

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Leff's Account Of The Aristotelian Roots Of The Boethian Theory Of Dialectical Reasoning: A Contemporary Reconsideration



This paper is an attempt to call attention to the need for a reconsideration of the evolution of the concept of dialectic that took place between the time of Aristotle and Boethius. The central allegation of the paper is that Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius was a central figure in the development of a formalised concept of the dialectic, one that was far from Aristotelian. This perspective on the dialectic was made possible through Boethius' reinterpretation of the dialectical *topoi*. The key evidence for this shift provided in the paper is the refutation of the presentation of the Aristotelian dialectic as being a theory of proofs. Rather, Boethius successfully convinced many contemporary authors, including Leff, that this interpretation was Aristotle's own.

The point of departure for the paper is Leff's stance on the Boethian theory of the commonplaces (1974, 1978, 1983), which was focused on the rhetorical *topoi*. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that a focus on the evolution of the rhetorical *topoi* does not allow for an adequate evaluation of the way in which Boethius' works affected the medieval understanding of the dialectic. Rhetorical theorists have failed to note how Boethius catalysed an important shift in the relationship between dialectical theory and the theory of the analytic demonstration, which subsequently affected the relationship between dialectical and rhetorical theory.

The importance of demonstrating the origin of the trend towards the conflation of the theories of dialectic and analytics is of more than merely historical interest. This is because of the fact that Boethius' work provides an example of one of the first instances of an attempt to create a hierarchy between theories of argumentative justification. A reconsideration of the way that Boethius attempted

to reconstruct dialectical disputation as an attempt to produce proofs might allow those interested in the reconciliation of rhetorical and dialectical approaches certain critical insights. The recognition of the importance of Boethius in the history of the medieval dialectical might allow these theorists to move forward towards a reconciliation that might do justice to both traditions of argumentation theory.

Understanding Boethius' role in the formalisation of the topical tradition (Bird 1960) leads to the conclusion that the theory contained in *De Topicis Differentiis* represents a paradigm shift in the dialectical method. This understanding should draw attention towards the impact of certain external influences on medieval dialectical theory. In particular, comprehension of Boethius' importance motivates an examination of the changes in the forums for argument that existed in the early middle ages, as a possible explanation for theoretical developments, which cannot be adequately explained (*contra* Leff) in terms of a synthesis of already existing notions.

1. An Introduction to Boethius' Context and Sources

Boethius was born into a patrician family and served in the Roman Senate at a time of great upheaval. While Cicero, one of his key influences, had served in a powerful senate during the late republican period, Boethius was a member of an assembly that was little more than a rubber stamp for Theodoric, the Ostrogothic King of Italy. Boethius, who was also a member of Theodoric's court, was ultimately executed by the King on the basis of flimsy evidence linking him with a plot of the Emperor Justinian to overthrow barbarian rule in Italy.

Boethius was a philosopher in his own right, author of one of the most influential texts of the Middle Ages (*The Consolation of Philosophy*). However, he is remembered primarily for his translation of the extant logical works of Aristotle into Latin (Murphy 1974: 67). On the basis of these credentials, he was also a highly respected commentator on the works of Aristotle, becoming the most credible exegete of the Stagyrice until the Renaissance. In keeping with the tenets of the classical age that had just drawn to a close, Boethius also attempted to further refine the method of dialectic.

While Leff (1978) was correct in claiming that Boethius was working within a Latin rhetorical tradition of the commonplaces, the question of which tradition of the dialectical topoi he drew upon is critical to an understanding of Boethius' work. Leff's conception of Boethius as a figure who intended primarily to

reconcile the Latin rhetoricians with Aristotelian assumptions is correct only insofar as one does not consider Boethius' approach to the dialectic. In his own philosophical works, Boethius was known for attempting to reconcile Aristotle and Plato, who had disparate views on the dialectic that might have informed Boethius' conception of the epistemic status of the proposition being tested within dialectical disputation (Boethius, 1999).

However, to show that Leff did not effectively highlight the difference between Aristotle and Boethius' conceptions of the *dialectical* commonplaces, Aristotle's own comments on these must be outlined, before moving on to demonstrate how the Boethian and contemporary interpretations of this commentary differ.

