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The Aristotelian Dialectical *Topos**

Abstract : One of the most difficult concepts to grasp in Aristotle’s philosophy is the concept of *topos*. There have been many attempts to define it. In this paper I will try to appeal to the etymology of the term, to summarize the attempts to define it, to present its structure and also give, at the end, a possible interpretation of the Aristotelian *topos*.

Keywords: Aristotelian dialectic, dialectical argument, *topos*, *topoi*, structure.

1. Introduction

One essential concept for understanding the Aristotelian dialectic is the *topos*¹. This is not a concept that is specific to dialectic only. It also appears in the *Rhetoric*, where Aristotle makes the distinction between rhetorical and dialectical *topoi*. But one must note that, while in the case of the rhetorical *topoi* Aristotle gives sufficient information in the *Rhetoric*, in the *Topics* essential information, vital to study the *topos*, is missing. We can mention the lack of a definition and the conceptual opacity of the *Topics*, especially the part that focuses on the particular dialectical *topoi*. Aristotle does not provide too much information concerning many technical dialectical terms (*topos* being one of them). One possible answer to this fact is that he considered that his readers were acquainted with the theoretical basics of dialectic (Smith 1997, XII). Also, there is a possible link with the mnemonical and recollection practices that would explain, in part at least, the knowledge regarding the technical sense (Stump 1989, 17-18).

Understanding *topos* can be useful for several reasons. First, we can grasp better the argumentation that Aristotle has in mind for the domains of knowledge he considers non-scientific². Second, it offers better understanding of

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¹ Gr. τόπος, pl. τόποι. Some modern translation options are: „commonplace” (E. S. Forster), „rule” (W. A. Pickard-Cambridge), „location” (Robin Smith), „lieu” (J. Tricot), „loc comun” (Mircea Florian).

² This is the case of braches that are not organized by demonstration (*apodeixis*) as is the case of ethics and politics.

the dialectical play between a questioner and an answerer, in the case of Aristotle or in the more general context of Greek dialectical practice (an example being the Socratic dialogues of Plato). Third, *topos* is an important concept, logically and philosophically, given the fact that starting from the Aristotelian dialectic we can identify an informal tradition in argumentation (Cicero, Boethius, medieval authors writing on dialectic, and, after a few centuries, reemergence in the second half of the 20th century: Toulmin, Amsterdam school of pragma-dialectics etc.).

In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle distinguishes between particular (specific) *topoi* and common (general) *topoi* (*Rhetoric* I, 2 1358a 2-35)³. The common *topoi* are applicable universally, while specific *topoi* have an area limited to particular domains of knowledge. Specific *topoi* are of several types, as presented in the *Topics*: physical, ethical, political, and a *topos* used in ethics cannot be used in physics. In the following lines it is important to start with some etymological information. Then we can pass on to an analysis of the *topos*' structure and, near the end, we can try to see if we can reach a definition of the Aristotelian *topos*.

2. Etymology

The term *topos* (pl. *topoi*) had different meanings in Antiquity. First, it was associated with the concept of physical space, but by Aristotle's time it gained a new technical sense which is related to dialectic and argumentation⁴.

There are two main lines in interpreting the etymology of *topos*. Both meanings have their source in the different usages that the term had in the 4th century BC. A first possible source is related to mnemonics. The relevant passage, usually cited by the exegesis, is the following:

F1., It is best to know by heart arguments upon those questions which are of most frequent occurrence, and particularly in regard to those propositions which are ultimate: for in discussing these answerers frequently give up in despair. Moreover, get a good stock of definitions: and have those of familiar and primary ideas at your fingers' ends: for it is through these that reasonings are effected. You should try, moreover, to master the heads under which other arguments mostly tend to fall. For just as in geometry it is useful to be practiced in the elements, and in arithmetic to have the multiplication table up to ten at one's fingers' ends-and indeed it makes a great difference in one's knowledge of the multiples of other numbers too-likewise also in arguments it is a great advantage to be well up in regard to first principles, and to have a thorough knowledge of premises at the tip of one's tongue. For just as in a person with a trained memory, a memory of things themselves is immediately caused by the mere mention of their loci, so these habits too will make a man readier in

³ Usually Aristotle names the general common places *topoi* and the specific common places by one of the following: *idiai protaseis*, *eidē*, *idioi topoi*.

