

# THE ARTICULATION OF ARISTOTELIAN DIALECTIC

*Yvan Pelletier \**  
*Faculté de philosophie*  
*Université Laval*  
*Québec*

## *Introduction*

IT'S QUITE DIFFICULT these days to understand dialectic the way Aristotle did. Whoever dares to try gets practically thrown out by the whirlpool of successive interpretation fads:

1° the difficulty of arriving at a scientific demonstration is underestimated, so it's reduced to a simple matter of good will, once analytics are discovered<sup>1</sup>;

---

\* This article was originally published in *Angelicum*, vol. 66 (1989), No. 4, pp. 603-620. It summarizes and leads to a whole book called [La dialectique aristotélicienne](#), first published in 1991, by Éditions Bellarmin, in the "Noësis" collection, and now available online since 2007, in a slightly updated version, as the third Monography *Philosophia Perennis* series (PDF file, 2.76 MB, see hyperlink above). — Note : Les polices de caractères OdysseaU, utilisées pour l'impression de ce document, sont disponibles auprès de : Linguist's Software, Inc., PO Box 580, Edmonds, WA 98020 0580 USA, tél. (425) 775 1130, ou à l'adresse suivante : [www.linguistsoftware.com](http://www.linguistsoftware.com).

<sup>1</sup> Thus Friedrich Solmsen: "Analytic cancels the *Topics*." (quoted by E. Weil, "La Place de la logique dans la pensée aristotélicienne", *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 56 [1951], 286); Pierre Aubenque: "Dialectic wouldn't have another role apart from a pedagogical adjuvant, so to speak, for insufficiently intuitive minds. If we admit that, among all men, the philosopher is the one who most partakes of intuition, we'll also grant that he's the one who most easily gets by without dialectic, nay, as a philosopher, he's entirely beyond the limitations that would make the use of dialectic necessary." (*Le Problème de l'être chez Aristote*, Paris: P.U.F., 1962, 296); W.D. Ross (*Aristotle*, London: Methuen and Co., 1923, 59); Jacques Brunschwig (*Aristote, Topiques*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1967, vol. 1, xiv.)

Yvan Pelletier

2° the need to discuss is proportionally downgraded<sup>2</sup>, reduced to a game<sup>3</sup> or to the more or less spiteful desire to appear rationally stronger than the person we're speaking with<sup>4</sup>;

3° this initial contempt for dialectic, despite the intention of benefitting science, prevents the rational fermentation indispensable to the discovery of scientific principles and conclusions;

4° one then despairs of science, which is grudgingly made uncertain and provisional like dialectic<sup>5</sup>;

5° then the whirling of interpretations is completed when dialectic is made the appropriate method for the highest science, i.e. wisdom<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> Thus Carlo Augusto Viano: "Once granted the possibility of arriving at an agreement, on issues of major importance, without discussion but only by using the mind's solitary eye, a logic for discussion risked remaining deprived of any reason to be." (*La Dialettica in Aristotele*, 52)

<sup>3</sup> Thus Ernst Kapp: "The immediate subject of his inquiry is ... a highly artificial and ... unnatural one." (*Greek Foundations of Traditional Logic*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1942, 63); Paul Moraux ("La Joute dialectique d'après le huitième livre des *Topiques*", in *Aristotle on Dialectic. The Topics*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1968, 277-311); Brunschwig, who reads in the *Topics* the rules "of a sport or game (*ibid.*, xxiii) played by no one anymore (*ibid.*, ix)".

<sup>4</sup> Thus Emmanuel Kant: "Dialectic was nothing else [for the Ancients] than the logic of appearance. It was indeed the sophistical art of giving, to one's ignorance or even to one's calculated schemes, the appearance of truth." (*Critique Of Pure Reason*, II, introd., trad. Barni, 115); Octave Hamelin: "(For Aristotle), there isn't anything common anymore between the quest for truth and dialectic." (*Système d'Aristote*, Paris: Vrin, 1976, 230); Enrico Berti: "We've already seen how dialectic properly speaking is what we call critique, or peirastic (*πειραστική*), i.e. the art of winning debates by making accountable the adversary's thesis, or by refuting him... Critique is a purely negative operation, unable to lead to any positive gain." ("La Dialettica in Aristotele", in *L'attualità della problematicità aristotelica*, Padova: Antenore, 1970, 66)

<sup>5</sup> Thus Ferdinand Gonseth ("Peut-on parler de *science dialectique*?", *Dialectica* 1 (1947), 293-304); Jean Desgranges and Georges Bouligand (*Le Déclin des absolus mathématico-logiques*, Paris: SEDES, 1949, 270p.)

