Alexander of Aphrodisias

On Aristotle Topics 1
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To Nelly A.W. van Ophuijsen-Bruck

for the love of useless learning

(akhrēsta mathēmata Plato Resp. 527 D 6)
Acknowledgements

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Johannes M. Van Ophuijsen
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Aristotle’s *Topics* is about dialectic, which can be understood as a debate between two people or the inner debate of one thinker with himself. Its purposes range from philosophical training to discovering the first principles of thought. Aristotle offers rules for debating, and the debates turn on the four predicables: definition, property, genus and accident. Aristotle explains these predicables, says something about how they fit into his scheme of up to ten categories, and begins in Book 1 to outline strategies for debate, such as the identification of ambiguity.

Alexander of Aphrodisias was the leading ancient commentator on Aristotle in the Aristotelian school. He wrote around AD 200, more than five hundred years after Aristotle’s death. His commentaries had an immense influence first on the Neoplatonist school and then on Medieval Philosophy in Islam and eventually in the Latin West.

His commentary on *Topics* Book 1 opens the door on a major argument between the Stoics and Aristotelians on how to think of syllogistic. He discusses how to define Aristotelian syllogistic and why it stands up against the rival Stoic theory of inference. This is also treated in his commentary on *Prior Analytics* 1.1-7, already translated in the present series, and it will be useful to consult the comments of the translators, Barnes, Bobzien, Flannery and Ierodiakonou. Alexander further considers what is the character of inductive inference and of rhetorical argument.

At least three further subjects in his commentary are of special interest. He distinguishes inseparable accidents like the whiteness of snow from defining differentiae like its being frozen and considers how these fit into his scheme of categories. He investigates the subject of ambiguity which had been richly developed since Aristotle by the rival Stoic school. And he speaks of dialectic as a stochastic discipline, that is as one whose success is to be judged not by victory but by skill in argument. A parallel view was sometimes taken in antiquity of medical practice, as a discipline to be judged not by its success in curing patients, but by its method and skill. And the Stoics took such a view of life, as something to be assessed not by its success in achieving objectives, but by the objectives chosen and the way in which they were pursued.
Notes


Textual Emendations

3,30  Reading katauto (i.e. kat’ auto) for kathauto (i.e. kath’ hauto) [n. 72]

5,27-9 Retaining axiousi … epigraphesthai and emending eniote hosa anankaia to einai te ouk anankaion (or to eniοi te hoti ouk anankaion) [n. 110]

5,28-9 Reading ex endoxôn de eirêke hoti oukh for ou gar [n. 111]

6,9  Removing brackets, to add on after phusin [n. 115]

13,22 Reading OPOIAS as ho poias with Wallies [n. 175]

14,14 Emending to (mê) tethnêkenai to ou mê tethnêkenai [n. 180]

17,13-14 Discussed in n. 195

18,31 Read <to> to haireton agathon einai [n. 201]

19,2  Perhaps reading ê for kai [n. 202]

19,5  Perhaps reading kai to houtós <ekhon> endoxon (Abbamonte) [n. 205]

20,10 Reading ti for to (or delete) [n. 216]

22,10 Reading (perhaps) hulês for hulas [n. 238]

24,1-2 Deleting second tôn (typesetting error [n. 251])

24,18 Perhaps reading hôn for hôi [n. 254]

26,10 Perhaps reading tina for tini [n. 260]

27,14 Perhaps reading tote tosauta biblia for tote toiauta biblia [n. 268]

28,10.15 Emending phusin to genesin [n. 276]

32,11 Phrase in sequel to lemma bracketed by Brunswig [n. 292]

34,16 Reading protheis for prosthéis [n. 299]

43,32 Deleting ho [n. 357]

45,5  Lacuna filled by Wallies [n. 365]

47,6  Lacuna filled by Wallies [n. 374]

49,29 Not adding a second rhis (Wallies) [n. 391]

54,12 Reading êi êi rather than, with Wallies, êi for the eiê of the MSS, here and at line 14 [n. 424]

55,20 Adopting ou from MS B and perhaps adding panta [n. 442]

58,4-5 Deleting sómainomenois, following Wallies [n. 468]

59,7 Repunctuating the ê … ê clause changing period to comma [n. 475]

60,23 Emending autês to autôn [n. 482]

61,19 Reading, with Wallies, hautou for autou without adding auto [n. 488]
Textual Emendations

