Logos and Power in Isocrates and Aristotle
Ekaterina V. Haskins

As one of the founding philosophers of the Western tradition, Aristotle raised many of the issues that still animate scholarly debates in the humanities. By contrast, Isocrates, despite his considerable reputation in antiquity and the Renaissance as an educator, became a marginal figure in the intellectual history of the West. In academic histories of philosophy and rhetoric, Isocrates occupies a much less illustrious place than Aristotle does. Our understanding of the very terms philosophy and rhetoric is largely indebted to the legacy of Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum.

Logos and Power in Isocrates and Aristotle presents Isocrates’ vision of discourse as a worthy rival, rather than a mere precursor, of Aristotle’s Rhetoric. Casting Isocrates and Aristotle as opponents in a debate over the character, resources, and ends of rhetorical education, Ekaterina V. Haskins argues that much of what Aristotle had to say about the status of rhetoric and the role of discourse in the life of a Greek city-state may have been an implicit reaction to Isocrates. The contrast between Isocrates and Aristotle is brought into sharper relief by the author’s consideration of cultural, political, and intellectual contexts in which these thinkers articulated their views.

On Haskins’s reading, Isocrates offers a more comprehensive and culturally attuned theory of civic discourse and education than does Aristotle, whose intellectual project disengages moral philosophy from the contingencies of public culture and introduces rhetoric merely as an art serviceable to a philosophically trained statesman. Haskins terms Isocrates’ approach to discourse “constitutive” and Aristotle’s “instrumental” and shows how the former is more congenial to the goals of contemporary rhetorical theory and pedagogy.

Ekaterina V. Haskins is an assistant professor of communication and rhetorical studies at Boston College. Her research on classical and contemporary rhetoric has appeared in the Quarterly Journal of Speech, the Rhetoric Society Quarterly, the Journal of Communication Inquiry, and in a number of edited collections. Haskins lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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