

The Aristotelian dialectics as an instrument for the democratic debate

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Abstract The purpose of my contribution is that of linking together two ancient systems of argumentation theory, *i. e.* the Aristotelian dialectics and rhetoric and trying to demonstrate their effectiveness when they are applied to the modern political debate. Namely, I'll argue that both the Aristotelian dialectics and rhetoric are highly competitive techniques, and this feature serves well in a political debate that is unavoidably and necessarily characterized by disagreement. I'll try to show that disagreement is a very beneficial feature if managed by the combination of dialectics and rhetoric.

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0. Introduction

This contribution aims at linking the Aristotelian dialectics and rhetoric with their function in the political debate. Namely, I'll argue that if the Aristotelian dialectics is interpreted in a way that highlights its competitive features, it works as a preferential tool in the democratic society. In such a society, in fact, disagreement is a matter of fact, and it cannot be eliminated from the political debate. Dialectics as seen by Aristotle might be a very effective tool in order to tackle the disagreement in the democratic arena.

My paper is articulated as follows: in the first section I'm going to highlight briefly the close connection existing between the Aristotelian dialectics and rhetoric. The concept explaining this connection is that of ἀντιστροφή (*antistrophè*), which is to be found at the very beginning of the Aristotelian *Rhetoric*. Highlighting the common features of rhetoric and dialectics is useful because what happens very frequently in political debates is not just the use of rhetorical skills by those who want to support an idea. In fact, an interplay between the two disciplines occurs more often, showing that both dialectical and rhetorical skills are needed to succeed in the political arena.

In the second section, I argue that dialectics is a competitive method, and I try to show this competitiveness is displayed. In particular I'm going to show how certain lexical choices are not casual, but they are connected to the Aristotelian idea of dialectics as a polemic method, subsequently I'm going to describe some keywords used by Aristotle.

In the third section I go briefly through the key theses of two major perspectives in the analysis of the decision-making process in democracy, the agonistic and the deliberative approach, and in the last section I argue to support the active role of the Aristotelian dialectics as a tool for tackling the disagreement in society.

1. Connection between Aristotelian dialectics and rhetoric

Rhetoric and dialectics are kept together by the notion of *antistrophè*, an ancient Greek term which indicates a relation of correspondence. This notion is really important in order to define the connection between rhetoric and dialectics, because sometimes it looks like Aristotle describes rhetoric and dialectics just through their relation.

As Aristotle states at the very beginning of the *Rhetoric*,

Rhetoric is a counterpart of dialectic; for both have to do with matters that are in a manner within the cognizance of all men and not confined to any special science. Hence all men in a manner have a share of both; for all, up to a certain point, endeavour to criticize or uphold an argument, to defend themselves or to accuse. Now, the majority of people do this either at random or with a familiarity arising from habit¹ (*Rh.* 1,1, 1354a 1-7).

Both disciplines keep their peculiar features, but there is no hierarchy between them. It is clear that we cannot even talk about an identification, because rhetoric and dialectics have different aims and therefore their discourses have different structures. The dialectical argument opposes in fact two speakers who argue (*i. e.* fight, compete) through a series of questions and answers, grants and refutations, therefore the form of the dialectical argument is the dialogue, and its instrument is the dialectical syllogism. The aim of dialectics, as is explained by Aristotle at the very beginning of the *Topics*, is to provide the reader with a method in order for him to support a thesis successfully.

The rhetorical argument is mostly like a monologue and it is more pragmatic, because a rhetorician must persuade his audience to take a decision, therefore the argument form shall be persuasive, and the tool is the enthymeme.

Dialectical syllogisms and rhetorical enthymemes are actually rather similar tools: they are both arguments whose premises are called *endoxa* (ἔνδοξα) by Aristotle. *Endoxa* are the premises of the dialectical syllogism and of the rhetorical enthymeme², they shall be considered valid, even though not necessarily true. According to Aristotle, *endoxa* are not trustworthy because they are true like logical axioms, but rather because they are *shared* by the majority of the members of a social group, who are generally considered wise. *Endoxa* are reliable even if not logically sound like axioms because they must be used only in dialectics, and not in logic. This means that if one were to build an apodeictic syllogism, he/she could not use *endoxa* as premises, but inevitably an axiom.

