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The very nature of pragmatic is based on knowledge, practicality, and realism. There is most certainly a parallel between the way Isocrates saw rhetoric and the way in which Jeff Grabill experiences it, both pragmatically. To better understand Isocrates’ approach to rhetoric and values, since the two go hand in hand for him, we must further explore the mindset of each of these men. Isocrates had what some would call a rigid set of standards set for himself. Others would say strict or virtuous even, as Isocrates himself emphasized virtues and truth when it came to the way he navigated his life and rhetoric.  Both Grabill and Isocrates valued he truth and knowledge of any given subject, not just theory. Grabill speaks of what’s known as “knowledge work” (Grabill, 2014 , p 249), and I’m certain that Isocrates would appreciate this angle of studying rhetoric.

When one engages in knowledge work, they are using reasoning skills and seeing the bigger picture. Grabill appreciate this approach. He also speaks of the citizenship of rhetoric and claims that “This way of thinking concerns the study of doing boring things . . . “ (Grabill, 2014, p 249). Another way to put this: Grabill sees this type of rhetoric as one performing a public duty in their community and educating themselves in monotonous and uneventful ways as it relates to their environment, much like Isocrates’ take on doing the work and research for the betterment of humankind. Isocrates’ work was “antithetical and symmetrical . . . His late contribution to Greek writing and to later prose was to develop the periodic sentence” (Bizzell et al. p 283), and if that isn’t pragmatic, I’m not too sure what is. Isocrates held education in high esteem and placed his work of rhetoric on a pedestal.

Much like Grabill, Isocrates believed in thoroughness and truth seeking in his work. His own pragmatic approach held that he could “serve the state through the development of arate (virtue or excellence)” (Bizzell et al. p 285) and paid a great deal attention to smaller details that were meant to aid in the delivery of truth and justice. This requires organizational skills, which Grabill also refers to in his paper, as he expresses an appreciation for it.

Like Isocrates, Grabill is grounded in his process and doesn’t emphasize the persuasion that is often a part of typical rhetoric. Instead, he feels that “practical activities and infrastructural characteristics” (Grabill, 2014, p 256) are to be built into the foundation of rhetoric. He feels that rhetoric has a place in society that could absolutely make positive changes, much like Isocrates. Both men valued assembly, especially Isocrates who spent long periods of time teaching and informing his students on ethical speech writing.

Grabill is indeed dedicated to this form of ethics when it comes to rhetoric. He feels that “To do rhetoric ethically and responsibly requires significant empirical work” (Grabill, 2014, p 258), a parallel to Isocrates’ approach to rhetoric: to supply the community with knowledge based on truth and more factual evidence. While Grabill does not seem to have dismay for philosophy and only briefly mentions it, Isocrates has little room for it in his practice. He isn’t opposed to it but feels that at times, philosophy is overrated and doesn’t have a solid place in education.

Each of these men feels that students of rhetoric must learn and nurture the skill set that it takes to be exceptional, even in those who naturally possess it. Isocrates felt that “Education can make such people more skillful and better equipped at discovery” (Bizzell et al. p 298) and Grabill makes mention of a similar notion when referring to the idea that “we need rhetorical theory that can help us invent agencies required to speak powerfully at any given moment . . . “ (Grabill, 2014, p 259).  Here, we see the significance of learning how to properly deliver and provide information to those who are seeking it. It is important not to stray too far from the facts if we wish to inform and provide one the opportunity to base their opinions not on manipulation, but on truth.

Lastly and to wrap up the ways in which each of these men takes a pragmatic approach, I want to briefly revisit idea that Isocrates was hugely dedicated to civic duty. Grabill makes mention of this in his paper as well by speaking of serving the community and doing our part. Isocrates said it best when he wrote that “public issues which are important and noble promote human welfare” (Bizzell et al. p 311). That is clearly a dedication to the greater good and to the people.  It is in my opinion, that Isocrates would have absolutely agreed with most aspects of Grabill’s pragmatic approach to rhetoric. While there are some clear differences, especially given the vast space between time periods and technology, there would undoubtedly be a meeting of the minds. They might learn a thing or two from each other.

Works Cited:

1. Bizzell, Patricia and Bruce Herzber, The RhetoricaTradition, 3rd ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2020.
2. Grabill, J.. (2014). The work of rhetoric in the common places: An essay on rhetorical methodology. 34. 247-267.