2. *The Aristotelian Dialectic*

Aristotle's conception of the dialectic was derived fundamentally from the question and answer procedure known as *elenchis*. One party must adopt a standpoint from two possible alternatives, while the interlocutor must attempt to refute them by obtaining premises (by means of putting questions to the first party) with which to construct a syllogism. This syllogism must either refute the proposition at issue, or demonstrate that the respondent has been led into a contradiction (Smith 1997: xxii).

However, for the purposes of this paper, a discussion of the salient features of the Aristotelian *elenchis* are not as important as the differences between the form of the syllogism with which it is associated (via the refutation) and the forms of argument associated with the two other forms of argumentative justification that Aristotle described. Aristotle (in *On Rhetoric* and the *Prior* and *Posterior Analytics*) formalised two other techniques of argument that are each fundamentally different from the dialectical procedure. The analytic demonstration produces a deductive proof that begins with an axiom (or first principle), and is designed to produce irrefutably true conclusions. Demonstration is the only method whereby Aristotle contends that one can demonstrate with certainty the truth of a proposition.

The second argumentative method that Aristotle distinguished from dialectic is rhetoric, which he designated as its counterpart (*On Rhetoric*: 1354a). When engaged in the rhetorical defence of a proposition, the speaker must attempt to discern which premises his audience would accept, and construct an argument that they would accede to on this basis. One of the defining characteristics of rhetoric is that some elements of arguments are usually implicit, which means

that they are constructed around and enthymeme rather than a syllogism.

In charting the Boethian movement of the canons of rhetoric closer to those of the dialectic, Leff has effectively detailed the way in which Boethius collapsed some distinctions Aristotle made between dialectic and rhetoric. However, Leff failed to note the way in which Boethius had weakened the barriers between the notions of analytic demonstration and dialectic. It was the latter process that had the consequent effect of allowing Boethius to subordinate rhetorical argumentation to a more quasi-analytical framework of argumentative construction.

Both rhetorical oratory and analytic demonstration diverge from the dialectic insofar as the latter depends upon two parties, who effectively champion the position of doubt and credence relative to the proposition at issue. However, this difference is obvious, and this paper must focus upon the differences between dialectic and rhetoric that have not informed discussions of the Boethian exegesis thus far. Aristotle stated that: “demonstrative propositions differ from dialectical ones in this way. A demonstrative proposition is the taking of one side of an *antiphrasis* whereas a dialectical proposition is an enquiry related to an *antiphrasis*” (*Prior Analytics* I: 1).

The starting point of the dialectical encounter is amenable to a different sort of testing procedure than a proposition which is suitable for an analytic demonstration. Once this has been acknowledged, it is a short step to understanding that the difference in the features of the appropriate method of argumentation is due to the disparate epistemic status of the two sets of propositions. The axiom that propels the analytic demonstration has the status of a first principle; while the axiom may not be in principle provable, it cannot be doubted. The starting point of a dialectical demonstration is one that can (or indeed must) be doubted in order to investigate the right course of action in practical matters, pertaining to such topics as the good of the city.

However, it is not only the starting point of the dialectical disputation that differentiates it from the demonstration. The epistemic status of the premises that support the syllogism that either refutes or affirms proposition at issue also vary between the two procedures. In analytic demonstration, the premises that allow for the deduction from the axiom or first principle must also be certain, owing to their connection to the axiom. In dialectical disputation, the propositions that form the syllogism of refutation are deemed acceptable not in virtue of the fact that they are certain, but owing to the acceptance of the interlocutor after careful

scrutiny (Evans 1977). The respondent in dialectical elenchis must not reject any potential premise out of hand, but must carefully consider whether they are acceptable in the context where they are being applied, thus preventing what Aristotle called “sophistical refutation”.

Aristotle stated that the premises of the dialectical syllogism should have the status of *endoxa*, being premises that would be endorsed not only by those involved in the disputation, but also by those people generally considered wise, or to a subgroup of the wise who are most qualified in that area of knowledge (*Topics I*). That said, it is still up to the parties participating in the disputation to grant or deny these premises in the course of the proceedings. The form of reasoning is therefore unique to the dialectic; dialectical disputation is aimed at producing tentative adherence to a proposition not on the basis of either the preconceptions of the audience, or because of the demonstration that proceeds from an undeniable principle.

