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Aristotle on Rhetoric and Teaching*

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ABSTRACT:

Aristotle follows the Socrates of Plato's Gorgias in contrasting rhetoric with teaching. For him, premises of arguments must in rhetoric be reputable (endoxa), but in teaching be archai of the relevant science. And teaching requires recognition of the speaker's authority, rhetoric does not. Like Socrates, he thinks teaching but not rhetoric requires knowledge of your subject. Unlike Socrates, Aristotle does not for this reason reject rhetoric as dangerous, but accepts it as useful for public and interpersonal deliberation.

KEYWORDS:

Aristotle, endoxa, rhetoric, teaching, authority, knowledge

As with other things, so with rhetoric, having a clear view of what it is will enable you to distinguish it from other similar things with which it might be confused. And perhaps distinguishing rhetoric from those things will shed important light on rhetoric itself (or on those things). Throughout antiquity, the philosophical discussion of rhetoric frequently involves comparing it with dialectic and highlighting differences and similarities. Although that remains, in my view, a rich area of research, it is not my focus here. Here, I am concerned with how Aristotle compared rhetoric and teaching and how he distinguished the two. He was not, of course, the first to do so. Rhetoric and teaching are contrasted early on in Plato's *Gorgias*.

> SOCRATES : Now, do you think that to have learned, and learning, are the same as to be convinced and conviction, or different?
>
> GORGIAS : I certainly suppose that they're different, Socrates. (454d)[1]

1 Translations of the *Gorgias* are from (Zeyl, 1987).

…

SOCRATES : Would you like us then to posit two types of persuasion, one providing conviction without knowledge, the other providing knowledge?

GORGIAS : Yes, I would.

SOCRATES : Now which type of persuasion does oratory produce in law courts and other gatherings concerning things that are just and unjust? The one that results in being convinced without knowing or the one that results in knowing?

GORGIAS : It's obvious, surely, that it's the one that results in conviction.

SOCRATES : So evidently oratory produces the persuasion that comes from being convinced, and not the persuasion that comes from teaching, concerning what's just and unjust.

GORGIAS : Yes.

SOCRATES : And so an orator is not a teacher of law courts and other gatherings about things that are just and unjust, either, but merely a persuader, for I don't suppose that he could teach such a large gathering about matters so important in a short time.

GORGIAS : No, he certainly couldn't. (454e-455a)

In this passage, the large category is 'persuasion' (*peitho*), which seems to be simply the process of causing someone to change their mind by speaking to them. And within this, rhetoric produces conviction (*pistis*) and teaching produces understanding (*episteme*). For Socrates in the *Gorgias*, this forms the basis for a criticism of rhetoric – that it is not knowledge-based, and thus it is a dangerous practice used by the ignorant on the ignorant. Aristotle inherits much of this way of dividing the territory, and in particular will recognise that rhetoric and teaching have significant things in common, but differ in important ways, such that it is right to deploy them differently.

I propose to set out some of the key contours of Aristotle's view of what the expertise of rhetoric is, and then what some of the key features of teaching are, for him. I shall then return to a pair of related passages, one from the *Topics*, one from the *Rhetoric*, that contrast both rhetoric and dialectic with teaching. This will highlight ways in which Aristotle recognised the limitations of teaching, and (unlike Socrates of the *Gorgias*[2]) recommended a useful role for rhetoric.

2 See however Erler in this volume for different view.

Rhetoric

Aristotle famously starts his *Rhetoric* as follows:

> Rhetoric is a counterpart to dialectic. For both are concerned with things that are such as to be, in a way, common to everyone to get to know, and that relate to no specific body of knowledge. This explains why everyone also, in a way, possesses something of both. For to an extent everyone engages in criticising and maintaining an argument and in defending and accusing people. Now in the general population, some do these things at random, others because of practice do them from ability. Because both of these are possible, it is clear that there would also be a way of doing these things methodically. For where success is achieved by some because of practice and by others from their own ability, it is possible to study the explanation for this: and just such a thing all would agree is the function of an expertise. (1354a1-11)[3]

Here in a swift 11 lines, the position of Socrates in the *Gorgias* is dismissed. Rhetoric's role is assimilated (as "counterpart") to the esteemed role of dialectic, not to the discreditable role of pastry-baking.[4] Socrates had denied the possibility of a genuine expertise (or art - *technê*) in rhetoric: Aristotle here, in a few quick moves, establishes the possibility of one, that is to say of a methodical practice founded (as with all other expertises) on knowing what explains the non-accidental success of expert practitioners, and therefore capable of explaining that successful practice.[5] One suspects that the swiftness of this move, and its appearance in the opening lines of the treatise, imply that by the time of writing, it was not an especially controversial point. Or at least it was not an issue that Aristotle was interested in devoting much time to. Rhetoric is an expertise that enables a person to achieve the same kind of non-accidental success in its area of application that dialectical expertise enables a person to achieve in its area of application. Those areas of application are not marked out by a

3 Translations of the *Rhetoric* are the author's own.

4 Cf. Socrates at *Gorgias* 465b-d.

5 Cf. Socrates at *Gorgias* 465a: there is no expertise of rhetoric because it cannot explain its goals or its methods, and possibly also because it does not have an identifiable valuable product or goal (464e-465a).

distinctive subject matter (as might be the case with the expertise of geometry), but by distinctive activities. Dialectical expertise enables success in criticising and maintaining an argument (and perhaps certain things closely related to these).[6] Rhetoric enables success in defending and accusing people (and things closely related to these).[7] Both are underpinned by an explanation of how success in these things is achieved and hence imply support for methodically achieved success.

