

The Art of Dialectic between Dialogue and Rhetoric

The Aristotelian Tradition

Marta Spranzi

CONTOVERSIES 6



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INTRODUCTION

Dialectic and the notion of tradition

The past does not pull back but presses forward. (Hannah Arendt 1977: 10)

Through the confrontation over some topic, the one uses his reasons to strike the opinions of the other, not unlike the iron to the stone or the stone to the iron. This occurs through dispute, and although the sought truth will not spring out openly and entirely, we shall inevitably witness some of its sparks, because truth by its nature always shines. (Sperone Speroni 1740: 283–284)

This work is situated at the crossroads of two sets of preoccupations: on the one side a curiosity for the nature and workings of a tradition of thought, and on the other, a concern about the nature and purpose of knowledge reached through dialectical discussions, i.e. through the normatively structured exchange of questions and answers between qualified debaters. Aristotle's *Topics* – an early and at times rather cryptic work – lies precisely at this junction and has set the stage for future thinking about the relationship between structured debates and knowledge: as Aristotle himself states in the *Topics*, “being of the nature of an examination, [dialectic] lies along the path to all principles of methods of inquiry” (101b3–4). How and why dialectic achieves its stated aim is by no means easy to determine, though, and Aristotle's answer is quite nuanced. Aristotle's text, I shall argue, contains the germs for the development of two different types of dialectic, which I call “disputational” and “aporetic” respectively: the former, and more important in my view, consists of a rule-bound and asymmetric debate between two interlocutors, a questioner and an answerer; the latter consists of an open-ended examination of different views and does not necessarily involve more than one thinker. Concerning the relationship between dialectic and knowledge, then, I will show that in the first book of the *Topics* Aristotle explores several possibilities and provides important indications as to the directions in which different answers to this question may be sought. Coupled with other passages from the eighth book of the *Topics* and from the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle offers us a multifarious, albeit sketchy, vision of the way in which dialectic can have epistemic significance. As a matter of historical luck, however, we don't have to restrict ourselves to Aristotle's text in order to understand what dialectic is and how it works. The *Topics* has initiated a long tradition of thought, before enjoying a true *renaissance* in 16th-century Padua and being resurrected by several contemporary authors working in the

field of argumentation theory. This book is devoted precisely to reconstructing the tradition of Aristotelian dialectic as it is described in the *Topics* with respect to a specific issue: its cognitive and epistemological function.

Given the intrinsic looseness and the potential limitless extension of a tradition of thought, the task will certainly appear unattainable to the reader, and too open-ended to be credible at all. In fact, the authors to whom I will devote my attention are quite few in number, although they are linked by an invisible thread. The inquiry into the art of debate will lead me from Aristotle's development of Plato's use of Socratic methodology in the *Topics* (Chapter 1) to Cicero's discussion in *utramque partem* (Chapter 2), and from Boethius' analysis of topical inferences to Medieval disputations (Chapter 3). The largest part of the book, however, is devoted to several crucial developments in the understanding of dialectic which took place in the Renaissance. At that time, the Humanist philosopher Rudolph Agricola, one of the founders of the "new dialectic" movement, first theorized the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric and set the stage for a more thorough Aristotelian approach (Chapter 4). In the first half of the 16th century, the Aristotelian philosopher Agostino Nifo recovered what he believed to be the true meaning of Aristotle's *Topics* – as opposed to Medieval interpretations – by drawing on the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisias and Averroes which had been newly translated into Latin (Chapter 5). Finally, in the second half of the 16th century, the relationship between dialectic and dialogue was developed in the context of various literary theories on the dialogue form which, quite surprisingly, were centered around Aristotle's *Topics*. The analysis of Carlo Sigonio's treatise on the dialogue form, the most accomplished of the genre, will complete the reconstruction of Renaissance developments (Chapter 6). Although dialectic was certainly used after the Renaissance, especially during the scientific revolution (Galileo is the most famous example),¹ and its importance was often acknowledged (Leibniz is a good case in point),² reference to Aristotle's own understanding of this elusive and multifarious art all but vanished. Dialectic became a generic and flexible tool of argumentation rather than an object of study in its own right. After several centuries of oblivion, Aristotle's notion of dialectic is variously referred to and discussed again in contemporary argumentation theory: the complex relationship between dialectic and rhetoric, its sister discipline, comes again to the fore. In the last chapter, I shall discuss these recent developments in the light of the Aristotelian tradition and I shall examine the epistemological considerations to which they are connected.