<sup>6</sup> Thus Jean-Marie Le Blond: "Dialectic is the metaphysical method." (*Logique et méthode chez Aristote: étude sur la recherche des principes dans la physique aristotélicienne*, Paris: Vrin, 1939, 54); Leo Lugarini: "Dialectic... is in fact the very method of Philosophy. In Aristotle no less than in Plato."

### *The Articulation of Aristotelian Dialectic*

Dazed by this merry-go-round, motivation definitely dies out when time comes to define terms on which Aristotle hinges dialectic: endox<sup>7</sup>, dialogue<sup>8</sup>, instrument<sup>9</sup>, dialectical place ("topic")<sup>10</sup> and genus.

In order to renew this motivation, I'd like to briefly set forth in this article, by connecting them to a few commented principles and definitions, the results of an effort to specify and articulate these elements of Aristotelian dialectic. This task has never fully been done: ancient commentators dismiss it as self-evident, and many recent scholars get discouraged too quickly, considering it a

---

("Dialettica e Filosofia in Aristotele", *Il Pensiero* 4 (1959), 67); Aubenque: "The science of being *qua* being is dialectic, insofar as it cannot - for reasons which are not a sign of failure, but are related to its very essence - constitute itself as a science." ("La Dialectique chez Aristote", in *L'Attualità della problematica aristotelica*, Padova: Antenore, 1970, 28-29); Berti, *ibid.*, 58, 75.

<sup>7</sup> For ἐνδοξόν, I dislike the standard translation: *probable*, which doesn't target the dialectical matter from the same point of view as Aristotle. Instead of the suggested workaround paraphrases (*received idea, current opinion*), I prefer "the neologism *endoxal*" attempted by Brunschwig (xxxv, note 1) and "built on the pattern of its exact antonym, *paradoxal*". I'll even say *endox*, when I'll need to consider dialectic's discrete matter; the endox is related to endoxal, as paradox to paradoxal.

<sup>8</sup> It appears decent, already to good interpreters of Plato, to doubt there's more than a historical accident relating *dialectic* and *dialogue*. Thus Richard Robinson: "It is useless to look for sufficient reasons for the Platonic doctrine that the supreme method entails question-and-answer, because there are none." (*Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1953, 82) See also Michel Meyer, "Dialectic and Questioning: Socrates and Plato", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17 (1980), 281-289. There is nothing surprising in this being extended to Aristotle.

<sup>9</sup> Thus Eugène Thionville: "Instruments are only an interim system, a way to the permanent doctrine." (*De la théorie des lieux communs dans les Topiques d'Aristote et des principales modifications qu'elle a subie jusqu'à nos jours*, thesis presented to the Paris Faculty of Letters in 1855, Osnabrück: Zeller, 1965, 53) Also Le Blond, 38; Brunschwig, xlii: "we can be brief concerning the constitution of the directory of premisses."

<sup>10</sup> As is observed by Innocentius M. Bochenski: "The object of the *Topics* is, essentially, what we call the Places (τόποι). Aristotle has never defined them, and up to today nobody has ever been able to say, concisely and clearly, what they are precisely." (*Formale Logik*, Freiburg: Alber, 1956, 60)

Yvan Pelletier

chimera. These scholars give up and present us with a disarticulated Aristotle, blaming either his different writing epochs, or a flexibility bordering on incoherence<sup>11</sup>.

• *The endox is the idea that's admitted spontaneously, and therefore always or nearly always; although without perfect evidence*

For Aristotle, the human reason is born ignorant, and it must learn everything it wants to know. Moreover, to learn, the human reason must proceed from the known to the unknown. This process will preferably be connected to true, first, obvious and necessary principles, in order to provide true knowledge, determined by a *habitus*<sup>12</sup>. Yet, the matters of inquiry don't often lend themselves to such a knowledge, and even when it's the case, the principles which would lead to it are generally not available offhand. Nonetheless, our natural desire to know isn't forever frustrated, nor paralyzed in its rational process. When the evidence required for science is lacking, *the spontaneous reaction of reason is to trust its own nature*, made to know truth, and adapted to this knowledge<sup>13</sup>. Lacking perfectly obvious principles, reason admits, as principles of its process, the statements it feels comfortable with, principles which it spontaneously tends to admit, which would appear ridiculous to question, despite their incomplete evidence. We immediately recognize these naturally probable statements<sup>14</sup>, in that

---

<sup>11</sup> Thus Le Blond, 8: "There would be a serious disadvantage to putting theory and practice too close together, in Aristotle, and to perpetually attempt to explain one by the other: indeed, it would be assuming perfect consistency, laying down in principle the agreement of one with the other."

<sup>12</sup> See *Post. Anal.*, I, 2, 71b9-22.