Aristotle's next argument in the *Rhetoric* is interesting, and pivotal for an understanding of what he thinks rhetoric is. But before we turn to it, it will be important to look at a key term used in that passage, the term *pistis*. Here is the start of the *De Anima.*

> Holding as we do that, while knowledge of any kind is a thing to be honoured and prized, one kind of it may, either by reason of its greater exactness or of a higher dignity and greater wonderfulness in its objects, be more honourable and precious than another, on both accounts we should naturally be led to place in the front rank the study of the soul. The knowledge of the soul admittedly contributes greatly to the advance of truth in general, and, above all, to our understanding of Nature, for the soul is in some sense the principle of animal life. Our aim is to grasp and understand, first its essential nature, and secondly its properties; of these some are thought to be affections proper to the soul itself, while others are considered to attach to the animal owing to the presence of soul. To attain any *pistis* about the soul is one of the most difficult things in the world. (402a1-11)[8]

What is it that it is so difficult to get, in connection with the soul? It is not difficult to get beliefs about the soul – people are convinced about all kinds of things about the soul, in Aristotle's day, including the intellectual predecessors whose views he is about to survey. It is also not fiendishly difficult to attain persuasion regarding the soul. Plenty of poets, priests, speculators and ordinary people had achieved *that*. No. Aristotle's

6 1354a5. Aristotle's view might be more fully indicated by his remarks in *Topics* 1.2 about the activities for which his work in the *Topics* and *SE* is valuable.

7 1354a5-6.

8 Translations of Aristotle other than the *Rhetoric* are from (Barnes, 1984) unless otherwise stated (here the last sentence is adapted – Smith tendentiously has "knowledge" where I have left *pistis* untranslated).

complaint is that there are not solid grounds for drawing conclusions about the soul, solid grounds that might justify your confidence in what you had concluded about the soul. And this is confirmed by the ensuing explanation which centres on the fact that there is not any established method for inquiring about what the soul is or its further properties, no method that would establish conclusions about the soul from known premises and ultimately first principles of a relevant science. The key point for us here is the meaning of *pistis*. It means something like "proof" (although without the factive implication that "proof" has in English), or solid grounds for conviction. And notice that Aristotle is not arguing for such a meaning of *pistis* in this passage. He is simply using the ordinary meaning of *pistis* in Greek – that is, it is part of the very meaning of the word *pistis* that what it applies to not only convinces (or is intended to convince), but that it *should* convince (or incline one to be convinced).

Let us return to where we broke off in the *Rhetoric* to see how this shows up in the argument that ensues.[9]

> These days, those who put together Arts of Speaking have provided us with scarcely a part of it. For it is only the proofs that belong to the art, other things are mere accessories. But they say nothing about enthymemes, which are the body of proof; whereas they devote most of their treatment to things that are outside the issue. For slander, and pity and anger and passions of the soul of this kind are not about the issue, but aimed at the juror. (1354a11-18)

The above uses "proofs" to translate the Greek *pistis*. The Revised Oxford Translation (W. Rhys Roberts) uses "modes of persuasion". The key issue here is whether or not *pistis* has a normative element to its meaning – as I suggested it does in ordinary Greek (or at least the kind that Aristotle can simply presuppose in his readers) – so as to mean something like "proper grounds for conviction" or "something that should incline you to be convinced" or more simply "proof" (if we can subtract its factive implication). The passage shows that it must have this normative implication, because otherwise the

9 I defend, in (Dow, 2015), this view at greater length and show how this interpretation fits plausibly across the ensuing chapters of the treatise (i.e. arguing against views on which Aristotle's view, or the meaning of *pistis* changes between different parts of the *Rhetoric*), 41-47, arguing against a number of rival views, particularly those of (Primavesi, 1987), and (Rapp, 2002).

argument simply doesn't work.[10] And in showing this, we will also uncover the core of Aristotle's view of what the essential core of rhetorical expertise is.

The argument's conclusion is the first sentence. The current handbook writers have told us virtually nothing about rhetoric. What follows is introduced by "for" and supplies an argument to support this conclusion. In fact, it supplies a multi-stage argument. Here is the first stage.

1. The Handbook Writers have told us nothing about proofs.
2. Only the proofs belong to the art.

THEREFORE

3. The Handbook Writers have told us nothing about the only thing that belongs to the art.

THEREFORE

4. The Handbook Writers have told us nothing[11] about the art.

The second stage of the argument offers support for the first premise as follows.

1. The Handbook Writers have said nothing about enthymemes.
2. Enthymemes are the main part of proof.

THEREFORE

3. The Handbook Writers have said nothing about the main part of proof.

And that is a reason to suppose that they have told us nothing about proofs, provided we grant that enthymemes are the main part of proof (the "body of proof"). Enthymemes are a type of reasoned argument, and it is easy to see why they would be an example of something that offers proper grounds for conviction, or the kind of thing that (supposing that its inferential structure was good, and its premises had epistemic merit) *should* incline someone to be convinced. That *pistis* must carry the normative

10 Cf. (Dow, 2024) for an argument to the same conclusion based on 1355a3-14, a passage which links '*pistis*' directly with the epistemologically loaded term '*apodeixis*' (demonstration) used in Aristotelian logic.

11 I have simplified the conclusion from Aristotle's slightly more cautious version in which he says they have provided "pretty much" a "small part" or "no part", depending on which textual reading one opts for.

meaning I've suggested is clearer in the next part of the argument. I have supplied the unstated premise 2, which Aristotle takes for granted.