⁴ For instance, Aristotle uses the *topos* in the sense of physical space in the *Physics*.

reasoning, because he has his premises classified before his mind's eye, each under its number. It is better to commit to memory a premise of general application than an argument: for it is difficult to be even moderately ready with a first principle, or hypothesis" (*Topics* VIII, 14, 163b).

Among the recent advocates of this perspective we can mention Paul Slomkowski (1997) and Robin Smith (1997). The origin of this point of view can be traced back to Friedrich Solmsen, in his *Die Entwicklung der aristotelischen Logik und Rhetorik* (Slomkowski 1997, 46-47). This hypothesis proposes that Aristotle had in mind the mnemonic techniques⁵ we can find in Classical Greece, used, for instance, by the sophists, their purpose being efficiency in using common places in argumentation.

However, this line of interpretation was contested by Sara Rubinelli (2006). There are two arguments against it (Rubinelli 2006, 268-269). First, Aristotle does not speak in F1 about *topoi* and he actually has in mind only the propositions as components of arguments. Slomkowski commits this mistake because he interprets the *topos* as a principle or a general premise. As evidence for enforcing her argument Rubinelli puts forward a passage from the beginning of the 8th book of the *Topics*, where Aristotle says that he finished treating common places⁶. The second argument is based on the difficulty implied by the memorization of all the common places, and Rubinelli holds that it is not likely that Aristotle had in mind a mnemonic technique⁷.

The alternative proposed by Rubinelli has its source in the military terminological usage of the term. It has been observed that the term *topos* was used in the 4th century BC in the sense of a position out of which one can effectively build an attack (Rubinelli 2009, 13)⁸, and the metaphorical meaning in dialectic and rhetoric is derived from it.

If we accept, following Robin Smith, that for Aristotle the term had two strongly interwoven meanings, a place out of which someone can build up an attack against an opponent and a place under which we can group arguments

⁵ See Robin Smith, *op. cit.*, XVII: "(...) Aristotle's dialectical method drew on mnemonic systems in use during his time. These systems appear to have been based on the memorization of a series of images of actual locations (e.g. houses along a street) in a fixed order; items to be memorized were then superimposed on these images, making it possible to recall them in sequence, in reverse sequence, or directly by position in the series."

⁶ *Topics* VIII, 1, 155b: „The attack-locations from which one should get (premises), the, were discussed earlier. We must discuss arrangement and devising questions, determining which premises are to be obtained besides those necessary". Tr. Robin Smith.

⁷ Even though memorizing some would be helpful and relevant.

⁸ Ritoòk, Z. (1975), "Zur Geschichte des Topos-Begriffes", *Actes de la XII-e conférence internationale d'études classiques*, 2-7 Octobre 1972, 111-114. Ritoòk says that in the military vocabulary the *topos* was "einen Ort von dem aus man eine bestimmte Macht entfalten, eine Wirksamkeit entwickeln kann". Apud Sara Rubinelli *Ars Topica*, Springer, 2009 (Rubinelli 2), p. 13, and Rubinelli 2, p.269.

(Smith 1997, XXVII-XXVIII), then we can regard both origins as being valid. The first sense (active, pragmatic) would have its source in the military usage and the second (passive, static) would result, at least partially, from mnemonics⁹. The actual dialectical usage during a particular dialectical encounter does justice to the first possible origin and the choice related to one *topos* or another out of a list of *topoi* can entail the second possible source.

3. Attempts to define the *topos*

As we said, Aristotle does not offer a definition for common places in the *Topics*. Scholars consider that this is because Aristotle supposes that his audience is already acquainted with the working concepts of dialectic¹⁰. Another possible explanation would be the following: Aristotle already used the term with a technical meaning since it was already used so, mainly in rhetoric (Rubinelli 2006, 269). Nevertheless, there have been many efforts to reach a definition: metaphorical ones, descriptive ones, more or less simple etc. We can list here the different attempts¹¹. *Topoi* were considered *points of view* (Hambruch, Viehweg, Prantl, Wieland), middle terms in syllogisms (Prantl), principle for solving the four types of dialectical problems - problems of definition, genus, property and accident (Gardeil), common genera of many types of arguments (Thionville), non-analytical premises (Plebe), research formulas (Lausberg), “pigeon-holes from which dialectical reasoning is to draw its arguments” (Ross 1995, 57), common syllogism (Scheck), “a *topos* is an “Ort”¹² in which the four instruments¹³ combine in the case of a determined species of problems and it relates to a predicable under which it advances

⁹ Sara Rubinelli considers the concept of *topos* as being a dynamic, pragmatic one (Rubinelli 2, p. 13). By contrast, the mnemonic interpretation can be viewed as static.