62,19 Bracketing problémati [n. 495]
63,30 Repunctuating (comma, not full stop after ou) [n. 504]
64,12-13 Transposing toi hou katégorêtai with ê katégoroumenon monon [n. 505]
66,1 Adding hôste estai with Wallies and perhaps horika [n. 521]
66,22 Emending genous for genos [n. 530]
67,2 Supplying the conjunction in the sequel to the lemma with Prantl [n. 536]
67,18 Emending tini to tina [n. 546]
71,17 Perhaps reading toiouton hoion ei for toiouton ei [n. 569]
72,10 Deleting part of clause with Wallies [n. 578]
72,20 Reading enantion for enantion [n. 581]
73,13 Reading AUTE as autê, not hautê [n. 588]
78,19 Supplying <oute haplôs adoxon> with Wallies [n. 650]
78,22 Reading enantion for enantion [lemma] with Pacius [n. 653]
80,4 Perhaps reading ex hautou rather than ex autou [n. 661]
80,25 Perhaps reading mède for méte [n. 666]
80,28 Emending grammatikon to grammatikên [n. 668]
81,6 I suggest bracketing axia zêtéseos einai as a gloss [n. 676]
82,23 Emending hoi aitountes to diairountes and deleting tas [n. 689]
85,3 Bracketing estin [n. 701]
86,4 Bracketing te [n. 704]
86,5 Retaining MS reading without Wallies’ addition of ouk [n. 708]
87,9 Perhaps reading paralambanein [n. 718]
87,10 Reading tou with the MSS, not toi with Wallies [n. 719]
87,13 Emending autou to ou tou to [n. 722]
94,15 Emending pros(ti)theis to protitheis [n. 800]
101,28 ou. hoti èn tauta hêtera allêlôn bracketed by Wallies [n. 858]
102,15 Perhaps reading legetai gar <aisthanesthai kai to ekhein aisthêsín kai> to [n. 864]
102,21-2 Emending amesôn/emesôn to ana meson [n. 867]
103,6 Reading hoti rather than hotê [n. 870]
103,9 Emending ep’ to ap’ [n. 871]
104,15 Reading tou dikaiôn, <mousikon> with Wallies [n. 881]
104,26 Repunctuating with a full stop after dikaiôn [n. 882]
106,8 Perhaps emending tosouton to toiouton [n. 892]
110,20 Retaining ekhein with A against Wallies’ ekhon [n. 936]
114,14 Emending idiou to idion [n. 958]
117,20.25 Emending ti to ei ti [n. 981]
118,10 Perhaps deleting genos [n. 983]
Alexander of Aphrodisias

On Aristotle Topics 1

Translation
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Alexander of Aphrodisias’ <commentary> on the first <book> of Aristotle’s treatise on topoi

1.1 (1) The purpose of the Topics

[100a18 The purpose of this study is to find a method by which we shall be able to syllogize about every problem that has been put forward from things approved, and when we ourselves are upholding a claim shall say nothing contrary to it.] (100a18-21)

Aristotle himself states the purpose of the treatise on ‘topics’, and the number and kinds of things for which this method is useful to the practising philosopher, and what is its goal. He does so partly at the very outset and partly a little further on, where he gives us to understand that dialectic is worth taking trouble even for those whose primary pursuit is philosophy, since it contributes to finding the truth, which is the goal of philosophical study.

1.1 (2) Dialectic defined

It is well for us to know beforehand that the name of dialectic is not by all philosophers brought to bear on the same thing meant. The Stoics, who define dialectic as the knowledge of speaking well, and posit that speaking well consists in saying the things that are true and fitting, which they take to be a distinctive property of the philosopher, make it refer to the most complete (and perfect) philosophy. This is why according to them only the wise man is a dialectician. Plato, who extols the method of division and declares it the coping-stone of philosophy, also calls it by the name of dialectic. He posits as its function the ability to make one thing into many and reduce the many to one, which seems equivalent to being able to divide genera into their species and what comes under these, and conversely to put the individual things together, reduce them to one genus and bring them under one heading.