1. Most of what the Handbook Writers offer is guidance on speaking irrelevantly.
2. Speaking irrelevantly [to x] cannot constitute proof [of any particular view of x].

THEREFORE

3. Most of what the Handbook Writers offer says nothing about proofs.

This is also a reason for supposing that they have, in the end, told us nothing about proofs. But notice that the argument is only sound if we understand the meaning of *pistis* in the normative way I have suggested (i.e. as meaning proof not mode-of-persuasion). Otherwise, the unstated premise 2 above is simply false. Can speaking irrelevantly constitute proof? No. Obviously not. Can speaking irrelevantly constitute a mode of persuasion (i.e. something that causes you to be persuaded)? Yes. Obviously it can, as is demonstrated by virtually every extant ancient orator! Unless *pistis* is understood normatively as above, the argument has an obviously false premise and does not provide support for its conclusion.[12] Understood in the way I have suggested, its conclusion follows and provides support for Aristotle's main argument in this passage.

That the handbook writers have told us nothing (or virtually nothing) about the only thing that belongs to the expertise of rhetoric (i.e. about proofs) is an excellent reason for supposing that they have told us nothing about *rhetoric*!

Of course, much hinges on the second premise of the main argument, the premise "only the proofs belong to the expertise [of rhetoric]". This premise states the core of Aristotle's view of rhetoric. It is an expertise in producing proofs – thing that give listeners proper grounds for being convinced. He spells out the implications for how useless his predecessors were in typically swashbuckling fashion:

> If this is correct, then it is plain that those people are *offering an expertise in irrelevance [i.e. not in rhetoric!]*, when they draw distinctions about these other

12 It is clearer still that the inference comes out unsound on the suggestion, (Primavesi, 1987), that '*hai pisteis*' refers to a particular section of the speech.

> things, such as what the introduction or narrative should contain or each of the other parts of the speech … (1354b16-19)[13]

One might worry that Aristotle is simply changing the subject here, and not really meeting his opponents head on. He asserts that rhetoric is an expertise in providing proofs, and that alone. But that is surely tendentious. Why believe that? If you are a follower of the tradition of Gorgias or Thrasymachus, you are not going to accept that. Rhetoric, for these thinkers, was more like a boxing match,[14] and what made something part of rhetoric was whether it contributed to making your speech *powerful* in overthrowing your political or forensic opponent. Rhetoric for this tradition is about power, and if something is a powerful tool of speech, it is *ipso facto* part of the expertise of rhetoric, regardless of whether it really ought to sway your listeners. Aristotle disagrees, and in saying that only the proofs belong to the expertise of rhetoric, he is asserting his view over against theirs. Asserting, not yet justifying. The next arguments offer an insight into what his justification for his own view was.

> The result is that if all judgements were conducted the way they actually are today in a mere handful of cities – principally those with the best governance – they would have nothing to say. For everyone thinks that this should be what the laws declare, whereas [only] some actually implement this and forbid speaking outside the subject at hand, as they also do in the Areopagus, and they are quite correct to have this rule. For one shouldn't warp the judge by bringing him into anger or envy or pity. For that would be like someone warping the ruler he is about to use. Moreover it is plain that the job of the disputants is nothing beyond demonstrating the matter at hand – is it the case or isn't it? Has it happened or hasn't it? Whether it is important or trivial or legitimate or illegitimate, to the extent that the legislator has not defined these things, surely the judge should find these things out for himself not learn them from the disputants. (1354a18-31)

What is the conclusion of the first argument invoking the procedural rules of cities as they would be if they were well-governed? It's granted already that most of what the

13 εἰ δὲ ταῦθ' οὕτως ἔχει, φανερὸν ὅτι τὰ ἔξω τοῦ πράγματος τεχνολογοῦσιν ὅσοι τἆλλα διορίζουσιν, οἷον τί δεῖ τὸ προοίμιον ἢ τὴν διήγησιν ἔχειν, καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστον μορίων·

14 Cf. Thrasymachus DK 85B7; Gorgias *Helen* (DK 82B11) 8.49-14.93; Plato *Gorgias* 456a-457c.

handbook writers offered instruction on was how to sway your audience by speaking irrelevantly, and that this actually worked. They offered pre-packaged speeches that could be used, with little or no adaptation, for the client's situation, and some of these even survive.[15] Their expertise was in irrelevant speaking. And now, seemingly we get the rather vacuous assertion that if things were different, and they were in a context where irrelevant speaking were banned, they'd be a bit stuck. Well, yes. But that risks being a vacuous argument. This group's rhetorical methods have feature X. If they were in a hypothetical situation in which speeches with feature X were banned, they would not have anything to say. This will hold for all values of X, and if this is the correct construal of the argument, it reveals nothing new whatsoever about the handbook writers' methods. Better, though, to construe the argument a different way. The key claim here is that this is how states *should* be regulated. Why would it matter if the handbook writers' techniques were at odds with how the state *should* regulate public speaking (given that actual real-world states do *not* regulate in this way)? The answer, I think, is that Aristotle is inviting us to see rhetoric as an expertise whose nature is determined by its role in a *well-functioning* state. The competitive exercise of rhetoric in the assemblies and lawcourts contributes not just (and perhaps not even primarily) to the interests of those giving speeches, but to the successful functioning of the state. Orators, for all that they compete for their preferred view or for their own side of a legal case, are contributing to public deliberation, and expertise in rhetoric is an expertise in discharging that role well – not just in getting the result you want, but doing so in a way that successfully serves the civic role of the orator within the processes of the state. Rhetoric, correctly understood, is something that is required, cherished and protected within a well-functioning state. If what you are engaged in would be banned in a well-functioning state, then it isn't rhetoric.[16]

This is not enough to rebut the charge of having changed the subject. Aristotle is arguably defining rhetoric in this particular way, thinking of it as "aimed at some good" (as he says every expertise is in *EN* 1.1, 1094a1-2), and on that basis emphasising the centrality of proofs to rhetoric and that irrelevant speaking doesn't count as rhetoric.