These choices may appear to some as overly selective at best, and quite arbitrary at worse. In order to justify my selection of the specific developments in the tradition of dialectic that will be included in the book, I owe the reader a description of my understanding of the tradition of Aristotelian dialectic and the

criteria I relied upon to define the range of potentially relevant authors. Firstly, I shall consider those authors who explicitly reflected on the nature and purpose of the art of dialectic, as opposed to those who described and discussed the technical aspects of its application. Therefore, I shall concentrate on those passages, and commentaries to them, where these second-order issues are discussed, most notably certain passages from Books I and VIII of Aristotle's *Topics*, as well as a few related passages from two of his other works, the *Rhetoric* and the *Sophistical Refutations*. This particular focus also accounts for a seeming paradox for a book devoted to the tradition of Aristotle's *Topics*: the reader will find very little about the 'topoi', the argumentation forms which are the technical tools by which dialectical arguments are constructed and the purpose of dialectic is carried out. Despite their intrinsic importance, I do not consider a close analysis of Books II–VII of Aristotle's *Topics* – the books where the 'topoi' are described and discussed – as relevant to my project. Such a radical exclusion may also be justified by the fact that the first and the eighth books of the *Topics* were sometimes treated separately from the rest of the work: they were either considered as a general introduction to one of the possible uses of logic as a whole, i.e. debate (Averroes), or as a minor application of dialectical syllogisms (Albert the Great). Even outstanding contemporary scholars of Aristotle's *Topics* have dealt separately with one or the other of these two components of Aristotle's work. Robin Smith (1997) has translated – and commented on – Books I and VIII, while Paul Slomkowski (1997) has written a very thorough study of Books II to VII. By the same token, commentators who exclusively concentrated on Aristotle's description of the 'topoi' will not be considered as part of the tradition I reconstruct; an important *corpus* of texts using Aristotle's 'topoi' to construct a juridical logic of proof in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance will thus be disregarded.³ This approach equally excludes authors who used a dialectical methodology (or what we could regard as such) without explicitly reflecting on it. I am referring here to a long and distinguished tradition of philosophical and scientific dialogues: dialogical forms of writing are clearly based on the assumption that debate is important as a means of advancing knowledge. However, such writings do not have as their main purpose that of analyzing that connection explicitly. In other words, using a Medieval terminology, I shall focus on 'dialectica docens' rather than on 'dialectica utens'.

Secondly, and more importantly, I shall deal with authors who understand dialectic as the art of debate and/or of reasoning *in utramque partem*, with a view to advancing knowledge. This choice is in tune with what I believe – and I shall try to show – was the meaning of dialectic for Aristotle himself, and rules out other Renaissance contributions to dialectic, like Ramus' or Melancthon's, as important as they might be in their own right. This is also the reason why I shall

approach Medieval developments as an “interlude”: dialectical arguments were understood then as either a lower form of probabilistic monological reasoning, or, alternatively, the art of sophistic or purely pedagogical debate, as in the ‘suppositio’ theory. On the other hand, I shall emphasize the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric which appears to be crucial for understanding the connection between dialectic and knowledge, because of the subtle difference between persuading an adversary and obtaining his assent in a dialectical debate. This theme runs through the whole tradition of dialectic, from Aristotle himself to Cicero, and from Agricola and other Renaissance writers to argumentation theorists like Chaïm Perelman and Douglas Walton.

Thirdly, and lastly, I shall give a central place to Aristotle’s founding text as the main reference for identifying the tradition of Aristotelian dialectic. This may seem a tautology, but it is not: I shall privilege authors who explicitly refer to, or use, Aristotle’s text to inform their own view of dialectic either as the art of debate or in its relationship with rhetoric, over those authors who developed these issues quite independently of Aristotle. A few exceptions will be allowed: Renaissance commentaries to Cicero’s *Topica* contribute to the understanding of some crucial dialectical notions such as “invention” and James Freeman (2005) offers a detailed discussion of the presumptive nature of dialectical premises, which indirectly sheds light on Aristotle’s ‘endoxa’. Taken together, these three criteria allow us to follow through time the idea explicitly developed for the first time in Aristotle’s *Topics*, namely that dialectic – as distinguished from both rhetoric and scientific demonstration – is an important tool for enriching and improving knowledge. The chosen authors all provide some insight into the reasons why this is so, as well as into the conditions which dialectic must satisfy in order to accomplish its task; I hope that their achievement will appear at the end of the book as a communal enterprise.

