

REVIEWS OF BOOKS

PHILOSOPHY

WAREH (T.) **The Theory and Practice of Life: Isocrates and the Philosophers**. Cambridge MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. viii + 236. £18.95. 9780674067134.
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Consider a standard view of the insignificance of Isocrates for the history of Classical Greek philosophy: Isocrates advertised a school of philosophy and attracted many illustrious students to it long before Plato had any students but, after the opening of the Academy, Plato's vision of philosophy was so much more vivid and impressive that it completely eclipsed Isocrates' (and whatever became of his school) and in hindsight it seems clear that his works were relatively superficial, compared with those of Plato and Aristotle (and their students and followers), and devoid of interest to modern philosophers or even to those of later antiquity. Historians of rhetoric and politics in the Classical period still have to invest research into Isocrates' rather boring speeches and letters; but historians of philosophy need no longer pay him attention, since the development of universal logic and science by more serious intellectuals in the same period so completely overshadows Isocrates' retrograde methods and ephemeral political concerns.

Except for the bit about Isocrates founding a popular and influential school advertising his own brand of philosophy, almost everything in the above paragraph is wrong. Wareh's study of 'Isocrates and the philosophers' offers a decisive rejoinder to such a view and of the general neglect of Isocrates, in two parts.

Part 1 focuses on Isocrates' contemporaries, Plato and Aristotle, especially Aristotle. Wareh makes great progress by giving fuller consideration to the indispensable evidence of Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, which has long been recognized as interrelated with Isocrates' *Antidosis*, but has not yet been brought to bear on the reconstruction of Isocrates' own educational methods and priorities, even by more recent scholars of Isocrates. We are only fairly lately beginning to profit greatly from

the fortuitous 19th-century recovery of all of Isocrates' *Antidosis* and part of Aristotle's *Protrepticus*, as Wareh's careful sifting of the evidence shows. And yet the *Antidosis* and its immediate context is crucial, since this is the work in which Isocrates defends his educational principles and conception of philosophy at greatest length, in part by attacking the abstract preoccupations and impracticable priorities of the Academy. Aristotle's defence of theoretical and mathematical science as the heart and soul of philosophical education in the *Protrepticus* apparently went so far as to produce speeches against theoretical and mathematical philosophy in the voice of an Isocratean character which were then refuted by Aristotle in his own voice, an innovation in the dialogue genre and philosophical polemics that was embraced and imitated by Cicero in his own dialogues.

Part 2 is devoted to later philosophical and political polemics by lesser-known figures, such as Theopompus of Chios, a pupil of Isocrates, and Speusippus, Plato's nephew and successor as head of the Academy. Particularly interesting is Wareh's contrast between Isocrates' quite principled and serious *Letter to Philip* (346) and Speusippus' poisonous and cloying *Letter to Philip* written perhaps three and a half years later. One's impression of both Isocrates and Speusippus changes in the course of Wareh's careful comparison and nimble handling of the delicate historical and philological issues.

Wareh's book concludes with a brief overview of the influence of Isocrates in the Renaissance, mentioning Erasmus, Machiavelli and Castiglione, and even Queen Elizabeth. It is a big leap from the fourth-century BC controversy in the letters to Philip to the 16th-century AD revival of the 'mirror of princes' genre. Unfortunately, there is no devoted discussion of the crucial bridging figure of Cicero, even though he proves essential to the evidence base of many of the arguments in the earlier parts of the book and is undoubtedly the major influence on the Renaissance figures discussed in the latter.

There are several areas where we should want more research and analysis, such as about the nature and limits of Isocrates' concept of *doxa*,

which Wareh ably brings into relation to Plato and to Aristotle's ethics, but not to the more general and highly developed methodology of the *Topics*. And occasionally one wonders whether the standard view of Isocrates' philosophical accomplishment, which I caricatured above, might have some points in its favour, when one considers the wrongheadedness of Isocrates' attack on mathematical and theoretical philosophy. Aristotle was right to recognize this as the most important and consequential development of the intellectuals of

his age for the future of civilization. But Wareh for his part is certainly to be thanked for undertaking the necessary research and analysis of the complex historical, political and philosophical context of these developments and for bending back in the opposite direction a stick that has been crooked for a long time.

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