

Jacques Brunschwig
 Aristotle on Arguments without
 Winners or Losers*

Die *Topik* des Aristoteles wird häufig als ein Lehrbuch der dialektischen Methode verstanden; dank ihrer Hilfe, so mag sich mancher Leser erhoffen, wird er, unabhängig vom Gegenstand, aus allen Diskussionen als Sieger hervorgehen. Dieses Bild ist in verschiedener Hinsicht zu korrigieren: 1) die Gruppe von Problemen, die Aristoteles für dialektisch diskutierbar hält, ist durch eine Anzahl von Punkten eingeschränkt; 2) die dialektische Debatte, so wie er sie versteht, folgt strikten Regeln, von denen die wichtigste die Rollenteilung in Fragenden und Antwortenden ist. So bestimmt, stellt sich die dialektische Debatte grundsätzlich als eine akademische Übung dar, jenseits aller Leidenschaften und Aggressionen. Ein Vergleich mit der sokratischen Praxis des Dialogs erlaubt es, die Beschreibung der von Aristoteles unternommenen Bemühung um die Entdramatisierung der Dialektik zu verdeutlichen. Eine kursive Untersuchung des Buches VIII der *Topik* offenbart schließlich die Sorgfalt, mit der Aristoteles, trotz der inhärenten Schwierigkeit seines Projekts, versucht hat, die Dialektik von jeglicher »agonistischen« Dimension zu befreien und der dialektischen Debatte den Status einer Diskussion ohne Sieger und Besiegten zu verleihen.

Duo, duellum, bellum, bis:
 la guerre, c'est ce qu'on
 fait quand on est deux.
 Charles Péguy.

Aristotle's *Topics* have a mainly practical purpose: they aim at imparting to their reader a general ability to discuss any subject whatsoever, rather than any specific knowledge about a particular subject. »The purpose of the present treatise,« Aristotle says at the very beginning, »is to find out a method on the basis of which we shall be able to reason, from accepted premisses, about any subject which might occur, and also, when standing up for some assertion, we shall avoid saying anything which might be contrary to

* In preparation of this paper I have greatly benefited from comments on an earlier draft by Günther Patzig, and from discussion with members of the audience (particularly Gisela Striker, Konrad Cramer and Michaël Frede) in response to a longer version delivered at the University of Göttingen in June 1985. Percy Tannenbaum kindly helped me to make my English better, or less bad. I am grateful to them all.

it«. This sounds attractive: everybody would be delighted to be the winner in any discussion he might take part in. However, it would be a mistake to think that any reader of this handbook of dialectical training, in whatever time and place he may live, could extract from it the all-embracing dialectical ability he might expect from Aristotle's words. There are a number of reasons why it is so.

First, the range of problems to be discussed on the basis of Aristotle's method is not as totally unlimited as he says. An initial limitation is that he only considers problems with general terms: mainly universal problems (of the type: is it the case that all As are B - or that no A is B?), subsidiarily particular problems (of the type: is it the case that some A's are B - or that some A's are not B?). Problems concerning individual subjects, such as those we often passionately discuss in everyday life, are practically excluded, probably because Aristotle took such problems as matter-of-fact questions, to be settled one way or the other by empirical inquiry, not by rational discussion. Accordingly, the major divisions of the *Topics* correspond to the most general kinds of predicates which may be attributed to such general subjects, namely »accident« (i. e. predicate of no specified type), »genus« (general kind), »property« (to be construed strictly speaking, i. e. as a »proprium« of the subject), and »definition«. This 'set, traditionally called the set of »predicables«, does not include species, and understandably so: statements having species-terms as their predicates would have names of individuals as their subjects. As a result, the topics with which the *Topics* are concerned are general items like »man«, »pleasure«, »science«, as may be seen from Aristotle's examples. The statements made about them are timeless generalities, suited to be discussed in a rather dispassionate mood; such discussions take place at what Chekhov's characters would call a »philosophical« level.

