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Dialectics and Sophistic in Classical Greek Philosophy: the case of
Refutation

Ph.D. Dissertation
Summary

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SUMMARY

Amidst the possible types of dialogue that can occur place between two interlocutors, the argumentative dialogue stands out. One of the contemporary definitions of the concept of argumentation is the following:

"Argumentation is a verbal, social, and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint."[1]

The specifications mentioned here are very important because, if the arguments' nature is not the specified one, the purpose of arguing can be missed, i.e. persuading the interlocutor. This phenomenon raises the need of common norms, and following these norms makes the consent possible. When we try to refute what an interlocutor claims we must convince him too about the falsity of his own opinion (or the existent contradiction between two or more of his opinions, i.e. the falsity of the conjunct of these opinions). This is why we need to have in mind the rules for building up a refutation of his opinion(s), rules known also by the interlocutor; otherwise, he would doubt the whole process.

The study of these features is not new and does not belong exclusively to a democratic society existent in the 20th and 21st centuries. The roots of these theoretical insights on the nature of argumentation can be traced back to Classical Greece, pre-socratics such as Zeno of Elea, the sophists, the dialogues of Plato, the Aristotelian

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[1] Frans H. van Eemeren, Rob Grootendorst, *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation. The pragma-dialectical approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 1.

corpus etc. The purpose of this thesis is to analyze, not exhaustively, some of these sources. We have in mind to present a face of ancient Greek dialectic focusing our attention on the context, on the first dialecticians and the methods employed by them, especially the Aristotelian refutation.

Tracing the steps of two of the greatest classical philologists of the 19th century, Jacob Burckhardt (*The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, 1872) and Friedrich Nietzsche (*Homer's Contest*, 1872), we have presented the context in which argumentative dialogues governed by precise rules appeared for the first time in the history of thought. We had all this in mind for explanative purposes regarding some aspects that may seem hard to grasp. For instance, the case of Aristotle's advice to „hide" the course of the argument, this advice may seem an invitation to use sophistry. We have seen that the Classical Age of Greek philosophy existed under the sign of the *agon*. The origin of the Greeks' agonistic spirit can be traced back to poets and rhapsodes such as Homer and Hesiod. Regarding Hesiod (*Works and Days*), two kinds of strife (*eris*) appear: the cruel strife, destructive and bringer of wars and death, and the kind strife, constructive, the one that brings forward the better and virtuous men. Based on the conceptual foundation of the second type of strife, the Greeks organized competitions in many fields: athletics, drama creation, rhetorical discourse etc.. The *agon* reached out of myth to consume, as the titan Chronos, all the parts of Greek life and then gave them back to the world profoundly changed. The ancient Greek philosophers were no exception to this. Zeno of Elea devised arguments against other schools of thought (the others schools retaliating in the same way), the sophists as a movement appeared out of the Greeks' need to be able to hold their own during a dispute in different contexts (political, judiciary, private etc.). Socrates had argumentative exchanges with the sophists or their disciples, while the dialectics of Plato and Aristotle seem to contain elements that try to hide an agonal origin that they wanted to change with a model of dialogue held in purpose of investigation and not competition.

Zeno of Elea is the first thinker whose arguments against other schools of thought or against common sense are extant. In his arguments, we can identify one of the first traces of logical reasoning, and the method he used would be later named, after reaching a determined form, *reductio ad absurdum*. We have seen that the image of Zeno and his arguments had to suffer during the history of philosophy mainly because of two of the main sources of his thought and personality: Plato and Aristotle.

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Zeno can be seen both as a dialectician and as a sophist, and the ancient sources seem to bring arguments for both his alleged images. Regarding his method, we already said that it had a major influence amongst his contemporaries, the sophists and dialecticians alike using the *reductio* in different contexts.

