Notes on Aristotle’s *Topics*

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The *Topics* is one of Aristotle’s earliest works, and also one of his most puzzling. What is a topic? What are the topics topics of? These questions don’t have very clear answers. Aristotle never defines ‘topic.’ The Greek word is *topos* (plural, *topoi*); Cicero uses the Latin *locus* (plural, *loci*). Both mean ‘place.’ So, the title might easily be translated *Places*. But that doesn’t help at all, since this isn’t a discourse on geography. What are places?\(^1\)

1 Dialectic

The chief subject matter of the *Topics* appears to be dialectic. But that too needs clarification. What is dialectic? A dialectical argument, Aristotle says, reasons from shared or reputable opinions (*endoxa*, 100a22, 100a30). Demonstration or deduction proper reasons deductively from first principles, principles which are true and primitive, and “should command belief in and by” themselves (100b20). Dialectic in contrast reasons from shared or reputable opinions, those “accepted by everyone or by the majority or by the wise” (100b21). These opinions are familiar as Aristotle’s starting points in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and other works.

Aristotle’s characterization of *endoxa* is surprisingly disjunctive—“accepted by everyone or by the majority or by the wise”—and raises some questions of its own. Though Brunschwig and others translate *endoxa* as ‘reputable opinions’, Aristotle distinguishes the majority and the wise. He has great respect for the opinion of the majority, as his methodology in other works shows, but the opinion of the majority often differs from that of the wise, and Aristotle’s opinion often differs from both. So, ‘shared beliefs’ might be better. Eleonore Stump uses ‘readily believable’ in translating Boethius; we might also use ‘plausible.’\(^2\)

Robert Stalnaker defines the common ground of a conversation as the set of beliefs the participants share. In the context of a discussion or debate, what might seem to matter are the beliefs the participants share. So, we could also interpret the *endoxa* as the common ground, the beliefs shared by the relevant parties.

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\(^1\)The title isn’t as random as it might at first appear. Aristotle has in mind an analogy with feats of memory, in which one associates items to be memorized with places.

The common ground in this sense may differ from the endoxa as Aristotle defines them:

- The common ground may include more than endoxa. The purest case is where there is no opinion on some given subject matter that the majority or the wise share, but the participants to the conversation do share such an opinion. Maybe there are no religious endoxa, for example. But a conversation among Presbyterians might take as common ground many shared beliefs.

- The common ground may include less than endoxa. Imagine a conversation among dissidents from the majority view or the view of the wise or both. They may reject the beliefs of the majority of the wise. If the conversation includes one dissident (or dissidents with differing views) the common ground may be much smaller than in the society at large. If it includes a group of dissidents who see eye-to-eye, the common ground may include a great deal that is inconsistent with the endoxa.

Ambiguities may make apparent agreements merely apparent. Everyone might agree that human actions aim ultimately at happiness, for example, but disagree about what happiness is. Or, the majority might agree that there is a God, but people might have very different conceptions of God. This can happen at the level of endoxa as well as that of the common ground. It’s not surprising, then, that Aristotle devotes part of Book I to identifying ambiguities. Agreement is sometimes only apparent. The same holds of disagreement; some disputes are merely semantic.

The relation of endoxa to the common ground, moreover, may shift as the discussion proceeds. Socrates, for example, often takes an opinion that seems acceptable to the other participants and shows that it faces problems, contradicting other opinions. They proceed to change their minds, abandoning their earlier beliefs. Neither endoxa nor the common ground is stationary. In fact, dialectical reasoning is dynamic, intending, in many of its applications, at least, at belief revision or persuasion—both of which involve changes in the common ground.

What sort of reasoning is dialectical reasoning, in this sense, meant to elucidate? The immediate inspiration seems to be the reasoning of the Platonic dialogues. But this is not merely an exegesis of Plato. There are a number of possible answers:

**Debate.** Richard Sorabji takes dialectic as “a debate between two people or the inner debate of one thinker with himself.” Paul Slomkowski similarly interprets the Topics as “a handbook on how to win a debate organized in a certain way.” And indeed much of the Topics reads like a debate manual; Aristotle tells us how to select issues for fruitful debate, how to counter an opponent’s moves, and so on. The Topics, viewed in this light, is the foundation

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for what would eventually become the medieval and post-medieval theory of disputatio

Conversation. Alexander of Aphrodisias conjectures that dialectic derives from dialegesthai, 'to converse,' and so sees dialectic as the art of conversation, which he takes to have a question-and-answer form. He sees dialectical reasoning as proceeding on the basis of what has been put forward in the process of questioning and answering.