Both of these features, the fact that neither the starting point nor the premises used to construct the dialectical syllogism are certifiably true, necessitate the presence of the *topoi*, the nature of which further differentiates dialectical disputation from analytic demonstration, until, unmentioned by Leff, the nature of these dialectical commonplaces are transformed by Boethius. Leff’s statement that Aristotle considered the *topoi* as “principles or strategies that enable the arguer to connect reasons with conclusions *for the purpose of effecting a proof*” (Leff 1983: 25, emphasis added) bears witness to a failure to recognise the shift in the dialectic that Boethius effected.

3. The Role of the Topoi within Aristotle’s Dialectical Procedure

If premises related to empirical facts were all that were available to those involved in dialectical disputation, it would be effectively impossible for these propositions to be combined in order to create an argument related to a controversial starting point. The questioner requires premises will that allow for the answers drawn from the respondent to be linked to the proposition at issue, in order to effect a refutation. These premises come in the form of the *topoi*. It is this addition of the *topoi* as crucial premises needed to construct syllogisms which accounts for the complexity of the dialectical disputation over the analytic demonstration. The treatise Aristotle wrote on the former method is over one third longer than the two written on the latter.

The *topoi* are basic (and abstract, as they lack both particular subjects and

predicates) premises that can be used to link the responses of the respondent in order to create the syllogism containing the refutation. In rhetorical terms, the commonplaces facilitate the invention of arguments, since once they are adopted they will dictate the form of the argument. Once the questioner chooses a commonplace, the premises they will need to acquire from the respondent in order to complete the refutation become known.

However, the *topoi*, like all other premises that will be used in the dialectical syllogism, must be accepted by the respondent. The *topoi* themselves only have the status of *endoxa*, as demonstrated by the fact that they can be denied by the respondent, if they are inappropriate to the subject at issue (and, as demonstrated in the *Topics VIII*, particular *topoi* are only appropriate relative to a certain class of subjects). In this paper, further evidence will be brought forward from Aristotle's work to support the claim that this is the correct interpretation of the epistemic status of the commonplaces. This argument will demonstrate that the *topoi*, (*contra* Boethius and Leff) did not provide the type of argumentative support that allows for a deductive proof.

Aristotle was clear on what is required for a proof, and dialectical argumentation, which relies upon acceptable but unproved premises (including the *topoi*), does not meet his standards. Aristotle wrote in the *Posterior Analytics* that: "Since, then, what we know demonstratively must belong to necessity, it is clear that we must demonstrate through a middle that is *necessary* (§74b). This is crucial, as it demonstrates that dialectics will not be able to produce proofs, since the middle term is a *topos* and is not derived from a first principle.

One can demonstrate that Aristotle did not believe that the *topoi* did not have the same status as first principles by providing an example of the way in which *topoi* are only functional if applied correctly. Aristotle wrote that in testing whether or not a species is actually a member of the genus to which the respondent has assigned it, one should inquire whether the respondent includes it within the genus because it is closely related to another species that is likewise considered a member of the genus in question (*Topics II*: 10, 115a 15-24). The skeletal premise connected to the *topos* is this: If the second subject belong to a class because of their similarity to the first subject, if the first does not properly belong to that class, then neither does the second. Example: If we believe that zebras are mammals (not having examined the internal anatomy of a zebra) on the basis of their similarity to horses, we must accept that we have no good reason to believe

that a zebra is a mammal if someone proves that horses should not properly considered mammalian.

In the *Topics*, Aristotle provides a commentary on each topos that explains why it works reliably in a general set of circumstances (which generally consists of examples), but he never makes an argument for the general applicability of that commonplace. Aristotle held that the topoi could be used inappropriately, showing that they were not axiomatic. He noted that there was an obvious way in which the topos above could be used inappropriately: “[W]hatever is one in number is most uncontroversially called the same in everyone’s judgement. But even this is customarily indicated in several ways” (*Topics*: 103a). Smith (71) notes that by highlighting how a similitude is not one but rather a set of relationships, Aristotle indicates that one must be cautious when using topoi based upon similarity. We must know that the subject that we rely upon (in our above example, horses) are in fact members of a set that is homogenous in terms of what is important for their membership in the mammalian genus, or else we might have drawn an incorrect conclusion about zebras on the basis of the topos employed.