The sophistic movement is the one that brought, if we give credit to the ancient sources, a significant amount of improvement in the field of argumentation. Protagoras of Abdera is presented as the one who invented the rule governed dispute type of discussion (possible by laying down its first norms, since it is obvious that he did not invent the practice itself). In addition, he distinguished between requests, questions, answers, and commands. He was among the firsts inclined to argue about any problem (attitude that is linked to his known relativism). In addition, he was the first to study solecisms and he can be found at the beginning of the tradition of the rhetorical common places (based on the testimony of Cicero and Quintillian). The rhetorical common places, at least in the case of Aristotle, were closely related to the dialectical common places, rhetoric being the counterpart (*antistrophos*) of dialectic. Gorgias, the next great sophist presented, is important in the history of argumentation at least in two aspects. Firstly, he was one of those that argued in an „eleatic manner". The type of argument used in *On nature or the non-existent* is part of an argumentative tradition initiated by Zeno's arguments and contains as an important moment the logical construction regarding the possible hypotheses about the One's existence, realized by Plato in the *Parmenides*. Another aspect in which Gorgias is to be considered relevant is the one concerning his research on the meaning of words. Observing the different meanings of one word is essential both in dialectic and in sophistry (the second dialectical instrument presented by Aristotle focuses on the different meanings of words). Prodicos of Ceos, likewise, is well known for his research on the nature of words, even Socrates considers himself a disciple of Prodicos in this matter (in the *Protagoras* and the *Meno*). He seems to be the first to make a distinction between dialectic and eristic (before Platon in the *Sophist* or Aristotle in the *Prior Analytics* and the *Topics*). In addition, he made the difference between the experts and the nonprofessionals when it comes to judge a dispute. Hippias of Elis is important due to his possible influence on Aristotle. Firstly, his art of memory is very important for the process of learning the common places of dialectic. Secondly, he can be seen as the first historian to critically assess his sources, a model that influenced Aristotle and his dialectical approach to sources (enumerating

endoxa and discussing them until a consistent view emerges concerning a certain problem). The last part of the chapter dedicated to the sophists focused on *Dissoi logoi*, an anonymous treatise that shows that the way Aristotle describes the educational methods of the sophists (using examples and no method) is not far from truth. The text also shows that problems like „can virtue be taught or not?" were common and that this kind of problems were not posed for the first time by the Socrates of Plato. In addition, there are parts on the mnemonic techniques and their use.

The socratic type of refutation (*elenchos*) was treated for its importance and influence on Aristotelian refutation. The first part of the chapter presents (following James H. Lesher's, *Parmenidean elenchos*) the changes in meaning that the Greek term *elenchos* suffered from Homer to the dialogues of Plato. The term meant initially „shame after losing a physical competition or fight" (Homer), and then „testing" and „disgrace following a test" (Pindar), „unveiling virtue" (Bacchylides), „test of character" (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides), „investigation" (Aeschylus). The meaning of refutation was first attached to the term by Herodotus and then by Plato and Aristotle. In the next part of the chapter, we presented the „standard form" of the socratic *elenchos* based on the works of Richard Robinson (*Plato's Earlier dialectic*, 1953) and especially Gregory Vlastos (*The Socratic Elenchus: Method is all*, 1994). We have seen that in every discussion we have the following steps: Socrates's discussion partner proposes a thesis (a definition) and Socrates considers it false; Socrates makes his interlocutor to accept a series of other propositions, usually through induction; then Socrates reveals that the accepted propositions imply other proposition that contradict the interlocutor's initial thesis. Another relevant aspect regards the insistence of Socrates towards the sincerity of his discussion partner. We can identify here a dialogue type that would later be named peirastic (*peirastike*) by Aristotle. Gregory Vlastos observed a problem that exists relatively to the „standard form", problem he named: „the problem of the socratic *elenchos*". Vlastos observed that Socrates could not affirm that he proved by refutation that the interlocutor's thesis is false. He only refuted the conjunct formed by the initial thesis and the other propositions accepted by the interlocutor during discussion. The problem observed by Vlastos brought about new interpretations, for instance Hugh H. Benson's (*Socratic Method*, 2011), that maintains „doxastic coherence" as the purpose of socratic dialogue.

