Aristotelian Dialectic

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Abstract: "Aristotelian Dialectic" is a dialogue between two persons, T and Q, concerning Aristotle's views on the nature of dialectic and rhetoric and also on the role of dialectic and rhetoric in modern education. T advances two theses: that Aristotle views dialectic and rhetoric as intellectual martial arts to be used to combat the sophists; and that these arts form the basis of Homeric education. T defends this view by examining what Aristotle has to say in the *Topics*, *The Sophistical Refutations*, *The Posterior Analytics*, and *The Rhetoric*. T also indicates a strong belief that these arts are as important for education today as they were in Aristotle's time. To drive home this point, T uses many of the techniques he ascribes to Aristotle on Q in the course of their discussion.

T: You don't look at all well today; perhaps you would prefer to postpone our discussion until tomorrow?

Q: Thank you but I'm hoping that the discussion itself will improve my condition.

T: As you wish. What is it that you would like to talk over today?

Q: I've been reading about dialectic in Aristotle—

T: Good for you! Soon we will have you studying history and rhetoric instead of wasting your talents in philosophy.

Q: I've been reading about dialectic in Aristotle's *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*; he says what it is, what it's good for, and how to do it. Still, I feel like I'm running into the tip of an iceberg here—that I don't have an adequate understanding of the role of dialectic in Aristotle's thought.

T: And you thought that since I'm training as a historian, I might know something about the rest of the iceberg.

Q: Yes, and—

T: Before we go into the Homeric fundamentals of classical education, it might be worthwhile to get a good fix on the tip of the iceberg in the first place. A more careful look at Aristotle might give you the understanding you seek. As you know, there are at least four important discussions of dialectic in Aristotle's writings.

Q: I take it that the *Topics* and the *Refutations* constitute two of them, and that some of the discussion in the *Posterior Analytics* provides the third. What is the fourth?

T: The *Rhetoric*, of course. But let us begin with the *Topics*. I see you have your Aristotle with you; please remind me of what he says there.

Q: Before we get into the texts themselves, I would like you first to consider some recent writings about Aristotle's views on dialectic. As I am sure you know, some recent scholars indicate that Aristotle wrote on the topic of dialectic to put an end to it.

T: You must be thinking of Hamblin,[1] who claims that Aristotle was so enthusiastic about the powers of formal logic that he wished to put an end to dialectic.

Q: As always, your knowledge of the field and your ability to see where I am going amaze me. But what do you make of his work?

T: There are at least two responses to Hamblin. The first is that he is simply wrong. His entire thesis is based on two rather opaque passages.[2] Those passages, weighed against everything else Aristotle has to say about dialectic, do not convince me that the philosopher sought to put the study of dialectic to rest.

Second, even if Hamblin is correct, and Aristotle did want to supplant dialectic with formal logic, we are not bound to share Aristotle's vision. While formal logic is truly one of the most powerful tools ever devised by human beings, it is a tool of limited applicability. Surely you have witnessed debates between logically skilled paleontologists and rhetorically skilled creation scientists?

Q: Of course. And in them while the paleontologist may carry the day at a technical level, the creation scientist frequently wins in the court of public opinion.

T: Precisely. Much the same phenomenon was displayed in the famous Kennedy/Nixon debates of 1960. Kennedy won with the television audience (relying on superior dialectical and personal appearance skills) while Nixon (relying on superior logical skills) won with the radio audience.[3] The point, of course, is that *we* know that formal logic is not enough to prevail in public disputes before a general audience, whether or not Aristotle did. But the stakes in public debates wherein logic alone is not enough to guarantee victory can be extremely high, and that is why dialectic remains important. Which brings me back to the text you were going to present.

Q: Of course. In the *Topics* he says:

> The purpose of the present treatise is to discover a method by which we shall be able to reason from generally accepted opinions about any problem set before us and shall ourselves, when sustaining an argument, avoid saying anything self-contradictory.
>
> First, then, we must say what reasoning is and what different kinds of it there are, in order that dialectical reasoning may be apprehended; for it is the search for this that we are undertaking in the treatise which lies before us.[4]

T: Sounds clear enough to me. Aristotle intends to teach us how to think and argue about any matter of opinion which we would take as a problem, without contradicting ourselves.

Q: It sounds extremely suspicious to me, not to mention over-ambitious. After all, no one is capable of arguing competently about every problematic matter of opinion.

T: That may be true, but it was not thought to be so in the days of Aristotle. Remember, there were sophists then who claimed to know or be able to win an argument about anything at all. They strove to appear to know everything. *They* had methods for arguing about just about everything under the sun.

Q: Are you suggesting that Aristotle was a sophist?

T: No. Merely that he was in competition with them, as were Plato and Socrates before him. Excuse me for interrupting you. If I recall, Aristotle states the distinction between demonstration and dialectical reasoning as the distinction between reasoning which proceeds "premises which are true and primary or of such a kind that we have derived our original knowledge of them from premises which are primary and true" and reasoning which "reasons from generally accepted opinions".[5] With "generally accepted opinion" being the opinions:

> . . . which commend themselves to all or to the majority or to the wise—that is, to all of the wise or to the majority or to the most famous and distinguished of them.[6]

Aristotle then goes on to explain for which purposes his treatise is useful. He says that there are three but he gives more—

Q: Listen T, you have brought up far too many issues already. I would be quite upset if you did not substantiate your remarks about Aristotle and the sophists. Just how were the sophists able to even *appear* to speak and argue successfully on such a range of subjects? Explain that. Then explain what makes you think Aristotle is in competition with them.