The long tradition of dialectic initiated by the *Topics* considerably enriches our understanding of Aristotle’s own analysis, and retrospectively manages to give his short, and at times cryptic statements, more intelligibility and breadth. Taking into account the tradition initiated by Aristotle’s own text to some degree makes the issue of “what Aristotle really meant” a moot point: insofar as later developments realize and exhibit the intellectual potential inherent in the *Topics*, we can consider that it is the tradition as a whole which provides answers and insight into the meaning and workings of dialectic. This is the approach that I have taken here. Owing to the tightly knit character of a tradition of thought, our interpretation of Aristotle’s own text and the commentators’ readings cannot be dissociated. Thanks to the particular connection that a later author establishes with the founding text(s) of the tradition he considers himself engaged in, the historian may legitimately draw on the tradition’s developments in order to reconstruct its meaning. As Bob Sharples has remarked in the introduction to a collective

volume on Aristotelian commentators, “the question whether a particular position is Aristotelian or not cannot be separated from – and so may contribute to the debate concerning – the interpretation of Aristotle himself” (2001: 2). In other words, a commentator claiming to be Aristotelian has to be taken seriously even if his position is not identical with what we understand to be Aristotle’s own position. Conversely, by reading a tradition’s founding text – in our case Aristotle’s *Topics* – as an open text, namely by emphasizing the issues it raises and the ambiguities it contains rather than what may appear as its uncontroversial conclusions, historians may be enlightened by later developments in their exegetical work. Thus, looking at the tradition of Aristotelian dialectic redistributes, so to speak, the burden of the correct interpretation over a considerable number of interpretations. Thus the important question is not: “What did Aristotle really mean by dialectic?”, but rather: “How can we make sense of what Aristotle wrote in the light of the interpreters who considered his text as the founding reference of their own reflections and claimed to perpetuate its tradition?”

This may appear as a purely retrospective and whiggish reading of Aristotle’s text, based on the point of view of those much later thinkers who claimed to interpret him and above all to carry his inquiries forward. Indeed, which interpreters should we choose as reliable?⁴ And why would they, as opposed to us, possess the key to Aristotle’s work? Clearly, if the interpretative tradition is used to give us direct hints as to the correct interpretation of Aristotle’s text so as to support a particular reading against another, it is useless at best, and disingenuous at worst. Nevertheless, the history of an interpretative tradition does provide us with indications about the richness and ambiguities of Aristotle’s original text; we can then read it as embodying the conditions of possibility for the varying interpretations which have been given to it throughout history. This approach has the advantage of enriching the text by adding a temporal dimension to the structural ones. We can then hope that, by reading Aristotle’s text not only as a position statement but also as a source of interesting developments, we can construct an interpretation which is both plausible and rich at the same time. In my own reconstruction of the tradition of dialectic, I shall give special attention to its Renaissance developments, since they mark its highest accomplishment as well as its virtual endpoint.

Contrary to the view common today, which emphasizes the socio-political components of a culture as the determining factor in identifying a tradition and in fostering intellectual and conceptual change, I shall stress the importance of the written text as the basic moving force of a tradition of thought. For, unlike ever-changing socio-political relationships, a written text possesses the power of straddling worlds, uniting radically different cultures spanning over eighteen centuries, from the Greek polis through the Roman empire to the dominion of the

“Barbarians”, and from new Medieval empires to the Renaissance states. Boethius dramatically sensed that amidst the crumbling of empires and the destruction of familiar ways of living, amidst the establishment of a new religion and of radically new authorities, only the written word (the ‘littera’) had the power to endure. He wrote: “The present age does not weaken the power of the written word; even time itself, which wears all things out, only increases and strengthens its authority” (*In Ciceronis Topica*: 1041). However, besides being a source of linguistic and conceptual relationships, a text is also a material object. As such, it partakes in all the historical contingencies which beset human artifacts, from buildings to institutions. This is why the history of a tradition, such as that initiated by Aristotle’s *Topics*, depends on the conditions which affect the physical transmission of the text and its availability; to that extent, a tradition of thought is an unpredictable living object. Thus, a history which may appear so closely knit as to look like the inevitable outcome of some kind of necessity, may be, at least partly, the result of chance historical events. The tradition of Aristotle’s *Topics* would not be the same if other Greek commentaries besides that of Alexander of Aphrodisias had survived the high Middle Ages, if Aristotle’s Greek text had been known before the 13th century, if Padua had not been the active intellectual center it was and if Alexander’s and Averroes’ commentaries had not been translated into Latin at the beginning of the 16th century.