<sup>13</sup> See *Rhet.*, I, 1, 1355a15-16: "Men are fairly well endowed by nature for truth and they attain truth most often." See also *ibid.*, 1355a21-22; *ibid.*, 1355a35-38.

<sup>14</sup> *Probabile*, by what the Latin tradition translates the *ἔνδοξον* of Aristotle, says what it's appropriate to approve, that which the uprightness appears immediately, and not what needs proof. See Ernout and Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1959, 537: "Probo, -as 'trouver bon; approuver'; et aussi 'faire approuver, éprouver'." See also Georges Frappier, *L'Art dialectique dans le traité De l'Âme d'Aristote*, Québec: Univ. Laval, 1974, 22-23.

### *The Articulation of Aristotelian Dialectic*

they bear the mark of all that is natural: constancy, regularity, frequency; everybody admits them without discussion, they represent what we expect to hear on a subject<sup>15</sup>. For this to happen, there has to be, in reason's nature, something which predisposes it to interpret in such a way the sense observations accessible to all. To make a long story short, when reason lacks a direct view on the properties of real things which attract its attention, it looks at some of its own properties: the ideas that reason spontaneously forms concerning these things and their properties.

This endoxal material presents a certain hierarchy. Lacking ideas actually admitted by everybody, reason will also consider as a legitimate starting point the ideas admitted by most, or only by the wise, and there again preferably by all the wise, or most, or by those considered wisest<sup>16</sup>. All statements, participating in some way in this constant acknowledgment, will be labeled as endoxes; then, by default as usual, statements which are similar to those, and also statements which conform to the teachings of renown experts in recognized techniques, and so on<sup>17</sup>. It's in this endox that the dialectician, according to Aristotle, will find his proper evidence. The most conspicuous feature of this *substitute evidence* is to lack a direct grip on the things themselves. When a principle is recognized as legitimate, because it's endoxal, we don't base ourselves on the evidence that things conform to it, but we base ourselves on the experience that man, starting with sense observations, has a strong tendency to conceive things in that way.

---

<sup>15</sup> "An endox is what everybody expects." (*Top.*, I, 1, 100b21) Δοκεῖν expresses the fact of being expected, and therefore spontaneously thought. See Pierre Chantraine: "Δόξα: only examples of homonyms ἀπὸ δόξης 'against expectation' (*Il.* 10, 324 *Dolone* et *Od.* 11, 344); the word first means 'expectation', cf. παρὰ δόξαν ἢ ὡς κατεδόκει (Hdt., 1, 79); hence 'what is admitted, opinion." (*Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1968-1980, 291)

<sup>16</sup> See *Top.*, I, 1, 100b22-23.

<sup>17</sup> See *Top.*, 10, 104a12-15.

Yvan Pelletier

• *Dialectic is the power of discovering any endox capable of providing a solution to a problem*

Dialectic is first and foremost a kind of natural flair which lets reason discern, when placed in front of some problem, the endoxal principles in which this problem is solved. In other words, by which endoxes one of the contradictories becomes a legitimate opinion. This discernment is a natural operation, since reason has for it a natural aptitude; but this operation is too complex to always succeed, based on this talent alone. Therefore, there is room for a rational effort which will make us aware of all the steps, as well as guiding them efficiently<sup>18</sup>. Hence, the method based on this rational effort is both science and art, and is given the name *dialectic*, like the talent and operation which it perfects. This is obviously the way Aristotle conceives dialectic, and we can see it well, among others, in two privileged circumstances: when he defines rhetorical talent, and when he presents the natural operation which is the object of dialectical method. Aristotle says rhetoric, which *corresponds*<sup>19</sup> to dialectic, *her kind*<sup>20</sup>, is a "δύναμις περὶ ἕκαστον τοῦ θεωρῆσαι τὸ ἐνδεχόμενον πιθανόν"<sup>21</sup>, *a power, for each [position], to discern the eventual belief [from which to attack it]*. The same definition goes for dialectic, under the condition of removing from the principle of solution its emotional coloration, to keep only its rationality. Aristotle would thus say dialectic is essentially *the power of discerning, for each position, the eventual endox from which to attack it*. And Aristotle says precisely that when, in the very first lines of the *Topics*, he describes what natural operation dialectic must propose itself to guide. The developed method, he says, will have to let us *discover, in any proposed problem, what can be concluded from endoxes*<sup>22</sup>. The development of this method assumes the natural possibility of the operation it wants to perfect, and reason's natural capacity for such operations (be they more or

---

<sup>18</sup> See *Rhet.*, I, 1, 1354a2-11.

<sup>19</sup> "Ἡ ῥητωρική ἐστὶν ἀντίστροφος τῆ διαλεκτικῆ" (*Rhet.*, 1354a1).

