1928, *Antitosis*, [in edition:] with English traslation by G. Norlin, Vol. 2, London.
- Ober J., 1998, *Political Dissent in Democratic Athens. Intellectual Critics of Popular Rule*, Princeton – Oxford.
- Poulakos T., 1997, *Speaking for the Polis. Isocrates' Rhetorical Education*, Columbia.
- Tuszyńska-Maciejewska K., 2004, *Izokrates jako tw  rca parenezy w prozie greckiej*, Pozna  .
- Vatai F. L., 1984, *Intellectuals in Politics in the Greek World From early Times to the Hellenistic Age*, London – Sydney – Dover – New Hampshire.