¹⁰ Robin Smith offers a convincing explanation for the lack of explanations in the *Topics*. We risk to have a mistaken view of Aristotle and Smith draws an analogy with the way Averroes interpreted tragedy, treating it as an eulogy, given the fact that in the Islamic world there were no dramatic spectacles. The same thing can appear in the case of a scholar that lives in a society where disputational contests by arguments do not exist. (Robin Smith, *op. cit.*, p. XII) Fortunately this is not the case in what concerns us, since there are many noted similarities between the dialectical disputes and contemporary debates..

¹¹ Our enumeration is based mainly on W. A. De Pater, *Les Topiques d'Aristote et la dialectique platonicienne*, Editions St. Paul Fribourg Suisse, 1965 (De Pater 1), pp. 92-93, Slomkowski, Paul, *Aristotle's Topics*, Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 1997, p.2 and Rubinelli 2, p.13.

¹² “Place” in German.

¹³ The four instruments mentioned here are presented by Aristotle in the last part of the first book of the *Topics* (I, 13-18): “The tools by means of which we may be well equipped with deductions are four: one is obtaining premises, the second is being able to distinguish how many ways a word is said, the third is finding differences, and the fourth is the examination of likeness. In a way, the last three of these are also premises, since it is possible to make a premiss about any of them”. Tr. Robin Smith.

systematically depending on the problem” (Braun), species meaning a universal of a branch of rhetoric (Solmsen). In 1951, I. M. Bochenski, describes the *topos* as “a general principle out of which arguments must be drawn for concrete cases” and identifies several ways to interpret the *topoi* as principles: logical rules (or laws), methodological recommendations or psychological remarks (Bochenski 1951, 32). Bochenski does not state his approval of neither of these alternatives, but later it was thought that he considered a *topos* to be a non-analytical law (Rubinelli 2009, 13). For William Grimaldi (1958) the *topos* is an axiomatic form, through which we can transform into inferences information given by the particular *topoi* - as in the *Rhetoric*, opposed to common *topoi* (De Pater 1965, 94). W. A. De Pater (1965) sees the *topos* as a logical law - *loi logique* (De Pater 1965, 141), Sainati (1968) as inference rules (Slomkowski 1997, 50), Ebbesen (1981) as axioms (Rubinelli 2009, 13), Stump (1989) as a strategy for arguing (Stump 1989, 20), Primavesi (1996) as an external principle of inference (Rubinelli 2009, 13), Paul Slomkowski (1997) considers *topos* to be a principle, universal *protaseis* or the hypothesis of a hypothetical syllogism (Slomkowski 1997, 45). The most recent attempt belongs to S. Rubinelli and in this case the *topos* is “argument scheme of universal applicability” (Rubinelli 2009, 14). Some of the scholars cited above were discussing the subject-matter from the perspective of the structure of the *topos*.

4. The structure of the *topos*. Examples

The appeal to the structure of the *topos* toward finding its definition is not new. It has been used by De Pater, and more recently by Rubinelli. Let us see a few examples from the *Topics*:

F2., **(Rule, Strategy)** Now one commonplace rule is to look and see if a man has ascribed as an accident what belongs in some other way. **(Example)** This mistake is most commonly made in regard to the genera of things, e.g. if one were to say that white happens to be a color-for being a color does not happen by accident to white, but color is its genus. The assertor may of course define it so in so many words, saying (e.g.) that ‘Justice happens to be a virtue’; but often even without such definition it is obvious that he has rendered the genus as an accident; e.g. suppose that one were to say that whiteness is colored or that walking is in motion. **(Law)** For a predicate drawn from the genus is never ascribed to the species in an inflected form, but always the genera are predicated of their species literally; for the species take on both the name and the definition of their genera. **(Example 2)** A man therefore who says that white is ‘colored’ has not rendered ‘colored’ as its genus, seeing that he has used an inflected form, nor yet as its property or as its definition: **(Law 2)** for the definition and property of a thing belong to it and to nothing else, **(Example 3)** whereas many things besides white are colored, e.g. a log, a stone, a man, and a horse. Clearly then he renders it as an accident” (*Topics* II, 2, 109a-b).