15 e.g. Thrasymachus DK 85B1, and cf. the list of his works at 85A1. Cf. Aristotle's comment on Gorgias's and others' method of teaching rhetoric at *SE* 34.183b36-184a8.

16 This view is defended in more detail in (Dow, 2015) ch.3, and situated against rival interpretations in ch.5. There is surprisingly little recognition in the literature of the role of the civic context in which rhetoric is exercised in determining what rhetoric itself is; but see (Engberg-Pedersen, 1996) for an exception.

But his Thrasymachean opponent might define rhetoric as simply the powerful use of speech to get people to think and do as you choose, and on that definition techniques in irrelevant speaking are very much a part of the expertise. Is it a purely verbal disagreement? Has Aristotle merely stipulated his own preferred account of rhetoric? Not entirely. He has, in a way, changed the subject. But his arguments here imply the superiority of his own view. Everyone agrees, he says, that states should regulate public speaking in such a way as to rule out irrelevant speaking. There is a sense in which, if this is correct, everyone shares this view of the place of speechmaking in a well-functioning state.[17] Aristotle is here, I think, appealing to his readers to uphold his preferred view of rhetoric. Perhaps there are many kinds of things you could call "rhetoric", many ways you could define that term. But what we are interested in here is this: of the various different things that might plausibly be termed "rhetoric", which of them might be worth cultivating in oneself and others, and worth carving out institutional space for in the state. In other words, what kind of conception of "rhetoric" do we *want*? Aristotle's point here is that the handbook writers' techniques belong only within a conception of "rhetoric" that is unattractive to us when we think of its place in the state. Those techniques have their place in the kind of rhetoric we want to get rid of. Aristotle's proof-centred conception of rhetoric is one that coheres with the kind of persuasion we want to see in our states, regulated as we'd ideally like them to be.

In the middle of the passage, notice the reference to the "carpenter's rule" (*kanon*).[18] Two things are noteworthy here. One is that the ruler serves the purposes of the carpenter, and the carpenter in this analogy is the orator. So, the appeal to the place of oratory in the well-ordered state might invite the objection that this ignores the important role of rhetoric in serving the personal, individual or private interests of the speaker. Perhaps, the objection runs, Aristotle's oratory is ideal if one's highest priority is promoting the public good; but why should I be forced to adopt that view, if I can gain private advantage from a type of rhetoric that benefits *me*? Aristotle suggests that using Thrasymachean emotional techniques is counter-productive also to the individual goals of the speaker – it would be like a carpenter warping his ruler before using it. How so? This highlights the second point. The ruler is a cognitive instrument. The ruler tells the carpenter that their joints are straight – it confirms this (if they are). The

17 Cf. (Engberg-Pedersen, 1996) esp. 135-7.

18 1354a24-6.

implied view is that when (or if) the orator succeeds in persuading an unwarped jury, their verdict in the orator's favour constitutes a kind of vindication or validation of the orator's case. But it only does so if their cognitive capacities have been allowed to function successfully.

Aristotle's view of rhetoric, then, is that it is an expertise in contributing to public deliberation by making the case for a particular view of an issue. It consists in providing *pisteis*, i.e. proper grounds for being convinced of that view. Of the various things to which people might consider applying the term "rhetoric" it is this that is the thing most worth cultivating in oneself and others. It has obvious value for the state, but it also is what speakers themselves should want (and sometimes do want), i.e. the ability to persuade others in such a way that doing so serves to confirm the merits of your case. You stride out of court having won your case, vindicated by the verdict (not merely having overpowered the jury with your deceptive tricks).

This broad sketch of Aristotle's view, and some of the arguments he offers in its defence, must suffice for our purposes here.

Aristotle elaborates his view of proofs by distinguishing, in *Rhetoric* 1.2, between proofs that do not belong to the expertise to generate, such as witnesses, torture-evidence and contracts (these are ready-made and the orator simply presents them), and those that do. Of the proofs that do belong to the expertise, there are three kinds, those in the character of the speaker, those through putting the listener into a particular emotional condition, and those "in the argument / speech itself, through showing something or appearing to show it". It is argument-based proofs that will be the focus of what follows.

Teaching

Aristotle, like Socrates in the *Gorgias*, is aware that clarifying in what way rhetoric changes people's minds can be advanced by contrasting it with teaching.

> Let rhetoric be a capacity of discerning the possibly persuasive in any given case. This is the function of no other expertise. For each of the other expertises

> involves the ability to teach and persuade in connection with its own domain, e.g. medicine with things related to health and disease, geometry with the properties that accompany magnitudes, arithmetic with numbers, and similarly also with the other expertises and sciences. But rhetoric is taken to be the ability to discern what is persuasive about pretty much any given subject. And this is why we too say that there is no particular defined kind of thing that it has as the domain of its expertise. (1355b25-34)

Teaching and rhetoric have in common that they are persuasive.[19] But they are contrasted on the basis that these other expertises are persuasive through their mastery of their own domain, whereas the capacity involved in rhetoric is exercised over more-or-less anything, and has no proprietary domain.