Another limitation works to the same effect. Aristotle explicitly says that one should only discuss problems worth the trouble of discussing them (105 a 4); he means that one should leave out of discussion perceptual and moral evidences (at least so-called evidences). If somebody asked whether snow is white or not, he should be referred to his own senses; if he asked whether gods should be honoured or parents cherished, he should just be rebuked as calling into question that which goes without saying. This constraint rules out the burning debates which usually arise about sceptical or cynical paradoxes and are likely to make the debaters passionate, angry and aggressive. Paradoxes are admitted to discussion, according to the Aristotelian rules, only if they have been held by some well-known expert or philosopher: in this case, the social respectability of the spokesman compensates, we might say, for the indefensible character of the speech. In the same context, Aristotle also says that statements should not be put into discussion when they are either too easy or too difficult to establish: it would not be fair

game either to their opponent or to their defender, and the prejudiced party is always likely to react unpredictably.

This leads to a second reason why we should not look into the *Topics* for a universal, trans-historical method of all-efficient discussion. In the debates Aristotle has in mind, there are two debaters with completely different roles, namely (as the above quotation has already shown) a questioner and an answerer; each of them has rights and duties of his own. The *Topics* do not legislate for informal discussions, in which each participant has a personal thesis to support and randomly expresses both arguments in favour of his own thesis and objections against the other one's. Rather, they are restricted to organized, codified, almost ritualized debates, where the main rules are such that, once the subject of the discussion is fixed (*»p* or *not-p?*) and the answerer's position declared (say, *»p*), the questioner has to build an argumentation such that (i) its conclusion is *»not-p*, and (ii) all its premisses are not directly laid down by himself, but put into questions addressed to the answerer, and assumed only if the latter gives them his agreement.

Several important consequences result from this division of roles: for instance, the questioner must put only questions which can be answered by yes or no, and the answerer must say either yes or no, except in a few specified cases where he is allowed to say: *»What do you mean?»* or *»Do you mean this or that?»* (160 a 17-34). These regulations are obviously meant (as are others of the same kind) to ensure that, if the questioner succeeds in proving *»not-p* on the basis of premisses explicitly accepted by the answerer, the latter has no reason to complain of the former: the conclusion has not been imposed on him nor extorted from him.

A noteworthy consequence of this situation is that the questioner, when choosing his premisses, is inclined to select those which, when put into questions, are most likely to receive an affirmative answer. In order to be as undeniable as possible, they will be borrowed from the treasure of generally admitted opinions (*endoxa*), which cannot be easily rejected, under pain of social blame; that is why Aristotle characterizes dialectical argumentation as *»proceeding from accepted premisses»* (*ex endoxôn*). Such opinions may be true, of course (and in Aristotle's view, they have a good chance to be true); but it is not their truth, as such, which is of interest to the dialectician, but rather their social undeniability. This is the main reason why Aristotle considers dialectic as an opinion-level, not science-level discipline (contrary to Plato who, for reasons of his own, takes it to be the queen of sciences).

Such regulations are likely to be respected only under strictly determined conditions. In order to guarantee that the debate rules are respected by both parties, a third man or umpire, endowed with unquestioned authority, must be present; and since the main place where authority can be found in intellectual matters is a school, the normal organizer of dialectical debates is

the schoolmaster. He does not act himself as a party within such a debate; when he happens himself to teach by way of questions and answers, the rules of this *didactic* dialogue are importantly different from those governing the *dialectical* one (155 b 3-16, 159 a 25-37). On the other hand, when two students are invited to open a dialectical debate with one another, they do not use what they learned from the master as matters of scientific knowledge: for the reasons already mentioned, they employ exoteric, common opinions as their premisses. The dialectical debate, in its purest form, is thus an inside-school exercise using outside-school material. This borderline position might explain the diversity of functions Aristotle ascribes to dialectic. The first function is merely scholastic: it is a matter of intellectual training, a sort of mental gymnastic. The second function of dialectic is to make possible peaceful »encounters« (*enteuxeis*) with ordinary people outside the school, and to lead them, on the basis of their own presuppositions, to abandon their erroneous convictions (101 a 28-34, 161 a 29-37). I leave aside a third, properly philosophical function of dialectic, which Aristotle mentions in this context, and which is of course supremely important in respect of his general method and doctrine; but it is not prominent in the *Topics*, to say the least. I would rather suggest that there are some interesting discrepancies within what Aristotle says about the second, non-scholastic use of dialectic. Sometimes, he presents it as normal and helpful; but elsewhere, he says that dialectical deduction (*sullogismos*) should be employed only with trained dialecticians, whereas induction is better suited to ordinary people (105 a 16-19, 157 a 18-21). Now the official subject of the *Topics* is the dialectical *sullogismos* (100 a 23-24). Hence, the *Topics* teach how to do with well-trained dialecticians, not with ordinary people. Towards the end of the treatise, Aristotle even declares that it would be unwise to start a dialectical debate with »the first comer«: the discussion might easily grow bitter (164 b 8-15). These inconsistencies seem to show that he is somewhat uneasy about using dialectic with ordinary people outside the school. The dialectical method loses its irritating sting only within the school walls.