Given the clarity of Aristotle’s comments, it seems self-evident that the commonplaces were not mention to serve the same function as axioms. However, some philosophers have interpreted the topoi as possessing the same epistemic status. Leff does not cite them within his accounts of the Boethius’ dialectic. Despite this absence, this paper will be used to flesh out the position that the reason why a quasi-analytic position on the dialectic (and the dialectical commonplaces in particular) goes unquestioned is owing to the enduring notion that dialectic is merely an extension of analytic demonstration, a position developed by Boethius himself.

However, some contemporary philosophers have alleged that Aristotle rejected the approach to argumentation found in the *Topics* by the time that he wrote the works contained in his *Organon*. This would provide for a defence of Boethius’ conception of the dialectic, and hence would demonstrate that Leff’s account of that conception was adequate. Fortunately, this position has been criticized and found lacking by more recent accounts of the Aristotelian corpus. The account of this refutation provides further evidence which complement the analysis contained above which concludes that the topoi do not provide analytic validity to a syllogism.

4. *Contemporary Philosophical Approaches to Dialectics and the Topoi*

There are two positions within Twentieth Century philosophy on the nature of the dialectical commonplaces, one consonant and one in opposition to Boethius. The former position was advanced by De Pater (1965), who argued that the topoi were designed to function as logical or axiological laws. The opposite position was taken by Stump (1978), who argued that the term *topos* only applies to the instruction of how to invent an argument and not the reason Aristotle provided for why it can be considered reliable. Green-Pedersøn (1984) advanced an intermediary theory, one that seems most satisfactory in terms of the arguments included in this paper. His position was that both the strategy of argumentation provided by the topoi and the reasons why it can be considered reliable in certain circumstances can be properly considered as part of the Aristotelian commonplace.

To the credit of his position, Green-Pedersøn's discussion of the dialectical commonplaces was eventually adopted by Stump (1989) who stated in the introduction to this volume that "I especially recommend the study of ... Green-Pedersøn's *The Tradition of the Topics in the Middle Ages*", and she acknowledged in an earlier treatise that she would have appreciated the ability to consult it. Thus, the paper must move forward to an examination to the details of the critique of Stump and Green-Pedersøn, which explains how Boethius had struck out in new directions when formalising the dialectical commonplaces.

5. *The Role of the Topoi in the Emergent Boethian Dialectic*

According to Stump (1988), the trend towards a logical interpretation of the *Topics* did not begin with Aristotle, as Leff (1983) had contended, but with Boethius. The key to the transition is Boethius' claim that the dialectical commonplace functions as a "maximal proposition", and essentially as being self-evidently true: "[T]hose maximal propositions are known *per se*, so that they need no proof from without to impart belief to all argument" (in Stump 1978: 1185D). Boethius appears to have been the first to equate a commonplace with an axiom, something that he could not have done without disregarding the function of each in argumentative construction.

Due to this change, the dialectical argument, according to Boethius, has a conditionally true conclusion (which depends only on the truth of the empirical premises) and therefore that the dialectical syllogism functions as a conditional proof. This is not exactly what Boethius had in mind, according to Stump (1978), but he was clearly interpreted this way by his later medieval exegetes. As shall be

shown below, this does not do complete justice to Boethius' concerns, but it is not far from the mark, as the general effect of the theory of the maximal propositions is to shift the epistemic status of the *topoi* closer towards that of axioms.

Stump and Green-Pedersøn have documented how this interpretation of the dialectical commonplaces diverges from the Aristotelian approach significantly. First, the new approach pays little attention to the fact that even the opinion of the wise could be challenged within the framework of Aristotelian dialectical disputation. This was a simple matter for the questioner during that procedure, as every premise can be denied with cause according to the rules laid out in book one of the *Topics*. Stump (1978: 57) demonstrated how Boethius' neglect of this fact is motivated by his failure to consider the implications of the oral context of the dialectic, which Aristotle took for granted when writing his texts on dialectical disputation.

The impact of considering the oral context of the disputation procedure is considerable. Within this type of encounter, each party has the ability not only to challenge the propositions that are offered to them within a question form, but also to challenge any form of reasoning that they do not find wholly convincing. The examples that would be found within the oral encounter would likely be far less tidy than those that Boethius provides, which bear the mark of any example of argumentation produced with no thought to context.

