

Rhetoric in early Stoicism

HÅVARD LØKKE

When Zeno of Citium established the Stoa in Athens around 300 BC, one presumably could not establish a philosophy school without offering a course in rhetoric. Zeno is said to have divided the part of philosophy that concerns *logos* into two parts, namely *dialectics* and *rhetoric*.¹ But even from our scanty evidence for early Stoicism, it is clear that the first Stoics were not very interested in rhetoric. In fact it seems that Zeno and his first successors were against rhetoric in the conventional sense, for reasons which I will return to later. This raises some big questions, in particular the question of how Zeno could encourage his students to engage in politics, as we know he did, for which rhetorical skills are crucial, at least in democratic *poleis*. I do not pretend to answer this question here. I just focus on one fact that I believe can shed some light on this question, namely that a course in Stoic rhetoric seems to have been a course in what we now call lobbying. That is, rhetoric in early Stoicism was not about learning to speak at large political meetings, but rather about learning to have conversations in smaller circles, much like the conversations Socrates had with leading figures in Athens. Thus, I will suggest that Stoic rhetoric is based on the sort of method that Socrates used. I will also suggest that the early Stoics used their fairly strange sort of rhetoric on the sort of questions to which the answers are more or less plausible, i.e. the sort of questions that Aristotle discussed in the *Topics*. What I am suggesting, in short, is that rhetoric in early Stoicism is related to Socratic *elenchos* and Aristotelian dialectics.

This means that rhetoric in early Stoicism was rhetoric for philosophers. Cicero, too, had a notion of what we may call philosophical rhetoric, but the Stoics and Cicero seem to have meant rather different things by this. Cicero's main point, as far as I understand, is that orators need to acquire a degree of philosophical wisdom in order to really master their art.² He also seems to be urging contemporary philosophers to engage in oratory, as he claims the ancients philosophers did, and to do so in order to gain some political influence, as he thinks they deserve to have. In any case, what the Stoics emphasized, by contrast, is that a wise man will engage in oratory and politics only in order to make other people more virtuous. Hence the philosophical rhetoric of the Stoics is not about using language in such a way that people are

1 See Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* 2. 7 (= Long and Sedley 1987 31E). See also Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum* 7. 41 (= Long and Sedley 1987, 26B4).

2 See e.g. his *De Oratore* 1. 84.

moved to make certain decisions, or in such a way that political ideals can be implemented; rather, it is about using language in such a way that people learn what they need to know in order to make well-informed decisions. These are strange ideas, no doubt, but I will try to make sense of it all in this article. That is to say, I will try to put together a jig-saw puzzle consisting of four pieces. First, I look at Cicero's objections to Stoic rhetoric. Then I discuss the relation between rhetoric and dialectics in the philosophical system of the Stoics. I then try to reconstruct what a Stoic speech may have been like. Finally I return to the question of why the early Stoics were so critical of traditional rhetoric, as I have claimed they were.

Standard objections to early Stoic rhetoric

Cicero's critique is harsh:

[H]ow much less refined is the Stoic style when compared with the glittering prose [of the early Peripatetics and the Academics]! ... This whole area was completely ignored by Zeno and his followers, whether through lack of ability or lack of inclination. Cleanthes wrote an 'Art of Rhetoric', and so did Chrysippus; these works are perfect reading for those whose burning ambition is to keep quiet. Look at how they proceed: coining new words and discarding the tried and tested ones. ... You say that the audience will be inspired to believe [the Stoic doctrine that 'the whole universe is our village']. A Stoic inspire anyone? More likely to dampen the ardour of the keenest student. ... The Stoics' own pronouncements on the power of virtue are poor stuff indeed. Is this what they suppose will bring about happiness through its own intrinsic force? Their little interrogations have all the efficacy of pin-pricks. Even those who accept the conclusions are not converted in their hearts, and leave in the same state as when they came.³ (*De finibus* 4. 5–7.)