F3., **(Rule, strategy)** If, then, a genus be suggested for something that is, first take a look at all objects which belong to the same genus as the thing mentioned, and see whether the genus suggested is not predicated of one of them, as happens in the case of an accident: **(Example)** e.g. if ‘good’ be laid down to be the genus of ‘pleasure’, see whether some particular pleasure be not good: for, if so, clearly good’ is not the genus of pleasure: **(Law)** for the genus is predicated of all the members of the same species” (*Topics* IV, 1, 120b).

F4., **(Purpose)** For constructive purposes, on the other hand, **(Instruction, Strategy)** see whether he avoids ever repeating the same term; for then the property will in this respect have been correctly rendered. **(Example)** Thus (e.g.) seeing that he who has stated ‘animal capable of acquiring knowledge’ as a property of man has avoided repeating the same term several times, the property would in this respect have been correctly rendered of man” (*Topics* V, 2, 130b)¹⁴.

F5., **(Instruction, Strategy)** see if from the expression used the definition of the contrary be not clear; **(Law)** for definitions that have been correctly rendered also indicate their contraries as well” (*Topics* VI, 2, 140a).

Instruction. Strategy. Rule: in his study *La fonction du lieu et de l'instrument dans les Topiques*, De Pater distinguishes two recurrent parts in a *topos*, each usually introduced by Aristotle using a particular term (De Pater 1968, 164-188). The term *skopein* (“you should examine”) appears in the first part of a *topos* and its role is to raise awareness. This first part can be considered a rule (*règle*).

Law: the second part is usually preceded by the word *gar* („for”) and represents a logical or axiological law (*loi logique ou axiologique*) (De Pater 1968, 165). The rule and the law do not appear every time, but for the most part. For De Pater the *topos* is mainly the law.

Example: many of the common places presented by Aristotle come with examples. The example is not an essential element of the *topos* and Aristotle criticizes learning the dialectical art only through examples¹⁵.

¹⁴ This example is taken from the common places of the *proprium*, common places that verify if the *proprium* is correctly formulated or not. The purpose here is explicit and the law is implicit.

¹⁵ For example, at the end of the *Sophistical Refutations*: „the training given by the paid professors of contentious arguments was like the treatment of the matter by Gorgias. For they used to hand out speeches to be learned by heart, some rhetorical, others in the form of question and answer, each side supposing that their arguments on either side generally fall among them. And therefore the teaching they gave their pupils was ready but rough. For they used to suppose that they trained people by imparting to them not the art but its products, as though any one professing that he would impart a form of knowledge to obviate any pain in the feet, were then not to teach a man the art of shoe-making or the sources whence he can acquire anything of the kind, but were to present him with several kinds of shoes of all sorts: for he has helped him to meet his need, but has not imparted an art to him.” (*Sophistical Refutations* 34, 183b-184a. Tr. W. A. Pickard-Cambridge.).

Purpose: there are two possible purposes for using a *topos*: destructive (refutation) or constructive (proving one's thesis). Aristotle has in mind three main types: for refutation only, for proving only¹⁶, for both refutation and proving¹⁷.

The difference between the rule (instruction, strategy) and law (principle) is first mentioned by the ancient peripatetic commentators, Theophrastus and Alexander. For instance, Theophrastus distinguishes between *precept* and *common place*, the precept being equivalent to the rule and the common place with the law¹⁸. Theophrastus considers the *topos* as different from a precept. In the case of Alexander of Aphrodisias both the rule and law were considered *topos*, with the addition that the rule is so only through association with the law (Stump, 1989: 20).