Aristotle and his school do not offer the same view of dialectic. They posit that it is a method of syllogizing, holding that one syllogism does not differ from another as a syllogism, but only in the form of its premisses, in its modes and figures, and in the subject-matter it deals with. The first of these differences makes some syllogisms
Translation

probative\textsuperscript{23} – those we call categorical\textsuperscript{24} – and others hypothetical.\textsuperscript{25}
The second differentiates between\textsuperscript{26} perfect\textsuperscript{27} and imperfect (syllogisms), and between those in the first, second and third figure,\textsuperscript{28} as is shown in the Prior Analytics.\textsuperscript{29} For the syllogisms declaring

\begin{align*}
\text{Every human being is capable of laughter,} \\
\text{Nothing capable of laughter is a horse,} \\
\end{align*}

and

\begin{align*}
\text{Every human being is capable of laughter,} \\
\text{No horse is capable of laughter,} \\
\end{align*}

and

\begin{align*}
\text{Everything capable of laughter is a human being,} \\
\text{Nothing capable of laughter is a horse} \\
\end{align*}

have the same subject-matter but are not identical, due to the different obtaining\textsuperscript{30} and positing of their premisses. The first is in the first figure,\textsuperscript{31} the second in the second, the third in the third figure.\textsuperscript{32} And

the third difference, that in subject-matter,\textsuperscript{33} makes some syllogisms demonstrative, others dialectical,\textsuperscript{34} others again contentious.\textsuperscript{35} For just as the crafts\textsuperscript{36} do not differ from each other as crafts, but take their difference from the different matter they deal with and the way they deal with it – which makes one of them carpentry, another house-building, and a third something else – so it is with syllogisms.

The one that proves\textsuperscript{37} and deduces\textsuperscript{38} the point at issue\textsuperscript{39} from what is true\textsuperscript{40} and appropriate to it,\textsuperscript{41} as well as prior\textsuperscript{42} and better-known,\textsuperscript{43} is called by the older authors\textsuperscript{44} a demonstrative syllogism, and they call the method of syllogizing through these things ‘demonstration’.\textsuperscript{45} That which proceeds through what is approved\textsuperscript{46} they call a dialectical syllogism, and the method of syllogizing through this they accordingly call ‘dialectic’. And that which syllogizes from what only look like things approved they call a sophistic syllogism, and the method which uses these they call ‘sophistic’.\textsuperscript{47} For there is no difference in form\textsuperscript{48} between the syllogism\textsuperscript{49} which says

\begin{align*}
\text{Pleasure is incomplete} \\
\text{Nothing that is good is incomplete} \\
\text{The good makes men good} \\
\text{Pleasure does not make men good} \\
\end{align*}

since both are in the second figure; they differ in subject-matter. The first purports to be demonstrative, for it has its starting-point in a definition\textsuperscript{50} that has been given of pleasure which says that pleasure is a perceptible process to a natural state,\textsuperscript{51} and any process is incomplete. The second one proceeds through what is approved, for the claim that the good makes men good, while not true, is approved.\textsuperscript{52} Applying the name of dialectic to the method which syllogizes in this way and through such things, they accordingly define dialectic as the method of syllogizing about every issue through things ap-
proved. Such a method is plausibly called dialectic: for if ‘dialectic’ is derived from *dialegesthai* ‘to converse’ and *dialegesthai* consists in question and answer, and the questioner asks questions about every problem raised by the answerer, so as to syllogize always through what he has obtained from his questioning, then he will, insofar as he tries to syllogize about everything put forward, not syllogize from what is true. For not all that is put forward is true: opposites are put forward, e.g. that pleasure is good and that it is not good, and that the soul is immortal and that it is not immortal; yet a pair of opposites cannot both of them be true. Nor is it possible to infer syllogistically what is untrue through things which are true: all that is proved through what is true is itself true. In so far, then, as the dialectician syllogizes from the concessions he gets out of his questions, he syllogizes from what is approved, for answerers grant and concede what is approved and persuasive. But not all that is approved is also true in the strict sense: it is the task of questioners to lead their respondents into paradoxical answers as well as into contradiction. So dialectic does not have its being in syllogizing through what is true but through what is approved. Therefore those who make it bear on a different thing meant use the name dialectic inappropriately.