As for consensus, in dialectics it is *a priori*, and it's not the aim of the dispute. This means that in order to start a dialectical debate, the opponents need to agree at least on some points, otherwise a starting point cannot even be created. Consensus in this case is granted by the *endoxa*, which are conceded one after the other through a

¹ Translations of the *Rhetoric* are by J. H. FREESE in *Aristotle, "Art" of Rhetoric*, Loeb, London 1926.

² In this case the kind of endoxon is slightly different: see also PIAZZA 2008: 53 ss.

sequence of questions and answers. So even if dialectics' ultimate aim is not achieving consensus or reaching a compromise, its foundation is just a collection of opinions which are shared by a relevant group of wise persons.

It is important to point out that both rhetoric and dialectics are competitive disciplines: by competitive I mean here the fact that their aim is to prevail in a discussion. The dialectician prevails on his opponent by refuting his thesis, and the rhetorician prevails by persuading his audience with different kinds of proofs.

However, while rhetoric's aim is looking for what can be persuasive in discourses, calling for consensus by the audience, dialectics doesn't look necessarily for an agreement between the opponents.

Another feature that links together dialectics and rhetoric is an anthropological one: it concerns the human dimension of both rhetoric and dialectics. This is very easy to see in the passage of the *Rhetoric* that has already been quoted above. Aristotle clearly states that both disciplines deal with subjects and issues that are common to every human being: «Hence all men in a manner have a share of both; for all, up to a certain point, endeavour to criticize or uphold an argument, to defend themselves or to accuse» (ARISTOTELE 1354a, 1-7). This means that everybody sooner or later happens to be in such a situation in which he/she has to stand up for himself or to take the offensive in a discussion, and everybody in those occasions would use either rhetoric or dialectics.

Rhetoric and dialectics have a limited field of action (one might even call it a "battlefield"): this is limited to the human issues, which are not necessary³, but can always be different from what they are, as Aristotle states in the *Rhetoric*:

But we only deliberate about things which seem to admit of issuing in two ways: as for those things which cannot in the past, present or future be otherwise, nobody deliberates about them, if he supposes that they are such; for nothing would be gained by it (ARISTOTELE 1357a, 4-7).

This reference to things which are not *ex ananches* doesn't mean that dialectics and rhetoric are inferior or lesser than other disciplines such as logic, but just that their epistemological status is different from that of logic (or any other science using axioms).

2. Aristotelian dialectics as a competitive method.

After briefly recalling the features that connect dialectics and rhetoric in a way that has been called *antistrophos*, I'm going to claim now that the Aristotelian dialectics is a competitive argumentation method, and I'm going to show how this competitive feature is displayed. Actually, rhetoric and dialectics are both strongly competitive disciplines, but as far as rhetoric is concerned, its competitiveness doesn't need to be proved as much as dialectics' does⁴.

First of all, two peculiar functions can be singled out in dialectics, the attack and the defense functions. Aristotle develops his view about dialectics in the *Topics*. The treatise deals with those particular instruments which are called in fact *topics* (τόποι)

³ The necessity referred to in this case is that described by the notion of *ex ananches*.

⁴ In fact, dialectics' competitive dimension is often neglected.

and that can be used in both ways: either in order to construct a positive argument (or to establish a proposition), or in order to demolish the opponent's arguments.

"To establish a proposition" and "to destroy the opponent's argument" are the expressions which describe the dialectical and rhetorical functions of attacking and defending oneself.

The whole treatise is a good representation of what Aristotle had in mind when he developed his dialectical method. In fact, a close look at the specific lexicon will show that Aristotle understood a dialectical dispute more like a fight than like a friendly talk aimed at solving a difference of opinions.