T: You really don't know, do you?

Q: Well, I suppose they accomplished a lot through the sorts of fallacies that Aristotle describes—

T: They did it by means of τόποι. They did it with topics. As Marrou explains in his chapter on the sophists, the sophist would work out ". . . general reflections on topics of universal concern—justice and injustice, nature and convention. By skillful manipulation any subject could be reduced to the simple ideas that the Sophists' pupils knew all about in advance—the famous 'commonplaces'—κοινοὶ τόποι—whose existence and fecundity the Sophists were the first to discover."[7]

Q: I see. It's not that Aristotle differs from the sophists in training his students in argument; the difference lies elsewhere, in the uses to which such techniques are to be put and the goals he seeks.

T: I'm not sure that it makes sense to distinguish uses from goals as you do here, but that is not important. What is important, historically and perhaps philosophically (I'll leave that up to you) is that Aristotle is in opposition to and competition with sophists. Furthermore, persons so trained by the sophists are successfully carrying off the appearance of having thorough general knowledge. But, as to how Aristotle would have his students deal with that, that we will consider later. Before we discuss the uses which Aristotle gives, I think it would be a good idea to first make certain that you understand the kind of argument which is being discussed in the *Topics*.

Q: Well, in general, my reading accords with that of Gilbert Ryle.

T: It just goes to show that just about everyone accords with anyone on something or other.

Q: As I was saying, like Ryle, I read the *Topics* as a training manual for debate.

T: Ryle says, if I recall, that this is a special kind of debate governed by strict rules.[8] Do you agree?

Q: Yes, If we allow for the fact that such rules are broken, given the recognition that there are certain persons who don't follow any of the rules which supposedly govern.[9]

T: Ryle also speaks as if such debate were a game, with his talk of 'play' and 'winning'.[10] Do you agree?

Q: Yes, provided that we realize that the stakes may not be at all trivial, and provided that we remember just how seriously the Greeks took sport in general.

T: Ryle, basing his position on the *Sophist*, claims that the contest takes place before an audience.[11] Do you agree?

Q: Far be it from me to disagree with an authority like Ryle, unless, of course, I thought he was wrong. I would like to point out however, that although Aristotle seems to be constantly aware of the audience reaction throughout the *Topics* and the *Refutations*, that the audience does not seem to be as central to the enterprise as in the *Rhetoric*. Apparently, one would be annoyed even if one contradicted oneself without an audience.

T: You won't mind, of course, if I quote Ryle's position for the benefit of *our* audience?

Q: Your memory always astounds me. Go ahead.

T: According to Ryle:

> The *Topics* is a training manual for a special pattern of disputation, governed by strict rules, which takes the following shape. Two persons agree to have a battle. One is to be questioner, the other answerer. The questioner can, with certain qualifications, only ask questions; and the answerer can, with certain qualifications, only answer 'yes' or 'no'. So the questioner's questions have to be properly constructed for 'yes' or 'no' answers. . . . Roughly, it leaves only conceptual questions, whatever these may be. The answerer begins by undertaking to uphold a certain 'thesis', for example that *justice is the interest of the stronger*, or that *knowledge is sense-perception*. The questioner has to try to extract from the answerer by a series of questions an answer or conjunction of answers inconsistent with the original thesis, and so drive him into an 'elenchus'. The questioner has won the duel if he succeeds in getting the answerer to contradict his original thesis, or else in forcing him to resign, or in reducing him to silence, to an infinite regress, to mere abusiveness, to pointless yammering or to outrageous paradox. The answerer has won if he succeeds in keeping his wicket up until the close of play. The answerer is allowed to object to a question on the score that it is two or more questions in one or that it is metaphorical or ambiguous. The duel is fought out before an audience[12]; and apparently it is sometimes for the audience to judge whether the questioner or the answerer has won. Certain debating tricks and maneuvers are recognized as fouls.[13] The exercise has to have a time-limit, or else the answerer can never win. The 'time's up' seems to be referred to in the *Topics* 161a 10 and 183a 25.[14]

Q: So, now we're fairly clear that dialectical reasoning is reasoning from general opinion, and that the *Topics* is a manual for a certain kind of debate.

T: Yes. And it should not go unmentioned that the bulk of the *Topics* is devoted to provision of κοινοί for such debates, as among the sophists.

Q: I believe that you have already made that point a couple of times.

T: So I have. But I have failed to emphasize that in such debate one is prepared to argue for and against on all such subjects. But, we will get into that when we consider the uses of dialectic—

Q: Which Aristotle indicates in the second chapter of the first book of the *Topics*:

> . . . the next point is to explain for how many and for what purposes this treatise is useful. They are three in number, mental training, conversations, and the philosophic sciences. That it is useful for mental training is obvious on the face of it; for, if we have a method, we shall be able more easily to argue about the subject proposed. It is useful for conversations—[15]

T: Hold it! That dialectic is useful for mental training may be obvious to me and to Aristotle. Is it clear to you?