Notice, in particular, that the Stoics, according to Cicero, used 'little interrogations' in their speeches. It seems that any kind of rhetorical question can be an *interrogatio*. In the language theory of the early Stoics, however, an *erōtēma* is defined as a specific sort of speech act and a specific sort of rhetorical question, namely the act of asking a yes-or-no question; it is probably this technical Stoic term that Cicero here translates as 'interrogatio'. If this is right, Cicero is saying in the passage above that brief yes-or-no questions played a key role in Stoic rhetoric. He is also saying that these questions 'have all the efficacy of pin-pricks'. This must be an ironic comment on Cicero's part, for he regarded Stoic rhetoric as having no sting at all. So it was probably the early Stoics themselves who described their brief rhetorical questions as having the efficacy of pin-pricks. (It is possible that what the Stoics had in

³ Trans. Woolf 2001.

mind is the sort of effect that Socrates had on the people he came into contact with, i.e. paralyzing them with his poisonous sting.⁴ But as far as I know, this is not recorded.) Both the yes-or-no questions and the sting are found in another of Cicero's comments on Stoic rhetoric:

Cato, in my view a perfect specimen of a Stoic, holds opinions that by no means meet with the acceptance of the multitude, and moreover belongs to a school of thought that does not aim at oratorical ornament at all or employs a copious mode of exposition, but proves its case by using little interrogations like pin-pricks.⁵ (*Paradoxa Stoicorum* 2.)

This passage is about Marcus Cato the younger, who according to Cicero is one of three 'Stoic orators' (the two others are Publius Rutilius and Gaius Fannius, both of whom were students of Panaetius, around 140–130 BC). Of these three, only Cato was any good, according to Cicero, and this was not because of his Stoic training but in spite of it. We should note that Cicero complains here that the Stoics do not aim for oratorical ornament and we should also note that he, in the passage I cited above, says that they invent new words and disregard the old ones. Thus, Cicero is also criticizing the Stoics for their rhetorical style, their *lexis, dictio*.

From these two passages in Cicero, Stoic rhetoric comes across as terribly boring: a 'Stoic speech' is without elegance or wit. I can see no reason to believe that Cicero is lying. Yet we should balance what he says against two other facts. First, Cicero may have had strategic reasons for emphasizing the less attractive features of Stoic rhetoric, namely the fact that he regarded this theory as a competitor against his own theory of philosophical rhetoric. Secondly, we must not forget that the Stoics had achieved considerable political influence by Cicero's time, which seems to presuppose that Stoic orators must have had some means of persuading people in political matters. Cicero gives no information about what these means might have been, but I will try to illustrate later how a 'Stoic speech' could be persuasive. First, however, we should try to clarify how the early Stoics conceived of rhetoric, i.e. where they placed it in their philosophical system.

⁴ See e.g. the *Meno* 80a–b.

⁵ Trans. Rackham 1942.

How to use logos: dialectic and rhetoric in Stoic philosophy

We will gain some clarity about how the Stoics conceived of rhetoric and its place in philosophy if we look at two passages. The first is again from Cicero:

Torquatus [who defends Epicureanism] said, ‘An end to questioning, if you please. I told you my own preference right from the beginning, precisely because I foresaw this kind of dialectical quibbling.’ ‘So you prefer to debate in the rhetorical rather than dialectical style?’ I asked. ‘As if’, he replied, ‘continuous discourse is only for orators and not for philosophers!’ ‘Zeno the Stoic shared your view’, I said. ‘He declared, following Aristotle, that the art of speaking is divided into two categories. Rhetoric is like an open palm, because orators speak in an expansive style; dialectic is like a closed fist, since the dialectical style is more compressed. I bow, then, to your wishes, and will use, if I can, the rhetorical style, but it shall be the rhetoric of philosophers rather than lawyers.’⁶ (*De Finibus* 2. 17.)