<sup>20</sup> Ὁμοία. See *Rhet.*, 2, 1356a31.

<sup>21</sup> *Rhet.*, 1355b25-26.

<sup>22</sup> See *Top.*, I, 1, 100a19-20: "Συλλογίζεσθαι περὶ παντὸς τοῦ προτεθέντος προβλήματος ἐξ ἐνδόξων." Συλλογίζεσθαι is seeing a relation of consequence between statements, making them principles and conclusion.

### *The Articulation of Aristotelian Dialectic*

less awkward)<sup>23</sup>. And most radically, dialectic is this natural power. An interpreter, forgetful of this, will trip himself up in apparently contradictory statements which he'll be unable to reconcile: dialectic is inborn, dialectic is acquired; the dialectician makes conjectures, dialectic is a science. He will then be left with the option of blaming an illogical Aristotle, or making a more or less consistent bundle of incompatible qualities<sup>24</sup>.

• *The use of endoxes requires a dialogue proceeding by requests and answers*

The adoption of dialectical propositions is not based on their evidence, but on their conformity to what we expect about the subject, and which will therefore be admitted spontaneously, without discussion. Thus, such propositions require two distinct operations to *conceive* them and *discern* their legitimacy as endoxes. These two operations depend on quite different qualities: conceiving will call into play imagination and memory, but discerning will call upon common sense and experience. Moreover, these operations will generate two irreducible functions: a *request*, since every suggested proposition will require rational assent; and an *answer*, since each reply will grant, refuse or qualify this requested assent. In a spontaneous discussion, obviously, each speaker doesn't identify himself in a permanent and rigid way to one of those two functions. In the heat of the discussion, each one tries to present his arguments as he forms them, leading to a constant swapping of functions. Nevertheless, for Aristotle, one thing remains natural and unchangeable: whoever presents an endoxal argument functions as a requester, and calls into play the answering function of the person he's talking to. Art will imagine additional rules and will settle on various devices to better insure the investigation's order and efficiency. These rules will vary depending on the different goals

---

<sup>23</sup> See *Rhet.*, I, 1, 1354a2-11.

<sup>24</sup> Thus: "By «methodological character of dialectic», I mean the fact it's not turned toward knowing, but toward doing, toward producing; in summary, it's not a theoretic faculty, i.e. a science, but a poetic faculty, i.e. an art (τέχνη)." (Berti,52) In the same way: "Thus dialectic is a δύναμις enabling argumentation, but it remains a method, hence a system of laws and rules." (Walter A. De Pater, *Les Topiques d'Aristote et la dialectique platonicienne, méthodologie de la définition*, Fribourg: St-Paul, 1965, 139)

motivating the discussion: threshing out the issue, simple exercise, power struggle. Sometimes we might assign to each speaker a permanent function; set a time limit; agree to obtain assent for the propositions as we go along, or just once the whole argument is made; start replies with canned expressions (*concedo, nego, distingo*, etc.)<sup>25</sup>. But beneath these obvious devices, Aristotle attributes the necessity of request and answer to the very nature of reason and the endoxal matter, whereas he grounds in the very nature of scientific principles the absence of such necessity, and even the impossibility of such requests and answers<sup>26</sup>.

• *The endox fatally generates conflict*

Aristotle calls the talent which enables reason to proceed from endoxes: *διαλεκτική*, a *power to discuss, to talk both ways*. This is because the principles, which spring from the reason's natural inclination for truth and its natural dislike for falsehood, are not infallible: they are sometimes mistaken. The relationship nature puts between reason and truth is not such that it makes reason

---

<sup>25</sup> It's the distinction between the common, socratic and scholastic methods made in most logic manuals. See among others Ignacio Angelelli, "The Techniques of Disputation in the History of Logic", *The Journal of Philosophy* 57 (1970), 800-815; Marcello a Puerto Jesu, *Cursus philosophiae scholasticae ad mentem Ang. Doct. S. Thomae Aquinatis*, Burgis: El Monte Carmelo, 1922, 135: "The form, moreover, or the instrument of this intellectual combat, can have three modes of presentation, i.e. *common, socratic* and *sylogistical*. The *common* mode consists in the freeform speech of Orators; there, nonetheless, many errors easily hide themselves, especially when the dissertations and the rhetorical speeches drag on. The *socratic* mode proceeds by requests and answers, like a dialogue... But the kind of discussion which is really vigorous is the *sylogistical*, or *scholastic* form, which proposes as syllogisms any science's matter."