Q: I think so.

T: Well, then what does it mean and how is it clear?

Q: If we can attack as well as argue for either side of an issue by applying these methods in a debate situation, it seems clear enough to me that we will be able to use these same methods later on, while working on problems in a different area. Surely, if I can relate the less familiar to the more familiar, as you yourself have suggested is the topical method, I can practice so relating them and improve those skills of argument which Aristotle terms "mental." May I continue with Aristotle's defense of the second use?

T: Please.

Q: To quote:

> —It is useful for conversations, because, having enumerated the opinions of the majority, we shall be dealing with people on the basis of their own opinions, not of those of others, changing the course of any argument which they appear to us to be using wrongly.—[16]

T: How do you understand *that*?

Q: As I understand it, Aristotle is claiming that, if we use this method, we will be able to argue against positions held by our opponents in terms of the positions held by our opponents.

T: Could you expand on that?

Q: Since, as Ryle explains, the aim of the enterprise is to lead our opponents into self refutation, we can make ourselves sensitive, by using this method, to the unexpected implications of those positions about which we argue. We need not accept our opponents' positions in order to show them that they lead to other positions which our opponents would prefer not to hold.

T: But, ideally, this method will only work when our opponents hold inconsistent positions.

Q: I suspect that if this is the case then they are wrong about something.

T: I see. Do go on with what Aristotle says in the second chapter of the first book of the *Topics*.

Q: With pleasure:

> —For the philosophic sciences it is useful, because, if we are able to raise difficulties on both sides, we shall more easily discern both truth and falsehood on every point.—[17]

T: And why is *that*, may I ask?

Q: I think it's because truth can stand up to difficulties better than falsehood; I think that's part of what truth can do, for Aristotle.

T: Why do you think that?

Q: Actually, I think it's because of something I read in the *Rhetoric* in a high-school English class. I'm not sure; you know how notoriously bad my memory is. Maybe you could help me.

T: Let me think. Oh, yes! Of course I remember it (it is, after all, part of his defense of Rhetoric). "Nevertheless," claims Aristotle, "Rhetoric is useful, because the true and the just are naturally superior to their opposites, so that, if decisions are improperly made, they must own their defeat to their own advocates; which is reprehensible."[18]

Q: Thank you. Would you like me to continue with Aristotle's—

T: Treatment of the uses of dialectic and his treatise thereon? Please, continue.

Q: To quote:

> —Further, it is useful in connection with the ultimate bases of each science; for it is impossible to discuss them at all on the basis of the principles peculiar to the science in question, since the principles are primary in relation to everything else, and it is necessary to deal with them through the generally accepted opinions on each point. This process belongs peculiarly, or most appropriately to dialectic; for, being of the nature of an investigation, it lies along the path to the principles of all methods of inquiry.[19]

T: Could you give me an example of such a use of dialectic?

Q: According to Ross, "The best specimen of an establishment of first principles by dialectic is the argument in *Metaphysics* Γ for the laws of contradiction and excluded middle."[20]

T: I suppose it would be difficult to establish rules as basic as those in any other way. Does Ross say any more about this issue of first principles?

Q: He points out that ". . . induction is one of the two modes of argument proper to dialectic,"[21] and we all remember the importance of induction in the securing of first principles in the nineteenth chapter of the second book of the *Posterior Analytics*.

T: All right. So far then, you have explained to me just what enterprise it is that you take the *Topics* to be addressing, and some of the uses which including in such an enterprise serves. You have made use of the *Topics* and have alluded to the *Posterior Analytics* in order to explicate Aristotle's own position on these matters. We have still to take a look at the *Sophistical Refutations* and the *Rhetoric*. Perhaps then you will see beneath the waves to the body of the iceberg.

Q: Perhaps, perhaps not. I still can not completely see the centrality or the importance of this dialectic of Aristotle's. Like a debate team, it may have its uses, but it all seems somehow artificial, these two-person games where one attacks and the other defends that which neither or both hold . . .

T: Maybe so, maybe not. Let's take a look at the *Refutations*. What do you think Aristotle is doing?

Q: A kind of informal logic—he's attempting to set off bad arguments from good ones. As Ross puts it:

> An interesting appendix to the *Topics* is formed by the *Sophistic Elenchi*. This phrase means strictly 'sophistic confutations,' the sophist being regarded as primarily as the negative spirit who sets himself to puzzle the plain many by the apparent refutation of his cherished opinions. But the methods of sophistic refutation are those which the sophist will use in proving his own theses as well; and the book is thus a study of fallacy in general.[22]

T: Why?

Q: Because good arguments are better than bad ones.

T: I think it's even more than that—bad arguments aren't arguments at all; they're counterfeit.

Q: That sounds a bit too paradoxical for my tastes.