On the debate and conversation models of dialectic, the common ground understanding seems more plausible than the shared or reputable belief understanding. Reasoning proceeds not only on the basis of reputable opinion but also on the basis of what the opponent or conversational partner asserts or is willing to concede. If the interlocutor isn’t in the majority, and isn’t wise, or at any rate does not fully share the opinions of the wise, then the basis for dialectical reasoning may include opinions that are not reputable—indeed, that contradict reputable opinion. So, on such conceptions, it would be misleading to think of dialectic as reasoning from endoxa, or even from endoxa supplemented with an interlocutor’s opinions.

But neither should we draw an analogy with counterfactuals and think of the basis as the reputable opinions altered minimally to make them consistent with additional opinions accepted by one’s conversational companions, for trapping them in an inconsistency is precisely the point of dialectic (AT 3, 1:20). Alexander therefore takes dialectic to be reasoning on the basis of “what is approved” (AT 3, 1:23), that is, what interlocutors accept, whether true or false, and whether reputable or not. One who engages in dialectic uses broadly shared or reputable opinions as premises, but only insofar as conversational partners admit them.

Inquiry. We might take dialectical reasoning as the reasoning of inquiry, in ordinary as well as scientific contexts. Typically, one participant takes a stand—advances a hypothesis, makes a conjecture, etc.—and another seeks ambiguities, raises objections, makes criticisms, or defends a contrary position. We might take this kind of reasoning, in short, as that involved in hypothesis testing. The overall point, from this perspective, is not to win the debate, but to winnow out or revise hypotheses. The perspective that matters isn’t so much that of the debaters but of the audience trying to distill a lesson from the discussion.

Argument Construction. Cicero sees the central project of the Topics rather differently. Aristotle, he contends, investigates “the system for the discovery of arguments.” Logic, Cicero holds, consists of two parts, “one of discovering, one of deciding” (T, 2)—that is, of argument construction and argument evaluation. He sees the Topics as providing the theory of argument construction, and the Prior Analytics as providing the theory of argument evaluation. He sees the Stoics as having examined the art of dialectic, but classifies it under the art of argument evaluation, presumably because it requires evaluating the positions of one’s interlocutors. And, indeed, if one takes Socrates as the model of one prac-

6Cicero, Topics (hereafter, T), translated by C. D. Yonge, 1.
ticing dialectic, this seems fair enough; Socrates argues against positions taken by others, but rarely advances arguments for his own conclusions. Boethius follows Cicero: “The purpose of the Topics is the easy discovery of arguments” (ICT, 29).

However we are to understand dialectical reasoning, it has a number of distinctive features. It is context-sensitive, to the particular participants of the conversation at a given point in time (on the common ground conception) and to the generally shared opinions of the community at a time (on the broadly shared or reputable conception). It is relative to those sharing the relevant beliefs. Its conclusions are not guaranteed to be true. The reasoning itself must be valid, but it proceeds on the basis of shared opinions which may or may not be true.

Does ‘valid’ here refer just to deductive validity? There are some hints that that’s too narrow a conception. Aristotle speaks of inductive arguments as part of dialectic. Also, he indicates that dialectic gives us ways to argue for conclusions as well as their negations. If we start from endoxa and use deductively valid forms of argument alone, that’s possible only if the endoxa are inconsistent. Aristotle moreover speaks of dialectic as interrogative, asking questions and finding answers. It’s hard to fit that within a strictly deductive framework.  

2 Commonplaces

It might seem, then, skill at dialectic involves having at hand a stock of widely shared or reputable opinions about matters relevant to the subject matter of the debate. If the debate concerns economics, for example, one needs to be well-versed in reputable opinions about economics. If it concerns astronomy, one needs to be well-versed in reputable opinions about astronomy. And this is true, Aristotle maintains, when it comes to rhetoric, which concerns itself with special topics. But the topics Aristotle wants to investigate here are common topics. They are universal. They apply regardless of subject matter. So, what Aristotle is after are widely shared, reputable, readily believed, plausible opinions about things that apply across various fields—that pertain to debates on any subject matter—in roughly the way that logic applies across fields. They must moreover apply no matter which side of an issue one is arguing. These topic-neutral, widely applicable opinions he calls koinoi topoi, in context usually translated as commonplaces.