This approach to the tradition of Aristotelian dialectic will appear as more justifiable if one considers the nature and the inner workings of a tradition of thought. A tradition of thought can be identified with a series of historical and cultural events endowed with a strong conceptual and temporal continuity. In this diachronic sense,⁵ a tradition is often linked to the transmission of, and explicit reference to, a central founding text which serves as its source and provides the thread around which the tradition develops and evolves. However, an individual author’s inscription into a tradition does not solely consist in a return to the sources. Rather, it derives chiefly from reinterpretation, which proceeds through a series of direct commentaries or other forms of indirect reference and capitalizes on the text’s ambiguities, inner inconsistencies, weak points and subtle distinctions. Moreover, even though an interpretation amounts to a clarification of key passages of the original text, the commentary does in fact achieve much more than its declared – and intended – task. In fact, by picking out certain passages as deserving further discussion, the commentator rearranges the internal hierarchy and the priorities in the text. By focusing on these key passages, he establishes them as the center of attention and, by clarifying them, he carries the inquiry one step further; he thereby enriches the tradition by adding new vocabulary and eliciting novel associations with terms belonging to another author’s work. Thus, a particular question can slowly evolve by only seemingly continuing to exist. And,

much in the same way as nature gives rise to a new species by natural selection, commentators unwittingly contribute to the creation of new forms of thinking by picking out certain terms, passages and points, and allowing them to develop by using various techniques of exegesis (such as association, division, equation, translation and comparison of concepts and terms). This mechanism of transmission and creation is even more spectacular when it occurs across languages and cultures, and terms literally require translation in order to fit a new intellectual environment, as well as the changing preoccupation of a new age. Thus, for example, different translations of the Aristotelian term 'endoxa' from Cicero to Perelman underline its different associations with the reputable, the probable and the reasonable in turn, and allow Aristotle's text to raise new questions and suggest novel developments.

However, a tradition is not identical with the content of what is transmitted and also includes the manner and modalities of its acceptance. Thus, as Alisdair MacIntyre writes, "a tradition is more than a coherent movement of thought. It is such a movement in the course of which those engaging in such movement become aware of it and of its direction and in self-aware fashion attempt to engage in its debates and to carry its enquiries forward" (1988: 326). In this sense, a tradition becomes a resource for each individual's new way of conceptualizing the issues and a tool of creative achievement. Also, the sources of the tradition themselves are continuously refashioned through the process of transmission itself (Mali 1989: 159). Commentaries as a particular *genre* of philosophical writing have recently attracted scholarly attention;⁶ they are considered not only as the main vehicle for the transmission of a text and the set of questions it contains, and hence for the perpetuation of a tradition, but also as a instrument for its enrichment through the addition of new references and meanings. A commentary typically exhibits a multiplication of authors and layers of understanding, which can itself be viewed as having an important heuristic function: "The plurality of cited voices invites the dialogue between the ancient authors and modern readers that is essential to each subsequent generation's understanding of a classical text – and that can even release a reader's creativity" (Shuttleworth Kraus 2002: 22). Contrary to our common intuitions, a living tradition includes change; indeed it can be characterized as a "structured potential for change" (Shils 1981: 145).

At each important step, a tradition exists by being appropriated by individual authors and by becoming part of their own conceptions – or pre-conceptions – of knowledge and reality. In this respect, there is an important analogy between a tradition of thought, as I have defined it, and a written commentary as a literary form: as the authors of a commentary aim at identifying and dealing with a single timeless question by seemingly explicating an ancient historical text, so authors working within a tradition refer back to a founding text, not for historical reasons

but in order to answer a novel question. Commentaries, writes a scholar of late antiquity, “tend to be an impersonal product” and they “play down the intermediary contributions, while looking backward to the past in order to search for (or to reconstruct) a timeless truth, held to be definitively contained in the foundational texts of the school” (Fazzo 2004:7).