T: Hyperbolical, perhaps, but true to Aristotle. Listen:

> . . . since in the eyes of some people it is more profitable to seem to be wise than to be wise without seeming to be so (for the sophistic art consists in apparent and not real wisdom, and the sophist is one who makes money from

> apparent and not real wisdom), it is clear that for these people it is essential to seem to perform the function of a wise man rather than actually to perform it without seeming to do so. To take a single point of comparison, it is the task of the man who has knowledge of a particular subject himself to refrain from fallacious arguments about the subject of his knowledge and to be able to expose him who uses them.[23]

Q: I see, behind your hyperbole, you are claiming that Aristotle is teaching his students how to avoid being misled by sophists.

T: And by sophistry, what ever its source. And given Aristotle's description of the sophist, I take it that Aristotle is trying to keep his students from being misled by fallacious appearances in arguments.

Q: Fallacious appearances?

T: I see no reason to argue that Aristotle is a Platonist who finds appearances *qua* appearances misleading. I do find reason, however, in the text of Aristotle, for holding that Aristotle feels that these questionable argument appearances (I'll call them 'fallacies' from now on) may arise without malice or sophistic intent.

Q: Show me.

T: In discussing the fallacy of mistaken cause, Aristotle points out, concerning their falling into this fallacy, "that the questioners themselves are often equally unconscious of such a state of affairs."[24] And then, there is Aristotle's own discussion, in chapter XVI of the *Refutations*, in which he explains the value of being able to figure out such arguments, whether directed at one's self from others, or whether directed at one's self by oneself.

Q: What *does* he say there?

T: To quote:

> We have now dealt with the sources of questions and how they ought to be asked in competitive arguments. We must next treat of answering, and how solutions are brought about, and what are their subjects, and for what purpose such arguments are useful.
>
> They are useful for philosophy for two reasons. In the first place, as they generally turn on language, they put us in a better position to appreciate the various meanings which a term can have and what similarities and differences attach to things and their names. Secondly, they are useful for the questions which arise in one's own mind; for he who is easily led astray by another person into false reasoning and does not notice his error, might also often fall into this error in his own mind. A third and last reason is that they establish our reputation, by giving us the credit of having received a universal training and of having left nothing untried; for that one who is taking part in an argument should find fault with arguments without being able to specify where their weakness lies, rouses a suspicion that his annoyance is apparently not in the interests of truth but due to inexperience.[25]

Q: I have no difficulty seeing why you think Aristotle is teaching his students not only how to avoid being misled by others, but also how to avoid

falling into errors of the students' own making. But, I am puzzled by certain other features of the quotation you just cited, and I would like to work through them, because I think that this is an important citation, in as much as it gives Aristotle's own statement of philosophical utility of dialectical skill. I would hope that you would lend your own fine exegetic ability to the task of interpreting this text which you yourself have now introduced into our discussion.

T: Ask about whatever bothers you; I shall do my best to answer.

Q: First, he points out that the fallacies "generally turn on language"; what do you think he means by that? I take it that he's referring to the fallacies *in dictione*, i.e., equivocation, ambiguity, combination of words, division of words, accent, and form of expression, which he discusses in chapter IV.[26] Do you agree?

T: With that, and more. In chapter XVII[27] Aristotle points out that it is more important to distinguish different meanings of questions and terms at all times, again in 177b.[28] Throughout the philosophy of Aristotle we see reflected this concern with making distinctions between the various meanings of terms. Consider, for example, his discussion of time in the *Physics*, and the various fine distinctions which he draws elsewhere as in—

Q: We have enough to discuss as it is. I see no reason to rehearse even a fraction of the multiplicity of distinctions which Aristotle is constantly drawing. You've made your point. But, I am still puzzled about the text.

T: But you do seem to be satisfied with our discussion of the two reasons such treatments of dialectical arguments are useful for philosophy.

Q: But Aristotle gives three reasons after promising two, and that puzzles me.

T: If he gave three, he kept his promise to give two, didn't he?

Q: You know what I mean!

T: I must admit that I do know; this puzzled me also. I have two interpretations. The first is this, that the third reason why such things are useful is not a reason that dialectical reasonings are useful to philosophy, but rather, how they are useful to particular philosophers. E.g., mastery of such arguments by Aristotle's students would reflect highly on his school, on Aristotle, and on the students themselves. They would then be taken more seriously, and find it easier to spread the truth of Aristotle's doctrines.

Q: This seems like a philosophical enough use to me, the making of truth accessible to the community at large.

T: A second interpretation is simply that the third use of dialectic was added by Aristotle in response to a student's question, or by a later copyist, desiring to preserve an emended tradition. A careful analysis of the Greek might reveal—

Q: You know as well as I just how tricky such an analysis can turn out to be; I'll accept the disjunction of your two interpretations until something better comes along. But, still, at most, I see the *Topics* and the *Refutations* as works on

how to avoid being misled, which might be of some post-heuristic value in coming up with criticisms of one's own philosophical positions.

T: You would say, however, that criticism of philosophical positions is central to the philosophical enterprise?

Q: I would go further and say that criticism per se is central to the philosophic enterprise.

T: Why is that?

Q: Because positions which don't stand up to criticism aren't acceptable, as presented.