The main part of the thesis is dedicated to Aristotelian dialectics. The first chapter's aim is to cover the main concepts, presented by Aristotle mainly in *Topics* I-VII. Firstly, a dialectical discussion takes place between a Questioner and an Answerer. It is the same that one can find in the socratic dialogues of Plato, having in mind that is different because it discusses many more types of problems (all the four predicables) and there are many more rules. There are two main types of dialectical argument: dialectical induction and dialectical deduction. Dialectical deduction and demonstration are different from each other on three criteria: the nature of the premisses, their purpose of use, their context of use. The dialectical sentence is endoxical, i.e. it has a degree of probability, it is reasonable (or in the case of arguing against the common opinion the sentence should have solid grounding), and based on the reasonability it is accepted by a certain group o people. Aristotle distinguishes between three types of dialectical sentence: dialectical problem, dialectical premise and dialectical thesis. The dialectical problem represents the subject of dialectical discussions and it is expressed in the following way: „is P the definition of S or not?" or „is P the accident of S or not?" The Questioner proposes the dialectical problem and the Answerer chooses one side. This is the starting point of a dialectical discussion. The Questioner needs to obtain concessions from the Answerer. The question by which the Questioner asks for a concession and the concession itself is the dialectical premise (its form is the following: „is P the genus of S?"). When the Questioner has enough concessions made by the Answerer in order to construct a syllogism whose conclusion is contrary or contradictory to the Answerer's thesis, then he can put forward that syllogism and the discussion is over. This final syllogism is the refutation. Another important concept is the dialectical instrument. There are four dialectical instruments: finding premises, distinguishing between the different meanings of one word, finding the likeness in things, finding differences in things. Without the mastery of these instruments, the Questioner will fail in conducting a dialectical discussion (since he has the initiative). The Answerer found in the same situation will not be able to follow the Questioner's line of reasoning and the Questioner will refute him without difficulty.

One of the problems related to Aristotelian predication results from the problem of the relation between predicables and categories. A model was presented by using tables to represent more clearly the possibilities of combination between the

two concepts. In a future project, we plan to discuss the Aristotelian predication as related to his dialectic.

The following step was to present the main concept of Aristotle's dialectic, the dialectical *topos*. We started with its etymology, then the different proposals to define the *topos*, its structure (strategy, rule, purpose and example) and then we tried to present a way of interpretation: the *topos* is the feature of the Answerer's thesis that makes it vulnerable to refutation.

The next chapter's purpose was to present the rules and recommendations made by Aristotle regarding the rules of a dialectical discussion. We presented in synthetic table form (tables that include ways a discussion can end, what can the Questioner utter, what can the Answerer say etc.) what Aristotle tells us in the *Topics* VIII.

Finally, when we presented the Aristotelian refutation we reached the following positive results: for Aristotle refutation is different from *reductio*, the refutation is a particular type of syllogism and needs to be formed regarding two sets of rules: the general rules of the syllogism and the particular rules of a dialectical dispute. In addition, the Questioner knows the exact structure of the refutation in the moment the Answerer chooses his thesis. He will also know how easily he will be able to apply the argumentative strategies proposed by Aristotle in *Topics* VIII. The dialectical context is essential to understand the way Aristotle classifies the sophistical refutations and all the sophistical refutations ca be reduced to *ignoratio elenchi*, i.e. the sophism which ignores the definition of the refutation.

We can say that Aristotle ascribes to himself justly the claim that he was the first to present a method of arguing against any type of thesis (as Questioner) or defend any kind of thesis (as Answerer). He made it possible for argumentation to leave the *empeiria* of the sophists and reach the stage of *techne*, art. This „dialectical art" influenced ever since logic, rhetoric and argumentation in general (a few examples of disciplines influenced: *disputatio* and *obligationes* in the medieval times, following a tradition that has Cicero's *Topicics* and Boethius's commentaries on Cicero and Aristotle as important moments, and dialogue logic, formal dialectic and pragma-dialectics today).

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