A very famous man had already experienced the dangers of open air dialectic: Socrates compared himself with a horsefly, unceasingly teasing this noble but lazy big horse, the Athenian *demos*. This behaviour did not please everybody, and Socrates eventually had to drink the hemlock. Aristotle certainly meditated upon this example; but it did not raise in him any call for martyrdom. Shortly before the end of his life, when the news of Alexander's death came to Athens and made the anti-Macedonian party raise its head anew, he left the city and said (so the story goes) that he did not want to give the Athenians an opportunity for sinning once more against philosophy. It is impossible to know whether, when writing the *Topics*, an early work of his, he had in mind to eradicate dialectic of its perilous pun-

gency, so dramatically illustrated by Socrates' fate. But it is possible to pick out some significant features, which seem to show that he was unclear about the extent to which his concept of dialectic was indebted to Socrates' example.

Socrates is rarely mentioned in the *Topics*, and then only occasionally as an example of individual man (as we still do). Elsewhere, when talking about the original contributions we may ascribe to Socrates, Aristotle mentions universal definitions and inductive reasonings, but not dialectic (*Metaph.* 1078 b 28); and when talking about the discovery of dialectic, he names Zeno, not Socrates, as its first inventor (*Sophistes*, fr. 1 Ross). On the other hand, Socrates is mentioned in the *Sophistici Elenchi* (rightly regarded as an appendix to the *Topics*); and there a very important role is ascribed to him, namely that he used to ask questions, and never to answer, because he claimed to know nothing (183 b 7-8). So one of the main features of dialectical reasoning - i. e. the fact that its premisses are not just posited but put into questions and obtained from the answerer's agreement - is connected with Socratic ignorance.

To extend this line of discussion, it is well-known that Socrates' favourite device was to dismantle any claim to knowledge, just by asking questions on the exact nature of the object claimed to be known; in so doing, especially in public, he of course aroused the anger of the so-called experts he submitted to this trial. Aristotle has a name for this sort of procedure, namely *peirastikè*, putting to the proof (*peira*) some claim to knowledge without claiming any knowledge for oneself. It is probably significant that he has no constant and definite conception about the relationship between *peirastikè* and *dialektikè*. As Paul Moraux says in summing up a long discussion, »sometimes *peirastikè* is a branch of *dialektikè*, sometimes it is a sister-art to it, and sometimes it seems to be identical with it«. These shifts, I take it, show how difficult it was to Aristotle to locate his own conception of dialectic in relation to Socrates' practice. *Peirastikè* was, or could be, a dangerous business; but he did not want dialectic to be a dangerous business.

Of course, Socrates did not *intend* to make people angry and aggressive. As Plato depicts him, he was eager to distinguish his own way of discussing matters from verbal dispute, resulting in the triumph of the winner and the humiliation of the loser; his *dialektikè* meant to be miles away from *eristikè*, contentious and sophistical argument. But he thought that, in order to avoid eristic, it was enough to lead the discussion in a spirit of benevolence (*eunoia*) and to appeal to the common love of truth. This proved insufficient: to say to people, however mildly, »Let us work together in search of truth« presupposes that they do not know it, a presupposition which may profoundly displease them if they claim to do so. Moreover, Socrates' prediction for ethical subjects, such as virtues, had the effect that it was difficult

for his partners to de-personalize the debate as Socrates asked them to do. If it turned out that they were ignorant about the virtues they claimed to know, this amounted to convicting them of leading their whole lives in the wrong way. In any case, Socrates was ready to admit that there could be an unsolvable conflict between a peaceful life within the city and the requirements of the quest for truth, since he eventually declared himself willing to sacrifice the former in the interest of the latter.