Many issues are raised in this passage, but I want to focus on only two of them.⁷ First, Cicero implies that, according to the early Stoics, orators and philosophers are in agreement about the usefulness of continuous discourse. Secondly, he says expressly that Zeno compared rhetoric with an open palm, while dialectics is like a closed fist. We know that Zeno used a similar hand analogy also in his epistemology. But what does he mean here? In what sense is rhetoric like an open palm? Let us turn to the next text.

[According to the Stoics], rhetoric ... is the science of speaking well in regard to continuous discourses (*peri tōn en diexodōi logōn*); and dialectic ... is the science of correct discussion in regard to discourses conducted by question and answer (*peri ton en erwtesei kai apokrisei logon*); ... [rhetoric] is divisible into invention, phraseology, arrangement, and delivery. A rhetorical discourse [is divisible into] introduction, narrative, replies to opponents and peroration. ... There are five virtues of language (*aretai logou*) – correctness, clarity, conciseness, appropriateness, ornament. conciseness is a style that employs no more words than are necessary for setting forth the subject in hand ...⁸ (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum* 7. 42–3, 59)

As far as I can see, everything in this passage is quite conventional, except for two things. (1) There are many similarities between dialectics and rhetoric. Not only can both orators and philosophers make use of continuous discourse,

⁶ Trans. Woolf 2001.

⁷ There is also the question of whether Cicero meant to say that the Stoic drew the distinction between rhetoric and dialectic in the same manner as Aristotle had done, which does not seem to be right. As far as I can see, what the Stoics call ‘the art of speaking’ consists of two parts: (i) the art of speaking in such a way as to give proofs, and (ii) the art of speaking in such a way as to reason from premises that are likely to be true, where the former belongs to dialectics and the latter belongs to rhetoric. In my reading of the passage above, then, Stoic rhetoric corresponds to Aristotelian dialectics.

⁸ Trans. Long and Sedley 1987.

as we have just seen, but Stoic dialectics is said to make use of a question-and-answer method, and we saw in the former section that rhetoric does, too. Note also that the five above-mentioned virtues of language seem to apply to *both* uses of language – argumentation as well as persuasion – and written as well as oral discourse. So a Stoic seems to have thought that he should use the same sort of language when he is giving a proof and when he is giving a speech. No wonder it was boring! (2) One of the Stoic virtues of language is unconventional, at least when applied to rhetoric, namely conciseness. And the Stoics seem to have emphasized this virtue. Not only should an orator be concise in the preamble, so as to get to the point quickly, and in the conclusion, so as not to make the audience impatient; no, the entire speech should be as concise as possible. This means, in plain English, that an orator should say no more than he needs to say in order to convey information: there should be no elaborations, no unnecessary examples, just a clear statement of the information that the audience needs to have in order to make a good decision. The reason for this ideal is simple: manipulation should be avoided. I will come back to that, but it is now time to try and get a better grasp of what a ‘Stoic speech’ may have been like. We will then be better able to understand how this conciseness was expressed in practice.

An attempt at reconstructing a ‘Stoic speech’

We have seen that Cicero had a notion of ‘Stoic orators’. But what sort of speeches did they give? In other words, what was a ‘Stoic speech’ like? How was it constructed? Neither Cicero nor, as far as I know, anybody else gives examples of Stoic speeches. But I think we can imagine how a Stoic would have spoken if we look more closely at some well-known Stoic proofs. Take Cleanthes’ proof that the soul is corporeal, for example:

No incorporeal interacts with a body, and no body with an incorporeal, but one body interacts with another body. Now the soul interacts with the body when it is sick and being cut, and the body with the soul; thus when the soul feels shame and fear the body turns red and pale respectively. Therefore the soul is a body.⁹ (Nemesius, *De natura hominis* 78, 7–79, 2)

⁹ Trans. Long and Sedley 1987.