T: How so?

Q: Because, in general, a philosophic position consists of arguments for positions; and, it is often the case that the arguments are the only evidence given for these positions. If the arguments don't stand up to criticism, the evidence, as it were, vanishes from sight.

T: Or is submerged, awaiting discovery, like the bulk of the iceberg of Aristotelian dialectic, which, for all I know, we have not yet made explicit.

Q: You mean, that you don't agree with my interpretation of the *Topics* and the *Refutations* as texts in philosophical criticism and analysis?

T: It would be strange indeed to disagree, given that the bulk of the latter work is devoted to the analysis of argument after argument of the type which might arise in philosophic debate, and given that the former work is devoted to the careful presentation of the core concepts or categories of such debates, and techniques for developing and criticizing philosophical theses and definitions.

Q: So you agree?

T: With what you have said thus far; but, I have more to say, provided that you feel that you are yourself not satisfied with the results of your inquiries.

Q: You mean there's more to my iceberg than meets my eye?

T: Yes, I mean that there is more to Aristotelian dialectic than avoiding being misled. Furthermore, I think that we have already cited enough passages to show of what some of that more consists, and why.

Q: You know, T, I get the feeling that you have been setting me up from the beginning for the argument that you are about to give. Aristotle spends some time in the eighth book of the *Topics*[29] teaching his students how to conceal their conclusions until the very last possible moment. This may be good dialectic; it probably keeps one's opponent from constructing a defense against the conclusion in advance. It certainly does not lack a certain dramatic quality. I have my doubts, however, about whether or not this is an optimal way of doing philosophy.[30]

T: Please get to the point, Q.

Q: My point, T, is this: I have the feeling that this entire discussion you have been arguing for some overarching thesis which you hold concerning the nature of Aristotelian dialectic and Aristotle's purpose in teaching it as he does. I feel that you know full well the body of the iceberg of which all but the tip has thus far eluded me. Furthermore, I suspect that you decided at the beginning that I would not agree with your insight unless you led me to it in a deliberately random sort of way, keeping me from having any idea of where you're going until it was too late for me to defend myself.

T: You have indeed caught me at what I was doing, but not quickly enough. For, in so catching me, you are giving evidence for what is, indeed, my thesis concerning the nature of Aristotelian dialectic.

Q: Namely?

T: Namely that Aristotle, in the *Topics*, the *Refutations*, and in the *Rhetoric* is teaching dialectic as a form of self-defense, organizing techniques and strategies from those who preceded him into the structured discipline of a philosophical martial art. An art, if you will, which is, to the defense of truth and knowledge and that which we call mind or even the soul, what an ordinary martial art is to the defense of life and property and that which we call body. And you caught me at it because Aristotle taught you my strategy.

Q: I am genuinely surprised now, T, for I would have thought that you would agree that dialectic is some form of a game and not philosophy at all.

T: Far from it. The view to which you refer[31] is not without merit, for there are many aspects of dialectical training which resemble a game. But it is error to confuse the aspects of one's training for an activity with the activity itself or with the uses to which the activity is put. Surely one would be mistaken if one inferred that boxing is whimsical activity because the training of a boxer involves jumping rope and jogging on country roads at all hours of the morning. To be sure, dialectic involves a contest, but not all contests are games. The stakes here—the care of the mind and the soul—are far too important. Now whether philosophy is essentially concerned with the care of the soul I will leave to you. But dialectic is far from a game.

Q: That's a lovely hypothesis, T; I suspect that all you say is true of your own view of dialectic. But, I am still not sure that it is Aristotle's, and I'm looking forward to seeing you defend it.

T: And I'm looking forward to defending it. You will recall, that at the beginning of our discussion, we acknowledged that there were at least four places where Aristotle discusses the role of dialectic. The fourth was the *Rhetoric* where he says:

> Rhetoric is a counterpart of Dialectic; for both have to do with matters that are in a manner within the cognizance of all men and not confined to any special science. Hence all men in a manner have a share of both; for all, up to a certain point, endeavour to criticize or uphold an argument, to defend themselves or to accuse. Now, the majority of people do this either at random or with a familiarity arising from habit. But since both these ways are possible, it is clear that matters can be reduced to a system, for it is possible to examine the reason why some attain their end by familiarity and others by

> chance; and such an examination all would at once admit to be the function of an art.[32]

Q: I see your point, T, but I still don't see where it is that you find Aristotle teaching a martial art. If that's a metaphor, I would appreciate it if you would explain it, and why you find it valuable. I would be even more impressed if you could show me a quotation from Aristotle where *he* uses it. If you do the former, you will have at last defended what I take to be your view of dialectic. If you do the latter, you will have defended your view as a reasonable interpretation of Aristotle's view. As of now, I don't see how you have done that.

T: As a matter of fact, I do happen to have such a citation.

Q: Let's hear it.