Conceiving primarily of dialectic as a school exercise, Aristotle could easily strip it of such dramatic overtones. In the debates for which he legislates, the meaning of life is no longer in question; the concern for truth retreats to the background, and the debaters are no longer tempted to identify themselves with the theses they are supporting. But the spirit of quarrel and contentiousness does not necessarily vanish within the walls of a school, as we all know only too well. When two people are arguing for and against the same proposition, all the conditions are met for a contest (*agôn*) to take place. If we remember how much the Greeks were fond of *agôn*, whether in the stadium or in the theater, it is striking to see how anxious Aristotle is to draw a firm line between dialectical and »agonistic« discussions.

This distinction is both clear and easy to overlook. The main data for it are contained in *Top.* VIII, a book which has been studied by Paul Moraux in a careful and detailed paper I have already referred to. The only questionable thing in this paper, I think, is the title: »La joute dialectique d'après le huitième livre des *Topiques*«. Etymologically, a »joust« (from the Latin *juxta*) is a sporting close combat. The adoption of this term thus implies an agonistic view of the dialectical debate; such a view is openly supported, in Paul Moraux's text, by a number of military and sporting metaphors. Now metaphors of this kind are remarkably missing in Aristotle's text, precisely at places where it is only too natural to introduce them in the commentary, and even in the translation. For instance, Aristotle rarely designates the two debaters under specific labels, and when he does so, he employs purely descriptive terms, like »the questioner«, »the answerer«; more often, he refers to them with an unspecified »he«, and it is up to the reader to understand who is who (a rather difficult task at times). Modern translators are understandably tempted to be more definite, introducing terms such as »the opponent«, »the attacker«, »the defender«, and thus giving a clearly agonistic twist to the description. Another example: Paul Moraux writes that dialectical discussion must be distinguished from that which is »purely agonistic, i. e. viewed as a struggle«, a wording which implies that dialectical debates are agonistic as well, but not »purely«. It is of course a very *natural* way to look at the matter: in many competitive games or sports (like chess or tennis, at least at the amateur level), each player tries to win, *and* both of

them try to have fun and to play a good game. But it is not, I think, the way Aristotle looks at the matter: paradoxically, perhaps mistakenly, and certainly without a full success, he tried to suppress the agonistic component of dialectic.

The crucial passage in this regard runs as follows: »Since, as a rule, he who hinders the common task (*to koinon ergon*) is a bad companion, such is clearly the case in arguments as well (*kai en logo p*. For here also (*kai en toutois*) there is a common objective, except for those of an agonistic mood. Those ones cannot both aim at the same end; for it is impossible for more than one to be the winner« (161 a 37 - b 1). Here we have to be careful: in some modern translations, the text seems to mean that both debaters have a common objective *in addition to* their personal, antagonistic objectives. But the context clearly shows that Aristotle's meaning is that they have a common objective, *as well as* other people involved in some non-verbal common enterprise. Thus either the aim is common and it is a case of dialectic, or each debater has his own aim and it is a case of agonistic. Elsewhere, Aristotle makes clear that there is no overlap: »peevish people (*duskolainontes*)«, he writes, »make the talks agonistic, not dialectical« (161 a 23-24). Dialectical arguments should not be described as »agonistic but not purely so«: they are not agonistic at all. They are arguments without winners or losers.

This sounds paradoxical, to say the least. The paradox is *not* that two people might have a »common task«, though having quite *different* jobs to do. This is a quite common situation: just think of two musicians playing a violin and piano sonata. The paradox is that two people are here said to have a common task, though having *opposite jobs* to do, in the sense that each of them can only do his own job properly, so it seems, to the detriment of the other and against the will of the other.