I suggest that, given the brief analysis of Stoic rhetoric above, we can detect the rhetorical elements in this proof if we reconstruct it as a Socratic dialogue along the following lines:

- Wouldn't you agree that no incorporeal entity can interact with a body?
- I would.
- And that no body interacts with an incorporeal entity?
- That, too.
- Rather, what interacts is one body with another body. Isn't that so?
- Yes.
- Now, doesn't the soul interact with the body when the body is sick and being cut?
- It does.
- And likewise the body with the soul?
- Maybe.
- Isn't it the case that when the soul feels shame and fear, the body turns red and pale respectively?
- Granted.
- So you must concede that the soul is a body.

This is a row of yes-or-no 'pin-prick' question that together make up a continuous discourse, a line of thought. But who is supposed to answer the questions? It depends, perhaps, on the size of the audience. If the audience is fairly large – say, 10 to 15 people – then each person would perhaps be expected to speak to himself, as it were, without saying anything out loud. But if the audience was very small – say, 2 or 3 people – then maybe one or two of them could have answered aloud. It is these small audiences, these closed circles, that the Stoics were mainly interested in, or so I have suggested. Note that this would virtually obliterate the distinction between rhetoric and dialectics, speaking and teaching, giving a lecture and holding a seminar. That is what I meant at the outset when I said that Stoic rhetoric was aimed at making students good lobbyists. Note also that if this is what a 'Stoic speech' was like, then we can understand why it was so boring. In fact I think it is fair to say that the outcome is neither a piece of good thinking nor an example of good rhetoric; but it may have made good seminars, as the many examples in Epictetus testify.

Why the early Stoics were so critical of conventional rhetoric

Julia Annas seems to think that the Stoics' reason for being against conventional rhetoric was that, in their view, it is required of agents that their actions spring from the right sort of motive, not superficially or shiftily.¹⁰ Annas even seems to think that a Stoic agent must act with the right sort of motives in a rather Kantian sense, which I believe is partly right, but partly wrong. It is wrong if it is taken to mean that, according to the Stoics, one cannot perform one's task (one's *kathēkon*, officium) without having a perfect moral insight, which, after all, is the prerogative of the wise man alone. But it is right that, according to the Stoics, acting from superficial and shifty motives is bad for the agents themselves – one should live with constancy ('constanter') – and also for other people in one's environment, since the behaviour of a shifty person is hard to predict and such a person cannot be trusted. So I believe Annas is quite right to suggest that the Stoics were against conventional rhetoric, because the aim of such rhetoric is to influence people in such a way that they change their minds for no good reason.

Another way of putting this would be to say that the Stoics were against conventional rhetoric because, in their view, we should never be governed by our emotions. But we should be careful not to understand this in the wrong way. It is true that according to the Stoics we ought to avoid irrational emotions such as fear, hope, enthusiasm, erotic desire, and so on. We also ought to avoid using language in ways that manipulate other people's emotional lives, even in situations where we may achieve worthwhile results by doing so. (We could lie, but that is a different story.) Irrational emotions should be avoided for the reasons I have mentioned: since they are shifty, they ruin the constancy of our lives. But it is important to realize that not all our emotions are irrational, according to the Stoics. There are reasonable emotions, for instance joy, caution, care, and benevolence. According to the Stoics, we may well be governed by them. We may even use language to influence such emotional reactions in others: a speech may create benevolence towards the speaker, caution against an upcoming danger, and so on. What we should not do is use language in such a way that the audience feels enthusiasm rather than benevolence, fear rather than caution, and so on. In short, as orators we should not appeal to other people's emotions but to their reason.

¹⁰ See n. 9 in Annas 2001, 92.

References

- Annas, Julia, ed. (2001). Cicero, *On Moral Ends (De finibus)* [trans. Raphael Woolf] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cooper, John M., ed. (1997). 'The Meno'. In *Plato: Complete Works* [trans. George M. A. Grube]. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Long, Anthony A. and David N. Sedley (1987). *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- May, James M. and Jakob Wisse, eds. & trans. (2001). Cicero, *On the Ideal Orator (De oratore)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rackham, H. (1942). *Cicero, Paradoxa Stoicorum*. LOEB Classical Library 28. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.