The result is that "Boethius' exposition centres on the arguments themselves, divorced from disputation and its participants, and the examples that he proposes are brief, orderly and textbookish" (Stump: 1978, 57). While it would be fruitful to examine the context (and especially the forums of argumentation typical of Ostrogothic Italy) or Boethius' influences (in particular, Plato) that led him towards this type of focus on abstracted rather than living argumentation, this is not within the scope of this paper. The next section must turn to the way in which this focus on argumentation led to the theory of the maximal propositions, which only makes sense on the basis of this shift away from the oral context.

6. The Maximal Propositions as an Anti-Aristotelian Development: Further Aspects

The focus on written discourse led Boethius to overlook the fact that in the Aristotelian dialectic the premises that form the dialectical syllogism can only be used if the propositions are granted by the *interlocutor*. Second, Boethius ignores the fact that the *topos* functions within the argument produced by the questioner on this basis, that it must likewise be accepted by the respondent, owing to the

epistemic status of the dialectical commonplace as endoxa. Indeed, it is highly unlikely that in actual argumentation, as will be demonstrated below, the interlocutor would not fail to react to the inappropriate use of a topos.

Boethius' examples of the maximal propositions indicate both that these topoi move towards obtaining the epistemic status of the axioms, and furthermore that this interpretation could only hold up when divorced from any pragmatic context. For instance, Boethius advances this example for the use of the maximal proposition of material cause: "If someone argues that the Moors do not have weapons, he will say that they do not use weapons because they lack iron. The maximal proposition: Where the matter is lacking, what is made from the matter is also lacking" (*De Topicis Differentiis*: 1189C15-D3). This is obviously a good general principle, perhaps appropriate when pertaining to a certain class of subject, but it fails utterly to create a conclusion that is necessarily true, as it fails to provide the analytic validity that Boethius desired.

Boethius failed to elevate the maximal proposition to the level of an axiom in this example because the general principle embodied in the example will only work within a certain context and for a particular purpose. It holds true if two conditions are met, namely if the discussion is intended to test the proposition that the Moors have a large quantity of iron weapons and if it is granted that the Moors could not otherwise acquire weapons made of this material. Like all topoi, the maximal propositions can only be considered as creating a valid argument given an all-important stipulation of *ceteris paribus*.

Unlike Aristotle, Boethius never explained how his dialectical commonplaces could be used effectively by reference to their purpose in dialectical disputation. To have done so would have been to undermine his conclusion that "once the arguer has made clear that the conclusion that he wants is covered by the maximal proposition, the opponent will have to grant the conclusion as well" (Stump 1989: 44). That said, those investigating the shift in the dialectic inaugurated by Boethius should move on to a consideration of his motives. Stump claimed that "it is easy to read Aristotle's *Topics* as if his presentation amounted to no more than a boxful of recipes for arguments [rather than as] the instruments of an art" (1989: 44-45), but there is little explanation of why Boethius was inclined to interpret the topoi in this manner. As indicated above, it will take more analysis on the factors external to the history of dialectical ideas to explain this shift.

7. Epilogue

This paper was an attempt to demonstrate that in order to address the evolution of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric more adequately, there must be further investigation into the transformation of the relationship between analytic demonstration and dialectical disputation in Latin thought. Leff's attempt was only lacking insofar as it neglected this dimension of the dynamic tension between all three of these disciplines, which lies at the centre the Boethian corpus.

To move forward with this line of inquiry, what is necessary is to avoid the trap of being inclined to see every development within theory as being the result of a gradual evolution of trends that takes place solely in the realm of ideas. By investigating the context of Boethius' writings, it might also be possible to explain the popularity of Boethius' corpus in the later Middle Ages more adequately. Insofar as Boethius was influenced not only by the Latin rhetorical tradition, but also by the political, legal and economic environment of the society in which he lived and worked. By comparing this environment against Aristotle's, it might be possible to understand some of the differences, and by comparing it against the societies inhabited by Abelard, Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, one might better understand the affinities in their works.

Leff was surely right to contend that Boethius' aim was to synthesize a theory of the rhetorical topics out of the disparate approaches of Cicero and Aristotle, but to understand and ultimately explain why this amalgamation took the particular form of Boethius' *De Topicis Differentiis*, one must first acknowledge that no scholar, even one who created his masterwork while imprisoned in a tower, works outside of a social context.

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