Aristotle himself seems to have trouble in sticking to his paradox, when he describes the strategy which the questioner should adopt (*Top.* VIII 1-3). The questioner's task is to build an argument, the conclusion of which is determined beforehand. To this extent, he is exactly in the same situation as anyone else looking for the proof of a given proposition. But dialectic is a *pros heteron* business (155 b 10) - an expression significantly ambiguous between »in relation to someone else« and »against someone else«. The conclusion to be proved by the questioner is not any conclusion but the contradictory of the answerer's thesis; and nevertheless the premisses must be conceded by the answerer himself. This double constraint is not easy to satisfy: obviously the answerer is not ready to grant premisses which lead to the ruin of his own position. So the questioner cannot just ask for all the premisses and only the premisses he needs for his arguments: he would run the risk of seeing them flatly rejected. He must ask more questions than strictly

needed, partly to make more difficult the rejection of those premisses which really matter, partly to disseminate them within a flood of questions so that the main ones are not all that obvious. What Aristotle has to say about this latter technique, which he calls *krupsis tou sumperasmatos* (concealment of the conclusion), is especially interesting. On the one hand, he says that those questions which only aim at concealing the conclusion are *agônos charm*, for the sake of contest; this, it would seem, should exclude them from dialectical practice. But on the other hand, he adds that it is necessary to make use of such questions as well, because the whole of dialectic is *pros heteron*, in relation to and against someone else (155 b 26-28). Here he seems to admit that unavoidably there is some agonistic component in dialectic, and that, as Péguy says, »war is what people do when they are two«. And this is not an isolated slip: elsewhere Aristotle allows his questioner a number of tricks which I cannot here enumerate, but which look much like war-stratagems. If the questioner, using such stratagems, succeeds in getting his conclusion, will not his achievement have all the characteristics of a victory after all? One might be tempted to say that Aristotle has been forced, by the logic of the dialectical situation, to reintroduce the *agôn* dimension into dialectic, in spite of his official intention to expel it out of dialectic.

Before drawing this conclusion, however, let us proceed with care. Suppose the questioner succeeds in getting his conclusion. This situation could be described as a victory for the questioner if and only if it could also be described as a defeat for the answerer. But this makes sense only if we could say what it would be for the answerer to be a winner; and this is not an easy matter. Of course, the answerer can choose to block all the other one's moves by saying no at every question, even when he thinks the right answer would be yes; but this will hardly count as a victory, because there has been no real contest. On the other hand, if the answerer gives each question the answer he honestly takes to be the right one, then the questioner will probably carry his point, except in three possible cases: (i) the statement he has to establish is utterly implausible; (ii) he does not put the right questions; (iii) he does not reason correctly. But these would be cases of self-defeat for the questioner, rather than cases of victory for the answerer.

As a matter of fact, Aristotle gives the answerer detailed instructions (chapters 4-10); he appears to be quite proud to be the first to do so (159 a 25-37). This might account for the fact that those instructions are emphatically permeated with »cooperative« values, whereas in his instructions concerning the questioner Aristotle had to concede something to the traditional »competitive« values (in the terms of A.W.H. Adkins; see his survey of the development of Greek ethics, *Merit and Responsibility*, Oxford, 1960). According to Aristotle, the answerer can be, and must be, neither peevish (*duskolos*) nor simpleminded (*euèthès*). This he can do, provided he per-

suades himself that to be a good answerer is *not* to prevent the questioner from getting to his conclusion, but rather to prevent him from doing so in a way which would not be the best available one, given this conclusion. Roughly speaking, the strategy Aristotle recommends to the answerer is the following: when you have to answer a given question, do not consider only the question itself (you could be led unnecessarily to grant premisses dangerous for your thesis); do not consider, either, only your thesis and what is dangerous or not dangerous for it (you could be led unjustifiably to reject quite plausible premisses); but consider always both the question and the thesis, and their respective degrees of plausibility. If the premiss asked from you has no relevance in regard to the thesis, then grant it, whether plausible or not. If the premiss *is* relevant, then grant it only if it is plausible, or at least more plausible, or less implausible, than the conclusion the questioner himself is aiming at. Thus, either the questioner will not succeed in establishing his conclusion, but this is not because you denied him the most appropriate tools for that; or he will succeed, but not to your detriment, since you knowingly granted him those tools.