5. Defining the *topos*

First, we should ask ourselves if from Aristotle's point of view the concept of *topos* can really be defined, since the *topos* is a general form of argument. We can define a particular type of *topos*, for instance one that can be found in the *Topics*. But the general concept of *topos* eludes its fixation into a definition. Simply put, we can ask what the genus of the *topos* is and what its specific differentia is. We cannot say, as mentioned above, that "a *topos* is an "Ort" in which the four instruments combine in the case of a determined species of problems and it relates to a predicable under which it advances systematically depending on the problem"¹⁹. A possible candidate to the status of genera in this case would be "argument". This entails that the *topoi* have a limited applicability, and in the case of another species of arguments (demonstration for instance, as different from dialectical syllogism) they are useless. But Aristotle insists on the universality of the dialectical *topoi*, since dialectic has universal applicability. Therefore we cannot dissociate *topoi* and universality in

¹⁶ We can find common places destined exclusively for refutation or exclusively for proving in the 5th book of the *Topics*, in the case of the common places of the *proprium*, where Aristotle presents all these *topoi* alternatively.

¹⁷ For example *Topics* II, 3, 110a or II, 4, 111a. Most of the *topoi* can be used in both ways. However, a difference exists regarding the difficulty of arguing for something. It is easier to refute a definition and harder to prove it. In the case of the accident the things are the other way around.

¹⁸ Theophrastus of Eresus. *Sources for his life, writings, thought and influence. I. Life, writings, various reports, logic, physics, metaphysics, theology, mathematics*. Edited by Fortenbaugh William W. et al. Leiden: Brill 1992., p. 263. Theophrastus also mentions that the relation between the precept and common place is analogous to the relation between the common place and the syllogism built on it.

¹⁹ Braun, Zur Einheit 92: „Ein *topos* ist ein Ort, in dem sich jeweils die vier Organe für eine bestimmte Art der Probleme einer Prädikatsklasse zusammenstellen und dem Problem entsprechend systematisch vorgehen" cited by De Pater 1, note 144, p. 93.

argumentation. Therefore they do not have a genus under which they fall and defining them this way would be impossible.

In the scholarship revolving around this issue it has been discussed whether the *topos* is only one element of those mentioned above, or all of them. If the *topos* is just one of these elements, then which one can be more properly regarded as *topos*? An argument against the thesis that maintains the fact that the *topos* is composed of all these elements (rule, law, example, purpose) would be to say that, since Aristotle himself finds appropriate in some cases not to mention certain elements, their necessity as a group cannot be sustained. But, even if an element is missing in the text, this does not mean that it is not presupposed. Therefore, this argument has no power. The only element which seems to be disposable is the example. Aristotle offers a certain amount of examples and the reader can find some more. We can say the same thing about purpose. It is clear that a *topos* is utilized with purpose, this being somehow a *proprium* of it. The last candidates that stand are the “rule” and “the law”, together or separated.

In the *Rhetoric* we can read:

F6. „I call the same things “element” and “topic²⁰”; for an element or a topic [is a heading] under which many enthymemes fall” (*Rhetoric* II, 26, 1403a).

The enthymeme is the rhetorical syllogism. In his discussion on the enthymeme Aristotle makes a lot of analogies between rhetoric and dialectic (Slomkowski 1997, 43-45)²¹.

But the way in which the enthymemes “fall” or “converge” under a *topos* is problematic. We can think that the *topos* is a genus and the enthymemes are particular cases. We can mention the following passage from the *Rhetoric*:

F7. „Most enthymemes are derived from these species that are particular and specific, fewer from the common [topics]. Just as in the case of *topoi*, so also in the case of enthymemes, a distinction should be made between the species and the *topoi* from which they are to be taken. By “species” I mean the premises specific to each genus [of knowledge], and by the *topoi* those common to all” (*Rhetoric* I, 2, 1358a).

It seems that in this passage the *topoi* seem to be some kind of premises, those common to all the branches of knowledge, with applicability in each type of discourse.

²⁰ Also a rendering of the *topos*.

²¹ Slomkowski concludes that the dialectical syllogism and hypothetical syllogism are the same thing for Aristotle, based on the fact that the enthymeme is the syllogism with a presupposed premise. This entails that the *topos* could be the hypothesis (explicit in a hypothetical syllogism, and implicit in an enthymeme).