Aristotle, as we’ve seen, never defines commonplaces in the Topics, though he does offer a definition in the Rhetoric: something “embracing a large number of particular kinds of enthymeme” (1403a18-19), that is, as a kind of enthymematic argument, or, more directly, as a missing premise—a principle which, added to other premises, yields a conclusion. Theophrastus defines them as “general principles” (“A Topic is a principle (arche) and element (stoicheon) from which we draw propositions that serve as a basis for reasonings on a proposed question;
it is determinate as to circumscription (perigraphe . . . horismenos) and undetermined as to particular applications (kath’ hekasta aoristos)” (AT, 126)), and Alexander understands them as “starting-points,” places from which arguments begin (AT 5.1.22); Cicero defines them as “seats from which arguments are derived,” that is, bases or foundations of arguments (T, 2): “Therefore we may give as a definition, that a topic is the seat of an argument, and that an argument is a reason which causes men to believe a thing which would otherwise be doubtful.” Boethius defines them as maximally general principles that serve as basic assumptions or axioms (ICT, 33). We’ll understand them as generalizations that, collectively, constitute a significant part of what we today call common sense. Their logical form remains unclear; Aristotle at some points seems to take them as universal generalizations, but, as we’ll see, that can’t be right for many of the commonplaces he identifies.

Before elaborating on commonplaces, however, Aristotle draws some distinctions that help to organize the commonplaces. He then discusses meaning, and in particular how to identify ambiguities. This seems like a digression. But Aristotle thinks that many debates revolve around meanings—that many disagreements result from using terms in different senses. So, getting clear about meanings is a prerequisite for productive debate.

3 Essence, Property, Genus, and Accident

Aristotle builds much of his philosophy on the distinction between essential and accidental properties. The distinctions he draws in the Topics, however, are not exactly the same as those drawn in the much-more-familiar Metaphysics. They have some features in common. In both, a definition is the formula of an essence: “A ‘definition’ is a phrase (logos) signifying a thing’s essence (to ti en einai)” (I, 5, 101b36); “The essence, the formula of which is a definition, is also called the substance of each thing” (Metaphysics 1017b22-23).

In the Topics, Aristotle sets up a four-fold classification of predicables. Essences are expressed by definitions. Properties (idia) are equivalent to essences without being essences: “A ‘property’ is a predicate which does not indicate the essence of a thing, but yet belongs to that thing alone, and is predicated convertibly of it” (102a18-19). ‘A plane figure bounded by straight lines with three interior angles’ defines ‘triangle’ and so expresses the essence of a triangle. ‘A plane figure bounded by three straight lines’, ‘a plane figure bounded by straight lines whose interior angles total 180 degrees’, etc., express properties. Since this isn’t a standard use of ‘property’, it’s probably better to translate this differently, or leave it untranslated. (Many commentators use the Latin word proprium, plural propria, for this.)

Let’s start with the terms as explained in the Metaphysics, beginning with essence. Aristotle uses two phrases for essences: to ti esti, “what it is,” and to ti en einai, “the what it is to be” a thing. An essence is expressed by a definition (horismos). What is essential to a thing? What it is kath’ hauto, in respect of itself. He links this directly to essence in one phrasing: “what belongs to a
thing in respect of itself belongs to it in its essence \((en \ ti \ ti \ esti)\)” \((\text{Posterior Analytics}, \ 73a345)\); “the essence of a thing is what it is said to be in respect of itself” \((\text{Metaphysics} \ 1029b14)\).