Seeing that dialectic is like this, it is plausible that Aristotle calls it a counterpart to rhetoric, since that too involves what is persuasive because it is approved. By ‘counterpart’ he means corresponding, and revolving and moving around the same things; for these are not like the sciences each about one determinate genus of things, proving and obtaining the things that are peculiar to that genus and hold of it as a genus, and doing so through the principles appropriate to that genus. The subject of either of these two is not any one genus, and their proofs about the subject of their argument are not produced through what is appropriate to this object and in its essence. Their inquiry is into things common to several genera: it is just as much the task of the dialectician to attack by argument about questions of music as of medicine, of geometry, physical science, ethics, logic, and about all that is put forward; and their proofs are through what is common and approved, and not peculiar to the issues. For the dialectician does not prove a medical thesis through medical principles – that is a physician’s task – or questions of geometry from principles of geometry – if he did he would be a geometrician. His distinctive property is to syllogize about everything that is put forward through what is approved. What these things approved are will be known a little later.
The orator, though he does not speak about everything as the dialectician does, is not concerned with one determinate genus of things either. He too discusses questions of medicine, of philosophy and of music, but mostly of politics, for questions of civil conduct and political action are considered to be the peculiar subject-matter of the orator. And, like the dialectician, he will develop his argumentative attacks on all his subjects from what is persuasive and approved, for he too attacks by argument on opposite sides of a question and proves the same thing now noble, now ignoble; now expedient, now inexpedient; now just, now unjust. So they have this too in common, that they use their capacity to support both of a pair of opposites. Practitioners of a science have a discernment of opposites, but their scientific aim is determinately one of the two opposites: the better part. The physician’s task is to heal, the massager’s to bring fitness about, and so determinately one thing for each: the better part of the opposites that he deals with. For their discernment of what is opposed to the better part does not precede but follow upon their discernment of this better part: the discernment of what is capable of causing sickness follows upon the scientific knowledge of what produces health. But the dialectician and the orator share the aim of proving opposites. This is why they call these arts capacities, since what is capable in the strict sense is capable of two opposites. There are those who claim they are called capacities because they put their users in a position of capability and superiority, since the many hold such men in admiration as being more capable than others, as well as because their possessors are capable of using them both for good and for evil – this, they say, is why things instrumental to good are also called capacities. But even though all these features too attend them, still they are capacities in the strict sense because they are equally capable of both of a pair of opposites, since the dialectician does not as a dialectician infer one thing rather than its opposite, and so it is with the orator. Characteristics common to them are: that they do not treat one determinate genus of things, that they proceed through what is approved and persuasive, not through principles peculiar to the issue; and that they are applied to both of a pair of opposites.

Differences between them are: that the capacity of dialectic is applied to every subject-matter; that the speeches it produces are not continuous but in question and answer – the origin of its name – and that the assertions it makes are more universal and general. Rhetoric is not to the same extent applied to every subject-matter but more to politics, as we have said before, it uses for the most part continuous speech; and it speaks more about individual things: it frames speeches with reference to circumstances, chance events, junctures, persons, places and the like,

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which are all individual. For lawsuits and speeches of counsel and of praise are about these things.

<1.1 (4) What is a ‘topic’?>

Dialectic thus called is dealt with in other books by Aristotle, but most of all in these, entitled Topics from the fact that in them certain ‘topics’ are offered, starting from which ‘we shall be able to syllogize about everything that has been put forward through things approved’, as Aristotle himself says. For the topic, as Theophrastus says, ‘is a starting-point or element from which we take the starting-points concerning each matter by focusing our thought upon it. It is delimited in compass – for either it includes those common and universal things which are the principal ingredients of syllogisms, or these are at least capable of being proved and obtained from them – but unlimited as to the number of individual instances which come under it’. For starting from these one may be supplied with an approved premiss with respect to the issue: for this is the starting-point. Some postulate that the first book should not be entitled Topics but Preliminary to the Topics, and that the ‘from things approved’ is not necessary, but Aristotle says ‘from things approved’ because it is not possible to syllogize about everything that is put forward from things true, as we have said before. For that pleasure is good as a goal cannot be proved through what is true, since what is to be proved is itself not true, but it can be through what is approved: for if we assume that everything which is choice-worthy, and is so not on account of something else but of itself, is a final good, and if we co-assume that ‘pleasure is of this nature’, which is something approved, then we shall deduce the point at issue. Again, if we assume that what is chosen by all living beings whether brute or rational is most in accordance with nature, and that what is most in accordance with nature is most final, and if after inferring syllogistically that what is chosen by all living beings whether brute or rational is [most according to nature], most final, we co-assume that they all, whether brute or rational, choose pleasure, we will have deduced syllogistically the same conclusion. For since it is for the dialectician to syllogize about everything, and since everything includes things which are untrue, and what is untrue cannot be inferred syllogistically from what is true, it is clear that he will deduce syllogistically (the solution to) problems of this kind not through what is true but what is approved – for it is not impossible for things to be at once untrue and approved. If, on the other hand, he syllogizes not from the approved but from what merely look like things approved, he will not be a dialectician but a sophist, as Aristotle has...