There are in fact some keywords in the Aristotelian treatise, which are used very frequently in order to specify peculiar dialectical features, such as κατασκευάζειν, which indicates the action of constructing a positive argument or establishing a proposition. The opposite action is ἀνασκευάζω, meaning to carry away, to remove, to dismantle, to waste, to ravage, and of course in the *Topics* it is used with the meaning of destroy the opponent's arguments.

Both terms are of a crucial importance, and they both clearly belong to a military semantic field, in fact they are used very often by ancient historians (like Thucydides) in order to describe warfare situations.

I have singled out some other significant words just to show that they are not chosen by Aristotle randomly. Since the philosopher didn't always have specific words for philosophy, he often had either to create new ones, or to take common use terms and give them a new philosophical meaning.

This is just the case for ἐπιχείρημα, which indicates in the most direct way the dialectical action of attacking the opponent's thesis. The term comes from the related verb ἐπιχειρέω, which means literally «to put one's hands to something», in a very concrete way. Other meanings are: «to attempt to» and, very interesting, «to attack» in a military way.

Another example for this use of common terms is τάξις, which indicates in its main meaning the order and the disposition of the troops. Then of course it indicates any kind of layout and disposition. It is mainly used in book VIII of the *Topics*, where Aristotle gives some procedural suggestions, by recommending the good dialectician to first think about all the questions he wants to address to his opponent. Then the dialectician shall lay out those question in his mind in a proper way and just at this point he can transmit them to his opponent.

Nevertheless, the lexical aspect is just one of the elements that make the Aristotelian dialectics a competitive method. In fact, the whole treatise is organised according to attack and defense structures. This means that when Aristotle introduces a *topos* and describes it, he always specifies whether it must be used for attack purposes or for defense purposes. However, many topics can be used for both purposes. Within this frame, the interlocutor is not a simple hearer, but becomes an opponent, and the dialectician must try its best with the dialectical strategies in order to attack him and possibly refute him. The rules of the game are set at the beginning: wiles are allowed, but the opponents must not commit fallacies or misuse the dialectical strategies. Dialectics has to be a fair game.

One of the main rules of the game predicts that one must not support a false thesis: this renders dialectics a competitive yet reliable method.

There's no guarantee that if we follow this method we'll support a true thesis and we'll prevail in doing so, but according to Aristotle, we all have a natural capacity to aim to the truth⁵:

to see both the truth and what is similar to it belongs to one and the same capacity, and at the same time people have a sufficient natural disposition towards truth, and in most cases they reach it; that is why someone likely to hit on reputable opinions is also someone likely to hit on the truth (ARISTOTELE 1355a, 14- 18).

Thus, even if there is nothing ensuring us that we will succeed in our task, we can say that dialectics allows us at least to come very close to it. Moreover, it is a method that helps distinguishing the truth from the false, and therefore it can be very helpful in examining carefully any opinion and any proposition we come across. That's why I envisaged that the Aristotelian dialectics can have a place in the democratic arena as a guide for the critical thinking and for the evaluation of the political proposals.

3. Agonistic democracy and deliberative democracy

I'm going now to connect the dialectical system that I've outlined with the theoretical model of the agonistic democracy, in order to show that dialectics, as designed by Aristotle, can be a key instrument for it.

The agonistic model for democracy envisages society as unavoidably pluralistic and *naturaliter* conflictual. Moreover, the acknowledgment of this conflictual dimension is stressed very often. Nevertheless, agonism does not mean antagonism: this perspective is not meant to design a society in which the model is that of *homo homini lupus* like after Hobbes.

The theoretical premise for one of the leading perspectives of this agonistic model for democracy is that it is necessary to acknowledge that social and political relations are potentially conflictual, and therefore policies must aim at regulating this conflictuality (MOUFFE 2000: 15).

The difference between agonism and antagonism must be taken into account as another important premise. Antagonism designs a fight between enemies, that are not legitimate and whose opinion we are trying to eliminate. Agonism is a fight between adversaries, who are legitimate opponents, whose opinions we may not share, but we shall respect (*ivi*: 16).