This cannot be the full extent of the contrast, of course. There are important differences in the way in which teaching and rhetoric use arguments, both regarding the constituent elements of those arguments, and in the way they are deployed with those to whom they are directed. To see this, let us attempt an overview of Aristotle's views on teaching.

Aristotle sometimes speaks of teaching in a very general way, as something like the communication of information or skill from one creature to another, in ways that may not involve arguments, or speech, at all. Thus in the *History of Animals*, the mother nightingale teaches the young birds to sing, shepherds teach sheep to huddle together, elephants (being very intelligent) can be taught lots of things such as to kneel in the presence of the king, and swallows teach their young to poo outside the nest rather than in it.[20] But when Aristotle refers to teaching in humans, he clearly has something much more specific and speech-based in mind. He highlights in *Metaphysics* 1050a18 that the goal of teaching is that the learner be able to exercise (and not merely possess) the skill or understanding they have been taught. In *Physics* 3.3, 202a31-b22,

19 Arguably when Aristotle says that each expertise is "apt to teach and persuade" (1355b29) in its own domain, this is hendiadys: it persuades by teaching (cf. (Rapp, 2002) *ad loc.*). But the assertion that it is "persuasive" may not be entirely straightforward. As had been pointed out in the *Gorgias*, the doctor or shipwright or builder may or may not in fact be a successful persuader, depending on the context (453d-454a, 455b-456c, 459a-c); so it is possible that even here, that the idea is that the expert's explanations are persuasive, if properly understood and received in the right way, i.e. that there is a normative colour attached to the sense in which experts are "persuasive"

20 *HA* 536b17, 608a18, 612b31, 630b20.

teaching and learning are recurring examples of capacities that are exercised together, such that teaching is not accomplished unless learning (i.e. the gaining of understanding) also is. And the centrality of understanding is emphasised in a number of passages where teaching is strongly associated with understanding (*episteme*). In *Metaphysics* 1.1, 981b7-10, the ability to teach is a sign of knowledge (episteme) and expertise (techne), and 1.2, 982a28-30 emphasise that in fact teaching (in the sense relevant here to humans) *requires* giving the causes.

> But the science which investigates causes is also more capable of teaching, for the people who teach are those who tell the causes of each thing. (982a28-30)[21]

This coheres well with what we find elsewhere in the corpus. In the discussion of the good in *Eudemian Ethics* 1, Aristotle makes reference to the method by which teaching proceeds.

> And that the end is the cause of all that comes under it, the method of teaching shows; for the teacher first defines the end and thence shows (*deiknuousi)* of each of the other things that it is good; for the end aimed at is the cause. E.g. since to be in health is so and so, so and so must needs be what conduces to it. (1218b16-20)

Teaching is being thought of here as working through reasoning. The reasoning shows that the conclusion must be so, and why they must be so (because of the premises) – in that sense, teaching conveys understanding of the conclusions, including their "cause" or reason why.

The passages says that the teacher "defines" (horizo) the end. It is clear from other passages that the teacher does not give the reason why the end is true in the way that they do for the conclusions. If the end is (for this kind of practical case) playing the role of a first principle, then it makes sense to ask on what basis it is accepted by the learner.

21 ἀλλὰ μὴν καὶ διδασκαλική γε ἡ τῶν αἰτιῶν θεωρητικὴ μᾶλλον (οὗτοι γὰρ διδάσκουσιν, οἱ τὰς αἰτίας λέγοντες περὶ ἑκάστου).

> For excellence and vice respectively preserve and destroy the first principle, and in actions that for the sake of which is the first principle, as the hypotheses are in mathematics; neither in that case is it reason that teaches the first principles, nor is it so here—excellence either natural or produced by habituation is what teaches right opinion about the first principle. (1151a15-19)

The suggestion here seems to be that first principles are not arrived at inferentially by argument, but are put in place by some kind of excellence. For mathematics, it is a matter of natural excellence to see the truth of the first principles, and in ethics it is a matter of correct habituation that puts in place the right first principles ("virtue makes the goal right" *EN* 1144a7-9).

If this is correct, it explains not only Aristotle's insistence in a number of places that the use of argumentation in teaching requires, as does all acquisition of new knowledge by argument, that the premises be "better known" than the conclusions (*Topics* 6.4, 141a30, 8.3, 159a13; *Post. An.* 1.2, 71b21, b33-72a5, a25-b4) but that the sense in which the premises are "better known" is that they are better known by nature, being first principles of the domain of knowledge that is the teacher's subject. And in this way, we can interpret what is said in distinguishing teaching from other kinds of use of argument in dialogue in *Sophistical Refutations* 2.

> Of arguments used in discussion there are four classes: didactic, dialectical, examinational, and contentious arguments. Didactic arguments are those that deduce from the principles appropriate to each subject and not from the opinions held by the answerer …

And here follows an explanatory clause which admits of both of the following translations:[22]

> (A) ...for the learner must be convinced) ...
>
> (B) …for the learner must trust [their teacher] … (*SE* 2, 165a38-b3)

The passage is clear, at least in its initial assertions. Teaching starts from the *archai* of the subject being taught. It does not start from the answerer's opinions (in contrast to

22 δεῖ γὰρ πιστεύειν τὸν μανθάνοντα

dialectical arguments, for example). The *archai* will be better known by nature than the conclusions, but perhaps not better known to us. But how then should we understand the explanatory last clause. How would reasoning from first principles rather than from the answerer's opinions help the answerer (or learner) to be convinced? Reasoning from premises that might not be held by the answerer seems to make it *less* likely that the argument will convince them of its conclusion, not more. Better to interpret the clause as insisting that the learner must place their trust in the teacher, and take the first principles on trust on the basis of the teacher's authority. For Aristotle surely does not hold that all learners will simply *already know* all relevant first principles:[23] knowing the first principles is itself an intellectual achievement, in which Aristotle himself earlier in the work has commented that his method of dialectic can help (*Topics* 1.2, 101a36-b4). How can teaching convey understanding, then, if the learner does not start the learning process with knowledge of the first principles? The answer is that they can accept them as true, and 'know' them on the basis of the teacher's authority, where the teacher is known to possess the science in question.