T: It appears shortly after that quote which you failed to remember before from your high-school English class; it's from early on in the *Rhetoric*, in section i of Book I:

> . . . Rhetoric and Dialectic alone of all the arts prove opposites; for both are equally concerned with them. However, it is not the same with the subject matter, but, generally speaking, that which is true and better is naturally always easier to prove and more likely to persuade. Besides, it would be absurd if it were considered disgraceful not to be able to defend oneself with the help of the body, but not disgraceful as far as speech is concerned, whose use is more characteristic of man than that of the body. If it is argued that one who makes an unfair use of such faculty of speech may do a great deal of harm, this objection applies equally to all good things except virtue, and above all to those things which are most useful, such as strength, health, wealth, generalship; for as these, rightly used, may be of the greatest benefit, so, wrongly used, they may do an equal amount of harm.[33]

Q: I suppose you even have a bit more to buttress your earlier point that dialectic helps us to separate real from counterfeit arguments.

T: Yes, from the same page: "It is further evident that it belongs to Rhetoric to discover the real and apparent means of persuasion, just as it belongs to Dialectic to discover the real and apparent syllogism."[34]

Q: I see. From the previous quotations we can learn that not only dialectic help us to find our way to truth, but that if we understand it, we can defend knowledge from sophistry. Further, we can protect our own reputations and defend ourselves and our own views in conversations and arguments. We will be able to keep ourselves from being misled.

T: And we will be able to mislead when necessary.

Q: What?

T: Recall from *Topics*:

> Furthermore, there is the sophistic method, by which we can lead an opponent into the sort of assertion against which we shall have a supply of arguments. This expedient will be sometimes necessary, at others it will only appear necessary, at others it neither is nor appears necessary.[35]

And further on:

> You ought not to discuss with everybody or exercise yourself against any casual person; for against some people argument is sure to deteriorate; for with a man who tries every means to seem to avoid defeat you are justified in using every means to obtain your conclusion, but this is not a seemly proceeding. You should not, therefore, readily join issue with casual persons; this can only result in a debased kind of discussion; for those who are practicing cannot forbear from disputing contentiously.[36]

Q: I am somehow not entirely happy with this result, that the one skilled in defending truth may defend that truth with a dishonest method.

T: Aristotle, apparently, is also unhappy about the necessity of this when necessary. But surely, you can see how one might learn how to commit a fraud by learning how to detect one.

Q: Yes, it reminds me of a certain pacifist friend of mine who learned how to unload a gun at the expense of learning how to load one.

T: And the way auditors are trained in the doctoring of books that they might be able to detect doctored books.

Q: Still, I agree with Aristotle that it is best not to become involved in a situation where such questionable action is, or even appears, necessary.

T: Still, do you see my point that Aristotle's dialectic can be understood as a martial art, and that Aristotle himself seems to so understand it?

Q: Yes. But now I am wondering if either you or Aristotle is justified in so understanding it. Many skills can be used in self-defense, just as many objects can turn our to be murder weapons. Why do you think that you or Aristotle have such an interesting view of what one might normally have taken to be a primarily peaceful enterprise? Why does Aristotle make a contest out of it? What's all the fighting about?

T: I believe that it is now time to get into the Homeric fundamentals of classical education.

Q: Oh yes, you mentioned that at the beginning.

T: According to Marrou's *A History of Education in Antiquity*, Homer, and the "Homeric ideal of the hero" dominate Greek education:

> At first sight its [the Homeric ideal of the hero] survival seems to be explained by the fact that throughout its history Greek literary education kept Homer as its basic text, the focus of all its studies. This is a fact of considerable importance . . . Homer dominated Greek education much more absolutely than Shakespeare did the English or Dante the Italians.
>
> As Plato said, Homer was, in the full sense of the word, the educator of Greece, τὴν Ἑλλάδα πεπαίδευκεν.[37]

Q: Could you tell me, briefly and clearly, in just what this ideal consists?

T: ἀρετή.

Q: Please explain a little less briefly.

T: Here's Marrou's explanation:

> The ideal value, to which even life itself must be sacrificed, is ἀρετή —an untranslatable expression, which it is ludicrous to call "virtue" unless into that simple word is compressed all that Machiavelli's contemporaries meant by *virtù*. Roughly speaking, ἀρετή is "valour", in the chivalric sense of the word—the quality of the brave man, the hero. "He fell like the hero he was"—ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς γενόμενος ἀπέθανε—were words frequently used in honour of a warrior who had achieved his true destiny by giving up his life. The Homeric hero lived and died in the effort to embody a certain ideal, a certain quality of existence, summed up in ἀρετή.
>
> Now, glory, the renown recognized by those who know, the company of the brave, is the measure, the objective recognition, of valour. Hence the impassioned longing for glory, the longing to be hailed as the greatest . . . [38]

Q: Could you sum that up in a fairly short sentence?

T: Sure: "Always be the best and keep well ahead of the others."[39]

Q: How might you and Marrou (not to mention Aristotle), connect this with the teaching of dialectic?

T: Citing *Iliad* section 442, Marrou points out "the two ideals of the perfect knight: he is to be both orator and warrior, capable of serving his lord in the law courts as well as in war."

Q: Look, T, I still don't see how this justifies you or Aristotle in considering dialectic as a philosophical art of self-defense.