Given this conception of what a tradition is and how it develops, its historical reconstruction cannot be reduced to a static chronological narrative of all the works referring directly to a single founding text – in our case Aristotle’s *Topics*. Rather, reconstructing a living tradition of thought involves unearthing the thread linking different and distant authors, taking into account the specific reasons why each author refers to the tradition, and the particular way in which he does so. Thus, this approach is both more partisan, more selective and less chronological than other historical analyses. It is more partisan insofar as it highlights those elements within the tradition which were referred to, and used by, later authors in order to initiate further developments. Scholastic developments, for example, have been considered by Renaissance authors as a negative backdrop against which they could and should develop a new notion of dialectic, which they considered to be in the continuity of ancient Greek and Latin approaches. For this reason their writings are not crucial in our reconstruction of the tradition.

Moreover, even though a tradition of thought is a continuous process of transmission and modification, its reconstruction cannot be exhaustive. Like the geological evidence for the history of a species, the discovery and understanding of just few significant moments in the history of a tradition can provide sufficient hints for reconstructing its main development. Thus, reconstructing a tradition of thought is a selective enterprise insofar as it takes into account the way in which each author considers his own past. This is equally true reflectively: my own particular viewpoint – the meaning and purpose of dialectic with respect to knowledge and its relationship with demonstration and rhetoric – determines the extension and the content on the tradition of Aristotelian dialectic. A tradition of thought is a constantly moving target, so to speak. Finally, the reconstruction of a tradition is less chronological than other historical approaches: authors like Alexander of Aphrodisias and Averroes, whose work on dialectic became influential in the Renaissance, will figure later in the narrative. Insofar as they provided a major source of inspiration for Nifo’s commentary on the *Topics*, I will evoke their respective approaches to dialectic in the chapter devoted to Renaissance Aristotelianism.

Aside from its historical interest, the analysis of the tradition of dialectic has allowed me to single out a particular kind of dialectic, which I call “disputational” dialectic, and to explore its connection with the acquisition and justification of knowledge. The tradition of Aristotle’s *Topics* provides a historically based model for what Nicholas Rescher calls a “dialectical mode of inquiry” (1977:44). This kind

of inquiry is different from both rhetorical persuasion and scientific demonstration, and has two main characteristics. Firstly, it is realized through a rule-bound exchange of questions and answers, and thus requires more than one participant. Although dialectical reasoning requires the assent of an opponent, it is not the art of achieving consensus, but the art of turning dissent into a critical instrument for advancing knowledge. In this respect, dialectic is crucially different from rhetoric, with which it is often associated. Secondly, dialectical reasoning is particularly suited to subjects which still give rise to controversy and where the research is still open. This sets dialectic apart from scientific demonstration, which is concerned either with establishing scientific statements beyond all doubt or, in a more deflationary vein, with systematizing and teaching already established views. The latter reading of the Aristotelian ‘*apodeixis*’ was first given by Jonathan Barnes, one of the major scholars of Aristotle’s theory of scientific knowledge. He concluded that “the theory of demonstrative science was never meant to guide or formalize scientific research: it is concerned exclusively with the teaching of facts already won; it does not describe how scientists do, or ought to, acquire knowledge; it offers a formal model of how teachers should present and impart knowledge” (1975:77). Although this may not have been Barnes’ main intent, and his reading remains controversial, by loosening the privileged connection between scientific research and demonstration, his views indirectly enhance the epistemological role of dialectic, as a means both of acquiring new knowledge and of justifying it to others. However, understanding how and why dialectic can carry out this important epistemic function is not an easy task. As we shall see, Aristotle’s dialectic has been associated with a variety of roles: it has been considered in turn as a means for justifying conclusions by showing their conformity with widely accepted beliefs, and for justifying the first principles of the sciences by deducing them from reputable premises.⁷ According to a less ambitious reading, it simply serves to set the stage for serious inquiry by creating common ground,⁸ enhancing understanding⁹ or exercising the minds.

For my part, I would like to show that dialectic is linked to “invention” in the Renaissance sense of the word. This term refers both to finding and ordering arguments in order to prove a given statement and – in a stronger sense – to finding out the truth itself: justification and discovery are intimately intertwined, and both are tightly connected to the practice of arguing. In its justification function, dialectic is first and foremost the art of proving a statement by means of an exchange of questions and answers. Dialectic proves a thesis not *simpliciter*, but to a qualified opponent and through that opponent, by forcing him to assent to a set of suitably warranted premises which will necessarily entail the conclusion. The assent of the opponent is a reasoned assent, insofar as it presupposes that all possible objections to a given premise have been overcome. A dialectical reasoning therefore yields well-tested and justified conclusions, which are nonetheless