Some interpreters distinguish between a thing’s essence \((to \ ti \ esti)\) and its very essence \((to \ ti \ en \ einai)\). And indeed essence seems to be used in several senses in Aristotle. The essence of a thing is:

- what it is to be that thing \((to \ ti \ en \ einai)\)
- what it is in itself, by virtue of itself, per se \((kath’ \ auto)\)
- what it is necessarily
- what its definition specifies
- what makes it what it is (its nature) \((\text{See Metaphysics} \ 1014b37, 1015a12-14)\)

Aquinas later distinguishes these; for him, what a thing is necessarily, by virtue of itself, is its essence; what makes it what it is is its nature; what its definition expresses is its quiddity, its whatness. Aquinas holds that these are all equivalent. But Locke distinguishes them, treating the nature as the real essence of the thing, and the quiddity as the nominal essence.

In any case, it seems clear that what a thing is in virtue of itself, or what it is necessarily, is broader than what its definition signifies. It’s no accident that Aristotle here defines essence (the very essence, \(to \ ti \ en \ einai\)) as what the definition expresses, and takes \(propria\) (\(idia\)) as things that flow from the very essence without being themselves of the very essence. He links those to essence in the \(to \ ti \ esti\) sense.

The genus is of course a natural answer to “What is it?” So, we can understand these distinctions as follows:

- **Essence**: what it is to be this thing \((to \ ti \ en \ einai)\)
- **Propria**: what this thing is \((idia, \ to \ ti \ esti)\)
- **Genus**: what kind of thing this is \((genos)\)
- **Accident**: what this thing happens to be \((sumbebekos)\)

Aristotle gives differing definitions of \(sumbebekos\), ‘accident’ \((\text{Metaphysics} \ V, 30)\):

‘Accident’ means (1) that which attaches to something and can be truly asserted, but neither of necessity nor usually, e.g. if some one in digging a hole for a plant has found treasure. This—the finding of treasure—is for the man who dug the hole an accident; for neither does the one come of necessity from the other or after the other, nor, if a man plants, does he usually find treasure. And a musical man might be pale; but since this does not happen of necessity nor
usually, we call it an accident. Therefore since there are attributes and they attach to subjects, and some of them attach to these only in a particular place and at a particular time, whatever attaches to a subject, but not because it was this subject, or the time this time, or the place this place, will be an accident. Therefore, too, there is no definite cause for an accident, but a chance cause, i.e. an indefinite one. Going to Aegina was an accident for a man, if he went not in order to get there, but because he was carried out of his way by a storm or captured by pirates. The accident has happened or exists, not in virtue of the subject’s nature, however, but of something else; for the storm was the cause of his coming to a place for which he was not sailing, and this was Aegina.

‘Accident’ has also (2) another meaning, i.e. all that attaches to each thing in virtue of itself but is not in its essence, as having its angles equal to two right angles attaches to the triangle. And accidents of this sort may be eternal, but no accident of the other sort is.

‘Accident’ in this second sense appears equivalent to propria as understood in the *Topics*. The first sense is more familiar, but has a surprising aspect. If an accident is asserted truly, but neither necessarily nor usually, it must hold of something contingently. It must also hold atypically—a point that Aristotle and the tradition springing from his work generally ignores, but which he specifies when he gives a careful definition of ‘accident.’

In the *Topics*, Aristotle gives two definitions of ‘accident’, one negative, one positive. The negative one says simply that an accident belongs to a thing without being a definition or a proprium or a genus. The positive one is more helpful: “something which may either belong or not belong to any one and the self-same thing” (I, 5, 102b6-7). In short, an accident is a contingent property of a thing.

It’s important to realize, however, that Aristotle also uses *sumbebekos* as a catchall term for properties in general. He argues, for example, that accidents are the easiest to establish, and the hardest to refute, for “in other cases one has to prove not only that the predicate belongs, but also that it belongs in such and such a way; whereas in the case of the accident it is enough to prove merely that it belong” (155a28-32). If he were using the term in accordance with his official definition, this would make no sense, for one would have to pay attention to how it belongs by showing that it is not a definition or a proprium or a genus.

Brunschwig has argued that the same problem afflicts all these terms, and that Aristotle wavers between inclusive and exclusive readings of essence, proprium, genus, and accident. Whether this is true or not, he surely does waver in his usage of *sumbebekos*.

Why does any of this matter to the project of the *Topics*? Aristotle is about to present us with a collection of general principles, starting points for arguments, that allow us to construct arguments, win debates, test hypotheses. He organizes them according to this division or predicables.