

# Epicurus' Rejection of Dialectic (Cicero's De Oratore)

Post by "Cassius" of August 15, 2024 at 9:01 AM

Last night in our Zoom meeting, when we were discussing Rhetoric, we returned to the question of "Dialectic."

Thanks To TauPhi for pointing out [this reference](#):

Quote

**Ruth CA Higgins**

"Zeno the Stoic suggests that while dialectic is a closed fist, rhetoric is an open hand (Cicero, *De Oratore* 113). Dialectic is a thing of closed logic, of minor and major [premises](#) leading inexorably toward irrefutable conclusions. Rhetoric is a signal toward decisions in the spaces left open before and after logic." ("The Empty Eloquence of Fools': Rhetoric in Classical Greece." *Rediscovering Rhetoric*, ed. by J.T. Gleeson and Ruth CA Higgins. Federation Press, 2008)

That will lead us back to Cicero's De Orator and [here is a section from that general area](#). I have underlined something that we discussed last night as one of the possible reasons that this subject of whether something is an "art" or not is so important -- the question of "natural endowment" vs "ability that can be improved by practice and skill":

Quote

{24.} [110] [L](#) Antonius then observed, that he was very strongly of *the same* opinion as [Crassus](#); for he neither adopted such a definition of art as those preferred who attributed all the powers of eloquence to art, nor did he repudiate it entirely, as most of the philosophers had done. "But I imagine, Crassus," added he, "that you will gratify these two young men, if you will specify those particulars which you think may be more conducive to oratory than art itself." [111] "I will indeed mention them," said he, "since I have engaged to do so, but must beg you not to publish my trifling remarks; though I will keep myself under such restraint as not to seem to speak like a master, or artist, but like one of the number of private citizens, moderately versed in the practice of the [forum](#), and not altogether ignorant; not to have offered anything from myself, but to have accidentally fallen in with the course of your conversation. [112] Indeed, when I was a candidate for office, I used, at the time of canvassing, to send away [Scaevola](#) from me, telling him I wanted to be foolish, that is, to solicit with flattery, a thing that cannot be done to any purpose unless it be done foolishly; and that he was the only

man in the world in whose presence I should least like to play the fool; and yet fortune has appointed him to be a witness and spectator of my folly. \*\* For what is more foolish than to speak about speaking, when speaking itself is never otherwise than foolish, except it is absolutely necessary? " [113] "Proceed, however, Crassus," said Scaevola; "for I will take upon myself the blame which you fear."

{25.} "I am, then, of opinion," said Crassus, "that nature and genius in the first place contribute most aid to speaking; and that to those writers on the art, to whom Antonius just now alluded, it was not skill and method in speaking, but natural talent that was wanting; for there ought to be certain lively powers in the mind \*\* and understanding, which may be acute to invent, fertile to explain and adorn, and strong and retentive to remember; [114] and if any one imagines that these powers may be acquired by art, (which is false, for it is very well if they can be animated and excited by art; but they certainly cannot by art be ingrafted or instilled, since they are all the gifts of nature,) what will he say of those qualities which are certainly born with the man himself, volubility of tongue, tone of voice, strength of lungs, and a peculiar conformation and aspect of the whole countenance and body ? [115] I do not say, that art cannot improve in these particulars, (for am not ignorant that what is good may be made better by education, and what is not very good may be in some degree polished and amended;) but there are some persons so hesitating in their speech, so inharmonious in their tone of voice, or so unwieldy and rude in the air and movements of their bodies, that, whatever power they possess either from genius or art, they can never be reckoned in the number of accomplished speakers; while there are others so happily qualified in these respects, so eminently adorned with the gifts of nature, that they seem not to have been born like other men, but moulded by some divinity. [116] It is, indeed, a great task and enterprise for a person to undertake and profess, that while every one else is silent, he alone must be heard on the most important subjects, and in a large assembly of men; for there is scarcely any one present who is not sharper and quicker to discover defects in the speaker than merits; and thus whatever offends the hearer effaces the recollection of what is worthy of praise. [117] I do not make these observations for the purpose of altogether deterring young men from the study of oratory, even if they be deficient in some natural endowments. For who does not perceive that to C. Caelius, my contemporary, a new man, the mere mediocrity in speaking, which he was enabled to attain, was a great honour ? Who does not know that Q. Varius, your equal in age, a clumsy, uncouth man, has obtained his great popularity by the cultivation of such faculties as he has ?

After that part of the discussion, we further attempted to distinguish "dialectic" from "dialog," but we need to make more progress on that.

Is it not likely that Epicurus was objecting most directly and primarily to "dialectic" rather than to "the dialog form of presentation?" No doubt he did not think that the "dialog" conversation / back and forth style is the best to use to present philosophy - we have Torquatus saying pretty

much exactly that, apparently based on the idea that dialog isn't as clear as single-person narrative presentation.

But the objection to dialog format sounds to me like its more a question of efficiency. if Ruth Higgins is right that "Dialectic is a thing of closed logic, of minor and major [premises](#) leading inexorably toward irrefutable conclusions. Rhetoric is a signal toward decisions in the spaces left open before and after logic" then you can definitely see Epicurus more likely to be suspicious of anything that claims to be so close to "necessity" as to "lead inexorably toward irrefutable conclusions." Yes, strict logic does do that, but except in the world of abstractions in our minds, the "forms" of  $A+B = C$  don't exist in necessary ways that can easily be translated to the real world.