So it turns out that the best way of standing for *pis* to force the champion of *not -p* to argue for *not -p* in no other way than the best available. The notion of a task common to both partners now takes a more precise meaning: *p* has a certain degree of plausibility, *not -p* another one, usually higher or lower; now, given *p* and *not p*, given their respective degrees of plausibility, given the set of generally accepted opinions (*endoxa*), the question is whether the discussions will bring out a good way of arguing for *not -p* on the basis of such opinions. It depends on *p*, on the questioner's ability to find out a good argument, and on the answerer's ability to prevent the questioner from offering a bad one. The fact that *p* and *not -p* have not necessarily, nor usually, the same degree of plausibility is crucial, I think: that is what makes misleading the analogy with tennis or chess (or we should imagine a game in which one of the players has a better racquet, or more chessmen, than the other).

That is why the right question to raise at the end of a dialectical debate is not »Who won?«, but »Was it a good discussion?«. The answer is not a matter of taste; it comes within the competence neither of the questioner nor of the answerer, but of a third character on the dialectical stage, the master or the audience. The *epitimèsis logou* (criticism of the discussion) is an essential part of the dialectical debate; Aristotle devotes three special chapters (11-13) to this aspect of dialectical skill, after the sections concerning the questioner and the answerer, thus graphically illustrating the triangular structure of dialectical activities as he sees them.

It appears from these chapters that the judgement passed on a dialectical debate cannot be a clear-cut one, such as a report of victory and defeat

would be; it has to take a number of considerations into account. Of course, the argument itself may have defects of its own: it may have been invalid, incomplete, pleonastic, unclear, or even »false« in various senses of this word. But even so, it must be considered in connection with the problem it was all about and with the constraints of the dialectical genre. An argument can be praiseworthy or blameworthy in itself, and deserve the opposite qualification in regard to the problem discussed, because within the frame of dialectical rules, it was possible, or impossible, to find a better one. The argument must also be viewed in the concrete context of this particular debate, involving those debaters and no others. One should accordingly distinguish between the judgement passed on the debate and the judgement passed on the debaters. Consistently with his notion of a »common task«, Aristotle points out that it is not within the power of only one of the debaters to achieve it. Therefore, if one of them fails to contribute to this achievement, the other one cannot be made responsible for the result, which might have been better with another partner. When both of them have done their job at the best of their possibilities, given the problem, they can both get good marks, whatever the apparent »result« of the apparent »joust«.

Arguments without winners or losers: in spite of paradoxes and difficulties, Aristotle consistently tried, I think, to build up a concept of dialectic which implies such arguments. This is a dialectic without tears, without drama, with no serious concern for truth, no involvement in the tragedies of life, no connection with the conflicts among persons, no hidden part to play in the struggle for domination. This conflict-free view of rational discussion - probably linked with Aristotle's conception of *theôria* as a purely speculative, disinterested activity - may seem over-idyllic and unrealistic to us, who are living after Hegel and contemporaneously with Karl Popper. Perhaps this was the price to be paid in order to concentrate on the *formal* aspects of reason and reasoning. But that would be another story.

Literature

For a general survey of Aristotle's *Topics*, I take the liberty of referring to the *Introduction* of my critical edition of this treatise, with French translation and notes, vol. I, pp. vii-cxliii, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1967 (Budé Series). On the special subject of the above paper, two articles are particularly important: Eric Weil, *La place de la logique dans la pensée aristotélicienne*, in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 56 (1951), pp. 283-315 (English translation in J. Barnes, M. Schofield, R. Sorabji, eds., *Articles on Aristotle*, vol. I, London, 1975, pp. 88-112), and Paul Moraux, *La joute dialectique d'après le huitième livre des Topiques*, in G.E.L. Owen, ed., *Aristotle on Dialectic*, Oxford, 1968, pp. 277-311.