<sup>26</sup> "Teaching and discussing (*διαλέγεσθαι*) are different: he who teaches, must not ask (*δέει μὴ ἐρωτᾶν*) but himself make obvious, whereas the other, he has to ask." (*Soph. Elen.*, 10, 171b1-2) He who doesn't see that, says Aristotle in the same place, ignores the difference between dialectic and teaching, by what Aristotle means science. See also *ibid.*, 11, 172a18: "Ἡ δὲ διαλεκτικὴ ἐρωτητικὴ ἐστίν, *dialectic, by nature, asks*." See also *ibid.*, 34, 183b1ss., an often misinterpreted text, where Aristotle nevertheless insists on what is required by dialectical preparedness: training to answer, as much as training to ask.



### *The Articulation of Aristotelian Dialectic*

unable to err; on the contrary, it errs a lot<sup>27</sup>, and sometimes even in what's endoxal, i.e. generally admitted. The consequence is that, proceeding from such principles, we'll almost always be able to validate and invalidate every proposed problem<sup>28</sup>. Indeed, from the false anything follows. Thus the endox inevitably leads to a situation of conflict, of aggressivity<sup>29</sup>. To the first request, which deals directly with the problem, the responder will produce, more or less arbitrarily, an answer which will boil down to a position to defend. All subsequent requests will target propositions needed to destroy this initial position<sup>30</sup>. Because of this, a dialectic argument will be appropriately called *an attack*<sup>31</sup>, and the requester and responder will be respectively called the *attacker* and the *defender*.

During the investigation, the requester will be more effective by attacking since, proceeding from the outside for lack of proper evidence, he'll gain more by trying to destroy rather than by trying to confirm (just like a test where the strength of an object or the crash-resistance of a car is checked)<sup>32</sup>. The responder will, on his part, be more effective by defending, in order to guarantee that any attack against the position will cause him as much damage as possible<sup>33</sup>. *The attack with therefore be, in the end, their common task*<sup>34</sup>: if successful, it will lead to rejecting the initial position; if not, it will persuade to keep it, as conforming better to the endoxal basis. This aggressive process, in addition to the fact that an exhaus-

---

<sup>27</sup> See *De Anima*, III, 3, 427b1-2.

<sup>28</sup> See *Top.*, VIII, 11, 161a25ss.

<sup>29</sup> "Reasonings are taken from endoxes; now many endoxal things are contrary to each other." (*Rhet.*, II, 25, 1402a33-34)

<sup>30</sup> "It belongs to the requester to lead reason so as to make the responder say what is most paradoxal inside what the position makes necessary." (*Top.*, VIII, 4, 159a18-20)

<sup>31</sup> "The dialectical syllogism is an attack (*ἐπιχειρήματα*)." (*Top.*, VIII, 11, 162a16)

<sup>32</sup> "As elsewhere it's easier to destroy than build, so it's easier in these matters to destroy than to confirm." (*Top.*, VII, 5, 154a30-32) (*Top.*, VII, 5, 154a30-32)

<sup>33</sup> "It behooves the responder that the impossible or the paradoxal obviously follow, not because of him, but because of the position." (*Top.*, VIII, 4, 159a20-22)

<sup>34</sup> See *Top.*, VIII, 11, 161a19ss., where Aristotle presents the dialectical act, attacking a position (*ἐπιχειρεῖν τὴν θέσιν*), as a collaboration (*κοινὸν ἔργον*) which neither of the two, requester or responder, can accomplish alone.

tive investigation will try, one after the other, both contradictory initial positions, makes even more inevitable the intervention of two distinct speakers. Even though it's quite possible for one person to discover and judge, one after the other, the principles capable of invalidating both contradictories of the problem, it remains far easier and more natural for two persons. Each one can then fairly naturally discover the propositions against the contradictory defended by the other speaker, and discover the objections against the propositions that attack the contradictory which he initially took as his position. But it's far more difficult to argue and give oneself rebuttals in both directions<sup>35</sup>. It's just too easy to get the impression you're attacking yourself.

• *The fundamental dialectic intention is the investigation of a problem; to this is necessarily added the testing of the ill-intentioned speaker.*

The driving intention behind all dialectic activity is solving a problem. We don't know which statement's contradictory we should adopt, and we don't have true and evident principles which would give us a conclusive discernment. Therefore, we seek out which contradictory is least well connected to the endoxal basis, so we can then reject it and adopt the other contradictory as an opinion. This is the fundamental dialectic situation, and we can simply call *dialectic*<sup>36</sup> the talent as well as the method enabling us to go about it; or *discovery* (εὕριστική), since the object of the exercise is to discover the premisses and arguments which most efficiently lead the initial position into a paradox<sup>37</sup>.