At *Topics* 8.5, Aristotle explains how the answerer should decide what premises proposed to them by their interlocutor they should accept.

> But since these points are not defined for those who engage in arguments for the sake of exercise and testing – for the goals are not the same for teachers and learners as for competitors, nor for the latter and for those who engage with one another for the sake of inquiry. For the learner must always concede the opinions – and nobody tries to teach a falsehood – but among competitors, the questioner must at all costs appear to be inflicting something on the answerer, while the answerer must appear not to be affected. (159a25-32)[24]

Aristotle seems here to contrast teaching with the kinds of dialectic with which he will be mainly concerned in *Topics* 8.4-5, in which he instructs the answerer to be sure to grant only premises that are more reputable than the conclusion. Learners do not have that requirement imposed upon them, because teachers never try to teach what is false(!). On that basis, this passage says that the correct behaviour for learners is

23 This is so, even when allowance is made for what Aristotle says in *EN* 7.8, 1151a15-19 about some of them being known through natural excellence.

24 Translation from (Smith, 1997).

always to concede the opinions (*ta dokounta*), which might mean conceding all the premises (including first principles) that their teacher proposes to them. Or, more probably, it imposes only the condition that they believe what is being proposed, which they might do largely or wholly on the teacher's authority.

With these views in hand, let us look at a pair of passages in the *Rhetoric* and the *Topics* in which, I suggest, Aristotle is making comparisons between teaching on the one hand and dialectic and rhetoric on the other.

Comparing Teaching with Dialectic and with Rhetoric

Let us start with the detailed consideration of a passage from the *Topics* in which Aristotle is concerned with the uses of the method of dialectic he is setting out in that work. In *Topics* 1.2, Aristotle says that his method is useful for various things – for a certain kind of intellectual training (*gymnasia*), for "encounters" with ordinary people, and for certain kinds of contribution to science. It is the discussion of encounters that concerns us here:

> [The method of dialectic set out in this work, the *Topics*, is useful] for encounters [with ordinary people] because when we have enumerated the opinions of the many we will meet them [those we are talking to] not with the beliefs of others but with their own, changing their mind on whatever point they might seem to us to speak incorrectly. (101a30-34)[25]

Aristotle is talking about encounters with ordinary people, members of the class of people he calls "the many". The passage is rightly understood as having in view not merely the elucidation and tidying up of the views of the person being addressed, but changing their minds, including bringing them to reject claims they previously held.[26]

25 Translation is my own. Greek text reads as follows: πρὸς δὲ τὰς ἐντεύξεις, διότι τὰς τῶν πολλῶν κατηριθμημένοι δόξας οὐκ ἐκ τῶν ἀλλοτρίων ἀλλ' ἐκ τῶν οἰκείων δογμάτων ὁμιλήσομεν πρὸς αὐτούς, μεταβιβάζοντες ὅ τι ἂν μὴ καλῶς φαίνωνται λέγειν ἡμῖν·

26 Thus (Brunschwig, 1967) has "[Q]uand nous voudrons les persuader de renoncer à des affirmations qui nous paraîtront manifestement inacceptables", although "affirmations" perhaps unduly restricts the reference of λέγειν. ROT has (rather ambiguously) "shifting the ground of any argument that they appear to us to state unsoundly." This seems to confine the scope of the many's utterances to their arguments, and perhaps confines the scope of the kind of change the dialectician brings about (confining it perhaps to the 'ground' of their arguments, as contrasted

Robin Smith helpfully draws our attention to the fact that the passage is emphasising the usefulness of the method that Aristotle is conveying – and specifically the practice he urges of "enumerating" in lists the various *endoxa* on various topics, indexed according to various things, including who holds them (everyone, most people, the wise, Anaxagoras, etc.).[27] These lists can serve to enable the dialectician to increase the likelihood that they use as premises things that their interlocutors will believe. However, Smith holds a view of what *endoxa* are such that they are nothing more than 'things that people think'[28] and such that they do not – in virtue of being *endoxa* – carry any particular epistemic credentials. This latter aspect of his view seems to me incorrect.[29] In these brief remarks on how Aristotle's method is useful for encounters, it is taken for granted that the premises used in encounters will be *endoxa,* since (as we know from the opening of the *Topics*) this is a characteristic feature of all dialectic. The passage says that, among the *endoxa*, the dialectician will be able to identify and select those that the many are likely themselves to believe. It is a necessary condition of successful premise selection that one choose things that the interlocutor will accept. But this passage does nothing by itself to support the view that the *only* concern of the dialectician in the selection of premises is that they will be believed by the interlocutor. In fact, closer investigation suggests that epistemic standards that apply to the use of dialectic in inquiry and testing also apply to its use in encounters.