T: Can't you imagine a society in which the competitive spirit is fundamental, where athletes are given the greatest of respect so long as they win? Where every time you turn around there's another self-proclaimed expert on how to win friends and influence people and become a success?

Q: Somehow I don't find that at all difficult to imagine.

T: Can you imagine what it would be like if these people were in open competition with philosophers, denying that the philosophers had anything worthwhile to teach, asserting that what the self-proclaimed experts were doing, e.g., teaching people how to succeed in their business and come off well in polite conversations, was the only worthwhile thing to do? Furthermore, imagine them denying that there was any kind of truth to seek at all, arguing that people should not waste their time with philosophy, but should study rhetoric instead.

Q: Somehow, T, with you here I don't find any of this difficult to imagine.

T: Can you see how it is that the philosopher might see in that primary philosophic tool of dialectical argument a weapon with which to defend the philosophical enterprise?

Q: I'm beginning to see that, T.

T: Can you see how, if the major threat to philosophy is sophistry, if the philosopher felt relatively secure that the truth had been pretty well worked out, and was worth defending as goal in any case, that that technique which could be used to so defend such an important goal might be primarily and basically understood in terms of self defense?

Q: I think I'm beginning to see that, T. If I can anticipate you then, formal logic would then be used for the careful analysis of the straightforward and clear arguments of the scientist and the philosopher, whereas dialectic and rhetoric would be used to introduce those sciences to the non-philosopher, and to defend those sciences from the sophists.

T: So you can now see Aristotelian dialectic as a technique of philosophical self-defense?

Q: I understand this position; I think it's heuristically valuable, but—

T: Can't you see how it makes sense out of the constant references to the "opponent" and the "sophist" which permeate the *Topics* and the *Refutations*?

Q: Well, yes.

T: Can't you see how this makes sense out of some of Aristotle's other remarks such as *Metaphysics* 985a 10-18, when he's discussing the work of his predecessors:

> . . . These thinkers, as we say, evidently grasped, and to this extent, two of the causes which we distinguished in our work on nature—the matter and the source of the movement—vaguely, however, and with no clearness, but as untrained men behave in fights; for they go round their opponents and often strike fine blows, but they do not fight on scientific principles, and so too these thinkers do not seem to know what they say . . . [40]

Q: If you must know, I did not find that remark from the *Metaphysics* puzzling in the first place. But, I do see your point; it's a good idea to remember, in these discussions of dialectic, that the Greeks took winning very seriously, and might well have been particularly interested in the method by which arguments are won. Furthermore, I think I can see, from your earlier remarks, why it is that logic is important to philosophy, and why we, as philosophers, as teachers of philosophy, are so concerned, in our introductory courses, with teaching the fundamentals of critical thinking.

T: But I've been arguing for—

Q: The importance of rhetoric, and trying to show that philosophy leads to dialectic and rhetoric. This is, after all, your position.

T: But you are going to claim that—

Q: Rhetoric is based on dialectic, and that dialectic and basic formal logic lead into the competent doing of philosophy, and that furthermore they are basic tools which protect us from bad philosophy, hence—

T: Their place in the *Organon*, or "instrument of thought".[41]

Q: Furthermore, I can see why this sort of basic training in critical thinking, and the inculcation of the ability to distinguish a bad argument from a good one, is a kind of training which would be important for anyone with a chance at a position of responsibility in a society.

T: What you are saying is not at odds with what Aristotle says in the last two books of the *Politics* about the role of education in equipping potential rulers.

Q: Given the nature of our society, such an education would seem to be most important. You know, T, I've never really considered the problems of philosophy of education, beyond wondering a bit about what would constitute the best kind of education for a philosopher.

T: That's a start, and you can see the relevance of Aristotle to that issue.

Q: Sure. We don't want to just hand the beginning student a copy of *Process and Reality* or the *Aufbau*, without any training in critical thinking at all.

T: But you might want to hand them the *Republic*, and let them practice on it.

Q: Given today's discussion, we might want to make them a bit wary with the *Euthydemus*.

T: Or we could start them off with a course in *Rhetoric*.

Q: There you go. Before we start up with *that* again, it might be a good idea to see just what we have done so far.

T: If I recall, you began understanding that the *Topics* and the *Refutations* contained rules for a certain kind of debate, and you eventually came to see that these were rules for critical argument in general, and that they are manuals of self-defense—

Q: Let us just way that I have been convinced that it is not unreasonable to use such techniques to defend certain things given the competitive spirit and the nature of the competition in certain societies.

T: In any case, you came to see that the bulk of the iceberg which initially evaded even your critical eye was the general context of a Greek society which emphasized a certain kind of winning above all.

Q: Then, carried away by the resemblance of such a society to our own and the resemblance of certain sophists to some present day charlatans and ex-philosophers, I found myself suggesting that such training may be as appropriate in our context as it was in Aristotle's—

T: Which led me to begin to argue for the fundamental character of rhetoric and dialectic, not philosophy.

Q: A view with which I do not agree, and one which we need to argue, after I have taken a look at some of the works of those philosophers, or perhaps you would want to call them ex-philosophers, whom you so admire.

T: Whenever you're ready.