But in this attack on one of the contradictories, the two speakers more or less give in to the temptation of making personal, right from the start, one of the contradictories of the problem. For the responder, it's the initial position, and for the requester it's his aim. They then propose to themselves, as an immediate intention,

---

<sup>35</sup> "Whereas solitary thought risks getting lost or being satisfied too quickly, the speaker's objections are, on top of a means of verification, a "spur", which moves the discussion forward." (Aubenque, *La Dialectique chez Aristote*, 11)

<sup>36</sup> Ἡ διαλεκτικὴ καθ' αὐτήν. (See *Soph. Elen.*, 34, 183a39)

<sup>37</sup> Δεῖ δὲ πρῶτον ... τὸν τόπον εὔρεῖν ὄθεν ἐπιχειρητέον" (*Top.*, VIII, 1, 155b4-5)

### *The Articulation of Aristotelian Dialectic*

the victory over the other speaker. If both speakers are overpowered simultaneously by this temptation, we leave dialectic to enter a *quarrelsome* (ἐριστική) or sophistical situation. If, on the contrary, one of the participants maintains the dialectic concern, he will add probation of the other participant to his basic intention. Some of his acts, while tending to destroy the initial position, or to object to the requests, will also attempt to reveal the intentions of the other speaker. For example, the requester will hide as best he can which contradictory he personally prefers, so the responder will grant or refuse more freely depending on the endoxal character<sup>38</sup>; the responder will let the requester commit himself ridiculously to dead ends, by not flagging irrelevant propositions<sup>39</sup>. In this context, rather than a matter of pure and simple *dialectic*, it will be a matter of *probative* (πειραστική<sup>40</sup>), concerning the talent and the enabling method; and of *disposition* (τάξις<sup>41</sup>), since the object is to feel which layout of investigative material will better confound the ill-disposed speaker.

- *The instrument is the operation for discovering endoxes*

The dialectician acts more strictly as such when he grasps an inference between immediate endoxes and the proposed problem. That's dialectical discovery, strictly speaking. But this operation absolutely requires another one: first, we need to find the endoxes related to the problem's terms. So we must develop a constant attention and a great skill at recognizing, for any subject, the propositions which satisfy the endoxal requirement. This is a natural and very simple operation, since it's recognizing, in each suggested statement, the presence or absence of the unmistakable features of endoxal matter: is it admitted by all? by most? by the wise? etc... On top of this recognition process, this operation also collects and sorts the endoxes, but as I've said, it doesn't go as far as the actual

---

<sup>38</sup> See *Top.*, VIII, 1-3.

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> "There are four genera for reasons produced in the dialogue; there are the didacticals and the dialecticals and the probatories and the quarrelsomes." (*Soph. Elen.*, 2, 164a38-39) See also: *ibid.*, 8, 169b25; 11, 171b4-5; 34, 183a37-b1.

<sup>41</sup> See *Top.*, VIII, 1, 155b3.

discovery of the dialectical argument. In fact, the former is so indispensable to the latter that it acts as its proper instrument.

This discovery of endoxal matter is spread over several *steps*, which we'll consider for more clarity as different instruments, despite their profound unity (since at each step we discover endoxes)<sup>42</sup>. We first notice the endoxal character of various statements on various subjects, and list these statements in the most orderly way possible, according to the kind of problem, the universality of the subject, the intimacy of the predicate. That's somewhat the core of the dialectical instrument or, as Aristotle wills it, *the first instrument*. But flesh is added to this growing skeleton of separate endoxes. Articulations appear, which give to the gathered endoxal matter a form more nearly able to enter into the composition of arguments. We notice the same predicate attached to different subjects: that's *discovery of likenesses*<sup>43</sup>, a specially useful instrument in the discussion of identities, definitions or genera, and during the search for inductions. We then notice that some of these subjects, normally represented through the same predicates, are sometimes given different predicates: it's the *discovery of differences*<sup>44</sup>; which also has an important role in the discussion of definitions, especially to search for specific differences. Finally, we must also observe that all likenesses are not deep. Often, the association of the same predicate to many subjects expresses each one in reference to a different nature: it's the *distinction of homonyms*<sup>45</sup>, of realities which we've given the same name, based on some analogy or similarity, without there being a true community of nature. This skill at noticing the more superficial character of such likenesses, lets us clarify the discussion by making sure each speaker is talking about the same problem, and by avoiding arguments based on false appearances. Those are three other parts or steps to the dialectician's instrumental operation, all ordered to the discovery of endoxal matter necessary for the argumentation.

---

<sup>42</sup> See *Top.*, I, 13, 105a25-33.

<sup>43</sup> Ἡ τοῦ ὁμοίου σχέσις (*Top.*, 105a25).

<sup>44</sup> Τὸ τὰς διαφορὰς εὐρεῖν (*Top.*, 105a24).

<sup>45</sup> Τὸ ποσαχῶς ἕκαστον λέγεται δύνασθαι διελεῖν (*Top.*, 105a23-24).