Firstly, we should notice that Aristotle explicitly says (101a33-4) that this dialectical method is useful for changing people's beliefs *with a view to improving them*. Although this is qualified (whatever they "seem to us" to be getting wrong), we are still a long way from the Gorgianic and Thrasymachean ambition to possess the ability to change

with other aspects?). But the basic thrust seems right – this is about changing their minds. (Smith, 1993) glosses it "replacing our audience's clumsy formulations of their own views with better ones we have worked out in advance." His translation in (Smith, 1997) is "changing their minds", but in the commentary he insists on his earlier position, citing *EE* 1.6, 1216b28-35 and *Topics* 8.11, 161a29-36. The first of these passages does mention the clarification of others' views, but scarcely restricts the meaning of μεταβιβάζειν to this. The latter passage seems to me to count decisively against this, to include within the meaning of this verb (used here specifically to describe the effects of dialectic) the production of the kind of change in belief in which the subject adopts a view they had previously not held and rejects something they previously had held. The echo (surely) here of the *Phaedrus* 262b5 also strongly supports this interpretation.

27 (Smith, 1993), 347-51.

28 (Smith, 1993), 347.

29 Cf. also (Karbowski, 2015).

people's minds *in whatever direction we choose*. Aristotle's method is useful for correcting *faulty* beliefs.

Secondly, it is a method that works, not by using someone else's beliefs as starting points, but by using a the interlocutor's *own* beliefs (a31-32). What is the point of this contrast? What kind of method would work on the basis of someone else's beliefs? The answer, I think, is knowledge-based teaching. If this is correct, the point being made is that Aristotle's dialectical method is useful for improving the beliefs of others in circumstances where we cannot presuppose that we possess authority as teachers: in such a case the person's views cannot be corrected on the basis of accepting someone else's – a teacher's – views as authoritative. They must be convinced by arguments from premises they themselves accept. This interpretation of the contrast is supported by a closer look at Aristotle's views on "encounters" with the many.

There are not many passages to look at on this subject directly. The word "encounters" (ἐντεύξεις) and its cognates are used only 21 times in the whole Aristotelian corpus, mostly meaning simply the meeting of one thing or person with others. Those that refer to the kind of persuasive or argumentative encounter envisaged in *Topics* 1.2 are three in number. Two occur in this passage itself: the one other is from the *Rhetoric*.[30] It is instructive.

> Another reason [why rhetoric is useful] is that with some people, even if you had the most precise systematic knowledge, it would not be easy from that knowledge to persuade them by speaking: this is because teaching is speaking based on systematic knowledge, and this is impossible, you must rather use what is common to all to craft your proofs and your arguments. This is just what we said in the *Topics* too about encounters with the many. (*Rhet*. 1.1, 1355a24-29)[31]

30 One other use, at *Metaph.* Γ.5, 1009a17, certainly refers to an argumentative encounter, but does not shed any detailed light on what Aristotle might have had in mind in the *Topics*.

31 ἔτι δὲ πρὸς ἐνίους οὐδ' εἰ τὴν ἀκριβεστάτην ἔχοιμεν ἐπιστήμην, ῥᾴδιον ἀπ' ἐκείνης πεῖσαι λέγοντας· διδασκαλίας γάρ ἐστιν ὁ κατὰ τὴν ἐπιστήμην λόγος, τοῦτο δὲ ἀδύνατον, ἀλλ' ἀνάγκη διὰ τῶν κοινῶν ποιεῖσθαι τὰς πίστεις καὶ τοὺς λόγους, ὥσπερ καὶ ἐν τοῖς Τοπικοῖς ἐλέγομεν περὶ τῆς πρὸς τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐντεύξεως.

Clearly in this passage from the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle is envisaging the persuasive use of rhetoric, and – one might naturally think – of dialectic too in the reference to encounters.[32] His contrast here is between understanding-based teaching and the use of "the common things" (τὰ κοινά) in persuasion, and he claims to have made just the same point in connection with "encounters" in the *Topics.* His point, as applied to rhetoric, is that understanding-based teaching is impossible because even if the speaker had the requisite understanding (a condition that, it is implied, is not in fact met) their audience would not be in a position to receive it, thus requiring the speaker to have recourse to the "common things".[33] This point, he claims, matches what he says about encounters in the *Topics*.

But where in the *Topics* could he be thinking about? As may already be clear, there is only one place he could be referring to, and it is our passage from 1.2. Could Aristotle, in this passage in the *Topics,* have been drawing the same contrast as in the *Rhetoric,* i.e. between understanding-based teaching and persuasive use of a more accessible range of premises? The answer, surely, is yes.

Why, according to these passages, is there a problem about the persuasive use of teaching with the many? The *Rhetoric* passage does not say precisely. It could be that orators lack systematic knowledge (and perhaps knowledge is not even attainable on the contingent subject matter they address), or that audiences would not understand the premises required for knowledge-based teaching, or that though they might understand them, they would not accept them in the way that is required in successful cases of teaching, or something else, or some combination of these. But the *Topics* passage *does* say. The problem with teaching is that it would be "from someone else's opinions" (a31-2) – unproblematic in the situation where, as *Topics* 8.5 reminds us, "the learner must always grant the opinions, for nobody undertakes to teach what is

32 One could evade this suggestion, and take the comparison to be strictly confined to the use of τὰ κοινά, but it does not seem to me the most natural reading.

33 It is not explicitly stated why this is. It could be because they do not believe the premises of the demonstrative syllogisms that be involved. Or – as I am inclined to think more likely – it could be because they are not disposed to accept the premises on the speaker's say-so, but rather are disposed to suspicion of what speakers assert, and need to be brought round. Teaching, as Aristotle seems to represent it in the *Topics* rests on assumptions of knowledge and good faith in the teacher: "the learner must always grant the opinions, for certainly nobody undertakes to teach what is false" (8.5, 159a28-30)

false" (159a28-30), but problematic in public oratory and problematic in encounters where the teacher-learner relationship is absent.