Q: It'll take me a little while to get through that stuff of Perelman's, Rorty's, and Toulmin's which you lent me.

T: Take your time.

Q: I will. Now that I'm feeling better, there are a few other things which I want to get to first.

T: Whenever you're ready.

Notes

[1] C.L. Hamblin, *Fallacies*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1970) pp. 59-62.

[2] The specific passages to which Hamblin points are *Sophistical Refutations* 169a 37 (a discussion of the fallacies of verbal expression) and *Rhetoric* 1359b 12 (wherein Aristotle notes that it is error to try to make either rhetoric or dialectic scientific).

[3] See generally, Robert Gilbert, *Television and Presidential Politics*, (North Quincy, MA: Christopher, 1972) pp. 167-171. Further evidence that Nixon won with the radio audience despite losing decisively with the television audience can be found in Charles Seipmann's article "Were They Great?" in *The Great Debates*, Sidney Kraus, ed., (Bloomington: Hartcourt Brace and World, 1964) p. 134.

[4] Aristotle, *Topics*, 100a 18-24, in *Aristotle: Posterior Analytics and Topics*, Loeb Classical Library, Forster trans., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) p. 273.

[5] *Topics*, 100 a 25-100b 18, Forster, p. 273.

[6] *Topics*, 100b 20-25, Forster, pp. 273-274.

[7] H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, Lamb trans. (New York: Mentor Books, 1956) p. 86.

[8] Gilbert Ryle, *Plato's Progress*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966) p. 104.

[9] *Topics*, 164b 8-15, Forster, p. 739.

[10] Ryle, *Plato's Progress*, p. 105.

[11] Ryle, *Plato's Progress*, p. 105. The relevant passage in the *Sophist* is 230c.

[12] Cf. *Sophist* 230c.(This note occurs in Ryle's text.)

[13] Cf. *Sophistical Refutations*, 171b 20; 172b 20; cf. *Euthydemus* 287c, 295b, 296a; *Theaetetus* 167e.(This note occurs in Ryle's text.)

[14] Ryle, *Plato's Progress*, pp. 104-105.

[15] *Topics* 101a 25-30, Forster, p. 277.

[16] *Topics* 101a 30-34, Forster, p. 277.

[17] *Topics* 101a 34-36, Forster, p. 277.

[18] Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, I. i. 12, in *Aristotle: The "Art" of Rhetoric*, Loeb Classical Library, Freese trans., (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962) p. 11.

[19] *Topics*, 101a 36-101b 4, Forster, pp. 277-279.

[20] W. D. Ross, *Aristotle*, 5th ed, (London: Methuen, 1966) p. 57.

[21] Citing *Topics* I. 12.

[22] Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 59.

[23] Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, in *Aristotle: On Sophistical Refutations; On Coming-to-Be And Passing-Away; On the Cosmos*, Loeb Classical Library, Forster trans., 165a 20-28, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965) pp. 13-15.

[24] *Sophistical Refutations*, 167b, Forster, p. 33.

[25] *Sophistical Refutations*, 175a 1-18, Forster, p. 87.

[26] *Sophistical Refutations*, 165b 23-166b 20, Forster, pp. 17-25.

[27] *Sophistical Refutations*, 175b ff, Forster, pp.

[28] *Sophistical Refutations*, 177b, Forster, pp. 93, 106.

[29] *Topics*, 155b 20ff., Forster, p. 677.

[30] As does Aristotle. See, e.g., *Topics*, 155b 3-15, Forster, p. 675.

[31] See, e.g., P. Moraux, "La joute dialectique d'après le huitième livre des *Topics*," in *Aristotle on Dialectic: The Topics*, Proceedings of the Third Symposium Aristotelicum, Owen ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968) pp. 277-311. Reasoning that since the central books of the *Topics* do not include the notion of ἔνδοχον (the honor of the victor), but that the first and last books place great emphasis on it, "La pratique de la dialectique est maintenant conçue comme une exercise, une gymnastique de l'esprit, sa fin première réside dans l'acquisition d'une aptitude, d'un savoir-faire, et non dans celle d'un savoir." (p. 310).

[32] *Rhetoric*, book A, Ch. 1, 1354a 1-2, Freese, p. 3. There is a striking parallel passage in *Refutations*, 172 a 25ff., Forster, p. 67.

[33] *Rhetoric*, I. i. 12-13, about where 1355b begins, Freese, p. 13.

[34] *Rhetoric*, I. i 14, 1355b, Freese, p. 13.

[35] *Topics*, 111b 32ff., Forster, p. 351.

[36] *Topics*, Book VIII, xiv, 164b 8-15,Forster, p. 739.

[37] Marrou, *History of Education in Antiquity* p. 29. Marrou cites: *Republic*, X, 606; cf. *Protagoras* 339a.

[38] Marrou, *History of Education in Antiquity*, p. 32.

[39] *Iliad*, VI, 208; XI, 784 cited by Marrou, p. 12.

[40] From Ross' translation of the *Metaphysics* in Richard McKeon's *Introduction to Aristotle*, 2d ed., revised and enlarged, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973) p. 287.

[41] Ross, *Aristotle*, p. 9.

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