## *The Articulation of Aristotelian Dialectic*

• *The dialectical place is the necessary consequence of a logical relation on the eventual composition of its terms with others*

We still need to describe the dialectician's fundamental operation: *the discovery of inferences*<sup>46</sup>. It's a simple operation, a judgment based on criteria knowable and observable by all, yet at very diverse degrees of distinction. The dialectician doesn't see this inference (which shapes his argument) using a direct view on the things strictly concerned by the problem at hand; rather *he bases himself on his internal experiences of natural affinities and repugnances between the types of concepts his reason must form to know these things*.

For example, it's commonly known that what we represent ourselves as defining, and what we represent ourselves as thus defined, can always be predicated of the same subjects and be subjects of the same predicates (*Definitio et definitum attribuuntur et subjiciuntur eisdem*). Also of common experience: what we represent ourselves as contraries can only be attributed to subjects themselves seen as contraries (*Contraria contrariis attribuuntur*). All dialectical places consist in such properties of concepts. To sum up, *each relation discovered between known things* (genus to species, supreme genus to subordinate genus, like to like, cause to effect) *has some rigorous implications for the relations that each one of these terms can have or not with any other term*. The dialectical inference judgment is based on the more or less blurred experience of such implications. These implications constitute the places where the dialectician obtains all his arguments, the ultimate elements where these arguments are resolved, the criteria used to judge, among the gathered endoxes, those from which his aim can be inferred<sup>47</sup>.

---

<sup>46</sup> The argument, an attack against the initial position on the problem, fits *in* the inference; thus the inference's discovery will be assimilated to the discovery of the *place* from where the attack will start. "We must first ... discover the place from where we must attack." (*Top.*, VIII, 1, 155b4-5) See Cicero, *Topica*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> For a more detailed explanation, as well as examples of many places in actual arguments, see my previous article: "Pour une définition claire et nette du lieu dialectique", *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 41 (1985), 403-415.

Yvan Pelletier

- *The species is a place incarnated in the more determined matter of a genus of problems*

Fundamentally, the attack is prepared by choosing endoxes related to the problem's terms and made available through instruments. Then, among those endoxes, we choose those from which we can infer the contradictory of the initial position. The criteria for this inference judgement are the places, which are naturally acquired experience (eventually completed methodically) of the possible relations between concept types. Nevertheless, the dialectician's experience can be honed; the common criteria supplied by each place can "incarnate itself", so to speak. For example, the dialectician or the orator discuss the problem of the preferable, or the useful, or the just. In the beginning, they choose their argument's matter from the propositions gathered by the instrumental investigation, by looking in a common way to their "predication experience". In other words, their experience of predications which can be made with a definition, a genus, a species, a proper, a cause, a contrary. But, after much debate on this problem, they'll eventually start using a more precise experience of the more proper predications which can be made with such an *endoxal definition* of the preferable, or the useful, or the just; the endoxal genus of the preferable, or the useful, or the just; and so on.

The place from which proceeds the discovery of their argument is no longer commonly: *Contraries have contrary attributes*, but: *That whose contrary is to be avoided, is useful*. Or: *That whose contrary is harmful, is useful*. Etc... This is a more immediate preparation for the discussion, and the dialectician as well as the orator will aim for it as much as possible. More so, *both will only rely on common places as such, in so far as they are less well trained and prepared as dialectician or orator*. Hence Aristotle will say, thinking about the gifted and mature orator: "Most of the enthymemes are discovered based on these particular and proper species, and far less of them based on common places<sup>48</sup>."

---

<sup>48</sup> *Rhet.*, I, 2, 1358a26.

### *The Articulation of Aristotelian Dialectic*

- *An adequate place-based method depends on a scope determined for its dialectical interest*

Nevertheless, this proximate preparation is only possible for frequently discussed problems. Or for those we can at least anticipate we'll have to discuss. To be the object of a method, *this preparation assumes we'll somehow determine the proximate scope of the dialectical interest*. The rhetorician succeeds fairly well for his matter, when he discovers that all oratory debates generally boil down to a few determined problems. Ultimately: is this action useful? or just? or beautiful? or the contrary?<sup>49</sup> Beforehand: is this action possible? has it occurred? is it important? or the contrary?<sup>50</sup> is this action a principle of joy? of sadness?<sup>51</sup> is this orator benevolent? honest? prudent?<sup>52</sup> Given this limited list, the rhetorician can fairly easily provide, to the apprentice-orator, a sufficient list of species from which he'll be able to proximately choose his enthymemes. But can the dialectician find such analogous scopes? The three genera - natural, moral, rational - to which Aristotle reduces all discussion objects, are not characterized, like the rhetorical genera, by a unique subject and predicate. Except for the *moral genus*, where we always seek to decide *whether such an action is preferable*, or the contrary. There, we can certainly methodically provide to the dialectician-in-training a fitting list of appropriate species<sup>53</sup>. But how can natural and rational problems be scoped out? We need to find a more universal starting point.