If the *Rhetoric* passage elucidates how Aristotle understood the point about encounters being made in *Topics* 1.2, then that point turns out to run something like as follows. "This method-based expertise in dialectic is useful for encounters with ordinary people because, when you are seeking to improve their understanding, you can't use teaching, as you can't depend on their regarding you as a teacher and accepting your opinions as premises on your authority as a teacher, but you can instead proceed from reputable opinions, and in this case on the basis of premises that they already accept (premises that this method supplies you with, from your lists of the "opinions of the many"). Using them, you are well-placed to correct any mistaken view you find your interlocutors hold." (*Topics* 1.2, 101a30-34, paraphrased)

There is one further curiosity about the cross-reference. Aristotle implies that his recommendation to use the "common things" in rhetoric repeats an instruction in the *Topics* to use the "common things" in encounters. But our *Topics* passage does not mention the "common things". Could Aristotle be somehow thinking of a different passage in the *Topics*? There is no obvious candidate. In fact the discrepancy between the *Rhetoric* passage's reference to the "common things" and the *Topics* passage is much less significant than it might seem. In the latter, Aristotle is recommending that, in encounters, the dialectician should use as premises the interlocutors' "own views" (οἰκείων δογμάτων, 101a32), and that their method of coming up with premises that are likely to be believed by a person one encounters will involve drawing on their lists of the "views of the many" (τὰς τῶν πολλῶν … δόξας, a31). The cross-reference strongly suggests that the views of the many simply are the "common things" - things that are (as we say) commonly held, or common knowledge.[34]

34 If so, then here (i.e. *Rhetoric* 1.1, 1355a27) is a further passage in which '*ta koina*' means items of common knowledge. This is defended, plausibly, at greater length by (Bolton, 1990), 215-8, who – further – identifies these "common things" with those discussed in *SE* 9 and 11 as the basis for *peirastic* testing of the first principles of the philosophical sciences. This argument from the comparison between *Rhet* 1.1 and *Top* 1.2 seems to be strong grounds for resisting the rejection in (Devereux, 1990) of this interpretation of *ta koina* in favour of a more technical meaning, at least in these passages (cf. also (Fait, 2007) 150). The more technical reading – i.e. that *ta koina* are principles or axioms common to more than one science – might seem to have its best support from *An. Post.* 1.10 and 1.11. But even this might be doubted: the phrase '*ta koina*' in those chapters is introduced as a sub-division of the 'principles' (*archai*, 76a31) into things that are unique to each science (*ta idia*), and the things that are common (*ta koina*). Aristotle is thus not really using (or

Teaching and Rhetoric (and Dialectic) – some conclusions

The above discussion suggests some tentative conclusions about how, in Aristotle's thought, the use of arguments in rhetoric (and dialectic) can be compared and contrasted with their use in teaching.

Whereas the premises for rhetorical (and dialectical) arguments with the many must be from reputable premises (*endoxa*) believed by the speaker but more importantly by listeners (or interlocutors), in teaching, the premises must be *archai* of the science in question, known by the teacher, and *accepted* by the learner as true when proposed to them by the teacher.

Rhetoric (and dialectic) can be practised by someone who lacks knowledge of the subject area under discussion, teaching requires such knowledge.

And whereas rhetoric (and dialectic) can be practised in the absence of any relationship of authority between the speaker and their addressees, the same is not true of teaching. If the interpretations suggested above, it is a distinctive characteristic of teaching, pivotal to how it works to deliver learning, that the teacher be viewed as knowledgeable and authoritative. Correspondingly, it is part of the usefulness of rhetoric (and dialectic) that they can be practised in the many situations within human life in which the speaker lacks both knowledge and authority.

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specifying a meaning for) the *unqualified* phrase '*ta koina*' (the common things). His use of that phrase ('the common ones') is here really implicitly qualified and stands in for 'αἱ κοιναὶ ἀρχαί' (the common principles) or 'τὰ κοινὰ ἀξιώματα' (the common axioms – a phrase that Aristotle actually uses at 76b14). He clearly feels the need to remind the reader that this is how he is using the phrase at 1.11, 77a27-8, distinguishing this use of 'common things' to mean specifically the premises of demonstrations, rather than their conclusions or what their conclusions are about. This shows that he cannot presume that readers can generally be relied upon to understand the phrase in that way. Indeed, it perhaps suggests that the two things he says that the unqualified phrase *'ta koina'* does *not* refer to in this context are things that it might otherwise be presumed to refer to, one of which is things which are the conclusions of scientific demonstrations i.e. what follows from a science's first principles – exactly what Aristotle uses the phrase to refer to in *SE* 11, 172a21-36 (discussed above). Similarly, Aristotle's use in *Metaph.* B.2 of the phrase '*koinai doxai*' is (a) not a use of the unqualified 'the common things'; (b) clearly a reference to the axioms of a science; and (c) indicates by the use of qualifier 'common' that those axioms are either common to more than one science, or common to the things that fall within the domain of the science in question, hinting perhaps at the common nature that unites the domain of a single science (cf. *Metaph.* K.3, 1061b18). Hence, it provides scant basis for resisting the view that in these key passages of the *Sophistical Refutations* and *Rhetoric*, the unqualified phrase '*ta koina*' means (as the context suggests) items of common knowledge.

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