We should bear in mind that when Aristotle says that a *topos* is used for refutation or constructive purposes he means the refutation of the adversary's thesis and the establishing of our own thesis (as opposed to the one of the answerer). In the first case it means that there are no arguments to support the adversary's thesis or that the adversary established that thesis committing some kind of error. In the second case, establishing the opponent's thesis cannot bring forward a valid refutation for our own thesis. It seems that the rule (or strategy) refers to the error committed by the opponent, error that enables the possible proof of our own thesis and refuting the opposed one. It would be possible then, that the *topos* may be the thesis held by the opponent, and this way we would group arguments, the species of arguments being divided by premises having a certain characteristic? If this is the case then why does Aristotle not mention that we actually have a classification of types of dialectical theses? Also, this way the *Topics* would be a treatise on false premises (theses) and the way we can refute them.

It seems to me that the *topos* is actually a quality of the premise (thesis). It is what makes the opponent's thesis vulnerable to refutation. This characteristic was observed by Robin Smith (Smith 1997, XXVII). Two examples:

F8., In regard to subjects which must have one and one only of two predicates, as (e.g.) a man must have either a disease or health, supposing we are well supplied as regards the one for arguing its presence or absence, we shall be well equipped as regards the remaining one as well. This rule is convertible for both purposes: for when we have shown that the one attribute belongs, we shall have shown that the remaining one does not belong; while if we show that the one does not belong, we shall have shown that the remaining one does belong. Clearly then the rule is useful for both purposes" (*Topics* II, 6, 112a).

F9., look and see also if he has stated a thing to be an accident of itself, taking it to be a different thing because it has a different name, as Prodicus used to divide pleasures into joy and delight and good cheer: for all these are names of the same thing, to wit, Pleasure. If then any one says that joyfulness is an accidental attribute of cheerfulness, he would be declaring it to be an accidental attribute of itself" (*Topics* II, 6, 112b).

In F8 the rule is missing but is assumed. The law is: "subjects (...) must have one and one only of two predicates²²". We can reconstruct the rule like this: "You should see if your opponent attributed to a subject one of two contrary attributes". This characteristic of the opponent's thesis can be the starting point for the attack. In the case of F9 the rule is explicitly stated: "look and see also if he has stated a thing to be an accident of itself, taking it to be a different thing

²² Contrary predicates.

because it has a different name". In this case we can find the law: "something cannot be its own accident".

This way it seems that the rule is actually the *topos* and it is actually an attribute of the opponent's premise, an attribute of which we need to be aware, if we want to construct a successful refutation. The laws are the ones that make possible the argumentative steps by which the refutation is achieved.

6. Relevance of the *topoi*

If we consider one of the paradigmatic works for the revival of the argumentation studies, Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* (1958) we can say that the study of the Aristotelian *topos* and its structure did not lose its importance. In a discussion article on Toulmin's work, Otto Bird sees the mentioned work as triggering a renaissance in the study of *topics* (Bird 1961, 535-539). Some similarities between what Toulmin treats in his work and the medieval dialectics were highlighted. For instance, the distinction operated by Boethius between "topical maxim" (*maxima propositio*), that is the rule in virtue of which an inference is possible, and "topical difference" (*differentia maximae propositionis*), the particular case in which that inference rule is applied, still maintains its meaning for the most part when Toulmin distinguishes between "warrant" and "backing". This distinction can be seen already in Aristotle's *Topics*, on which Boethius wrote his commentary:

„, (**law**) any predicate of which we can speak of greater or less degrees belongs also absolutely: (**example**) for greater or less degrees of good or of white will not be attributed to what is not good or white: for a bad thing will never be said to have a greater or less degree of goodness than another, but always of badness. (**purpose**) This rule is not convertible, either, for the purpose of overthrowing a predication: for several predicates of which we cannot speak of a greater degree belong absolutely: for the term 'man' is not attributed in greater and less degrees, but a man is a man for all that" (*Topics* II, 11, 115b).

We can observe that the law can be linked to the *maxima propositio* and to the "warrant" of Toulmin and the example can be linked to *differentia maximae propositionis* and the "backing". Based on these continuities one can see the importance of studying the Aristotelian *topoi*.

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