When discussing a problem, we always tend to judge the knowledge that a predicate claims to give us about a subject. We do this through two types of concerns: 1° *does the predicate really make the subject known?* is it really predicated in fact? 2° if so, *what knowledge does the predicate give us of the subject?* direct or indirect? confused or distinct? In summary, in the progress toward the distinct representation of each thing in its specific nature, we must both form more and more perfect conceptions of this thing, and keep in mind the degree of distinction of each one of these

---

<sup>49</sup> See *Rhet.*, 3, 1358b20ss.

<sup>50</sup> See *Rhet.*, II, 18, 1391b28ss.

<sup>51</sup> See *Rhet.*, 1, 1378a20.

<sup>52</sup> See *Rhet.*, 1378a8.

<sup>53</sup> See *Top.*, III.

Yvan Pelletier

conceptions. Now we can roughly distinguish four "steps" in this pathway, depending on whether we'll represent the thing:

1° through some foreign nature to which it's related;

2° through its nature, but seen confusedly enough to also be predicated of something else specifically different;

3° through its own nature, distinguished in some proper effect;

4° through its own nature, distinguished in its ultimate essential principles.

Thus trying to find out with what intimacy a given predicate makes a subject known, will boil down to one of four fairly determined genera of problems: problems *of the accident*, *of the genus*, *of the proper* and *of the definition*<sup>54</sup>. Given such determined *logical problems*, it's conceivable to supply a proximate criteria for argument selection. Aristotle believes he's doing this in Books IV to VII of his *Topics*<sup>55</sup>.

We can also recognize some scopes for the first question's discussion: "Does the predicate actually belong to the subject? does it really make it known?", which characterizes this other genus of so-called *natural* problems. Indeed, any concept able to make a subject known - accidentally, generically, properly or through its definition - determines in a way one of the *ten supreme genera from which proceeds the knowledge of any nature*. In a dialectical method, we could propose the species, i.e. the proper places used to discern which supreme genus, and which of its immediate inferiors, are appropriate for the adequate expression of a given subject's nature. Aristotle does something quite similar in his *Predications*, such that they have sometimes been called *Prototopics*<sup>56</sup>. But the dialectician needs more: he would also need the species required to select arguments in the discussion of problems, where any inferior

---

<sup>54</sup> See *Top.*, I, 4.

<sup>55</sup> To which we have to add the beginning of *Top.*, II, 2. This chapter's first place precisely targets the problem of the accident, in its strict conception of rational problem; it's actually a matter of saying that the predicate makes known as an accident if it doesn't make known as a genus, a proper or a definition, which is another way of referring to the places of Books IV to VII.

<sup>56</sup> See Porphyry, *In Aristotelis categorias commentarium*, Berlin: G. Reimer (*Commentaria in Aristotelem graeca*, IV, 1), 1887, *prooemio*, 56, 18.



### *The Articulation of Aristotelian Dialectic*

of these supreme genera can function as a predicate. But that would be an immense enumeration, far beyond the development of a method, which must be limited. So the logician must be content, for natural problems, with supplying *common places* for argument selection *in any question where we need to judge the inherence of a predicate to a subject*. Aristotle dedicates, to this enumeration of common places, his second Book of the *Topics*.

#### *Conclusion*

I'll conclude by saying that, under the condition of accepting the principles I've just presented, we will not consider Aristotelian dialectic as a superficial fashion, or a purposeless game, or a guide to vain quarreling. On the contrary, we'll see it as the natural and inescapable way of leading an investigation. Do we have a problem? Spontaneously we seek, among the relevant endoxes, those which force us to conclude one of the contradictories, because of the implied concept's properties. Facilitating this operation requires, as Aristotle helps us with his *Topics*, the development of skills to discern the endox<sup>57</sup>, to find rational affinities upon which inferences are based<sup>58</sup>, to make a running classification of the discovered endoxes and their deduced inferences<sup>59</sup> and to adequately phrase the requests and responses of the dialogue in which they're used<sup>60</sup>.

---

<sup>57</sup> The treatise of instrumental enquiry: *Top.*, I, 13-18.

<sup>58</sup> The treatise of places: *Top.*, II-VII. To which we have to add the places of homonymy: *Top.*, I, 15.

<sup>59</sup> The treatise of rational geography: *Top.*, I, 4-12.

<sup>60</sup> The treatise of dialogical functions: *Top.*, VIII.