

The Differing Conceptions of Knowledge in Quintilian and Cicero

Quintilian's view of knowledge seems to differ from that of Cicero in some respects. The argumentation of a well educated rhetor is the source of human knowledge both contend, but Cicero adds that such knowledge is only, at best, probable but important in that it is the ground upon which a well functioning polity depends. Quintilian, on the other hand, views knowledge as equivalent to the human person as he is formed by his study of rhetoric and the subsequent actions taken as a result of his studies.

In *De Inventione*, Cicero notes that the knowledge derived from argumentation is either "probable or irrefutable" (Bizzell 275). Cicero explains, "all argumentation drawn from these topics which we have mentioned will have to be either probable or irrefutable. For to define it briefly, an argument seems to be a device of some sort to demonstrate with probability or prove irrefutably" (Bizzell 275). Quintilian, on the other hand, in the *Institutes of Oratory*, implies that the just and skilled orator, when silently contemplating a topic is also silently engaged in argumentation and will derive the purest "pleasure" from the activity; the orator will experience knowledge set apart from the utility of action (Bizzell 343). Quintilian explains that even when "[the orator] has ceased to plead, he will not cease to be an orator" (Bizzell 343). "The pleasure," Quintilian adds, "derived from knowledge is pure when it is withdrawn from action, that is from toil, and enjoys the calm contemplation itself" (Bizzell 343). The emphasis on the experience of the solitary orator described by Quintilian implies that contemplation divorced from action yields an experience of certain knowledge that Cicero would not admit. Cicero seems to emphasize that the action of the orator is necessarily corporate, for it seeks to influence minds and thereby bring about the best outcome for the polity.

When discussing the path to becoming an ideal orator, Quintilian seems to quibble with Cicero's emphasis on the orator as an agent of political change. He states that for some "oratory is identical with civil polity; Cicero calls it civil polity; and a knowledge of civil polity, he thinks, is nothing less than wisdom itself" (Bizzell 336). Quintilian's project to "form the perfect orator," though, shifts the focus away from the political arena as he notes that the "best definition" is "that oratory is the art of speaking well" (Bizzell 337). "Above all," Quintilian writes, the perfect orator should be a "good man" (Bizzell 336). He adds that Albutius, a famous rhetorician during the reign of Augustus (see Bizzell 337, note 25), "errs" when he limits the art of the good man speaking well to "political questions and with probability," for it is the business of oratory to equip one with the means to "think and speak rightly" (Bizzell 337).

For Quintilian, then, rhetoric is an art that is practiced and studied over a lifetime, not merely a "natural talent" (Bizzell 339); additionally, the study of rhetoric is, ideally, meant to foster virtue as it leads to thinking and speaking "rightly." Quintilian contends, quoting the rhetorician Cleanthes, that oratory is an art because "'an art is a power working its effects by course,' that is 'by method,' and, furthermore, such an "'art consists of perceptions consenting and cooperating to some end useful to life'" (Bizzell 343).

Our thoughts and words ultimately determine the actions we undertake in the material world, and, as a result, they constitute an art. Rhetoric is the art and the human person such as he is, such as he unfolds due to a lifetime of choices and actions, is the artifact. In other words, rhetoric is an art whose product—in the sense that painting as an art produces an image and logic as an art produces demonstrations—produces not only objects of thought, separate from the act of pleading a case, separate from all utility, but also consequences in the material world for such objects of thought direct actions, and actions shape the soul of the human person. Rhetoric, then, is the art of crafting true thoughts in the mind of the orator, truth that may be contemplated silently by the rhetor. Oratory is the art of speaking well, then, especially when one is “speaking” to oneself, according to Quintillian.

Quintillian further elevates oratory by arguing that it is not only a virtue (Bizzell 344), but also the most quintessentially human virtue (Bizzell 345). He states that if argumentation, “reason and speech” in which “man excels other animals,” is celebrated as a particularly human capacity for excellence, then “why should we not consider that the distinctive virtue of man lies as much in eloquence as in reason?” (Bizzell 345). The study of rhetoric develops reason and eloquence, so for Quintillian it is the highest expression of human flourishing. This is emphasized in the study of oratory as well, for Quintillian insists that the student of rhetoric must make writing a central aspect of his study and an imitation of a variety of authors and styles is also required (Bizzell 348). “We must write,” Quintillian urges, “as carefully and as much as we can” in order to cultivate our minds through study (Bizzell 352). By studying writing assiduously, Quintillian contends, we will put down roots that will serve as a foundation for our own intellectual flourishing (Bizzell 352).

For Cicero, studying rhetoric allows for the citizens of a society to interact civilly and to engage in political debate peacefully. Quintillian, on the other hand, believes an individual seeking to be good is the catalyst for a flourishing society.

Works Cited

Bizzell, Patricia, et al. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* Vol. 3, Boston, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2020.