Agonistic disagreement is unavoidable, but we must accept and tolerate a plurality of values and beliefs. This is the base for a liberal democratic and tolerant society. Even if we disagree with the ideas of our opponent, we shall tolerate and respect them.

Moreover, those opposite ideas can be used in order to make better policies through democratic competition: this means that antagonism should be turned into agonism (*ibidem*), *i. e.* the conflictual disagreement should be integrated into the society in order for it to be productive. This kind of productivity is the result of the confrontation and then clash between different and competing positions.

So the key thesis for this perspective is that conflictuality doesn't jeopardize democracy: on the contrary, it is a necessary condition for it. A democratic society

⁵ Aristotle's so-called epistemological optimism is not an easy issue to deal with. For sure, it cannot be taken for granted as one might be likely to think after reading passages such as that which is quoted above. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the issue, see HASKINS 2004 and WARDY 1996.

can only exist if conflict is recognised and legitimated. A democratic system requires a clash of different positions in order to function in a good way (*ibidem*).

If this is missing (*i. e.* if the focus of the political debate is on the consensus, or if the parties advocate identical proposals), democratic confrontation will be fallacious and the voters will have to choose on basis of criteria that are different from the validity of the proposals, just like in a beauty contest (see also HIX 2003: 10: «policy debate is replaced by a political beauty contest»).

Moreover, too much emphasis on consensus will lead to apathy and lack of political participation, as well as stagnation at a policy level.

What happens very often, especially in the European Union, is that rival parties propose policies which are very similar, so that the democratic debate is weakened and invalidated, and the ultimate result is the removal of innovative policies (*ibidem*). This means that there cannot be policy innovation without a genuine competition between rival proposals.

That's why a democratic competition between different policies is vital for any healthy democratic system, and the competitive model for democracy is more effective in tackling this particular issue than the deliberative model.

Lastly, as Chantal Mouffe points out, disagreement is simply unavoidable in a *healthy* society⁶. As a consequence, the search for a rational consensus at all costs doesn't make sense, because such consensus cannot exist. She holds that the deliberative model of democracy is not efficient enough in tackling the challenges of a pluralistic society (such as the reception of multiplicity). In fact, this approach denies the existence of disagreement and it aims at erasing the conflictual nature of pluralism (MOUFFE 2000: 17), which is, on the contrary, innate in our society.

4. Tackling disagreement with the Aristotelian dialectics

The use of rhetoric is not separated from the use of dialectics; rhetoric does not result necessarily in manipulation and dialectics is not just a method of debating whose rigor is inferior to the logical one. It seems to me that a healthy political debate needs both disciplines, as long as they are practised with fairness.

If we choose to support the model that has been outlined before (the one which is aligned with the agonistic democracy theory), we may think of the Aristotelian dialectics as a good instrument operating within this perspective, which could be useful just in order to deal with the disagreement and to accomplish the aforementioned task of turning «antagonism into agonism» (MOUFFE 2000: 16).

As far as this issue is concerned, the Aristotelian rhetoric is a very effective instrument as well, but in this paper I'm going to deal just with the dialectical perspective.

Dialectics and its instruments can in fact capture and manage the disagreement and they can integrate it in the political debate, making it productive. In fact, disagreement is vital for democracy, but it must be organised by a set of rules which allow a correct, yet competitive debate in the political arena.

In the political arena multiple policy positions compete: a true and genuine confrontation between competing positions leads to optimal outcomes, just as happens in an ideal perfect economic market (HIX 2003: 4). This means that it is

⁶ And it's important to remember that the opponents may stop disagreeing, but this doesn't mean that their antagonism has been deleted: see MOUFFE 2000: 15.

more likely for good ideas, or sound political proposals to emerge from a highly competitive debate that is organised by the dialectical method.

Speaking from a general point of view, dialectics, as designed by Aristotle, allows an accurate inspection of such positions, which are checked and sorted carefully. At the end of this procedure, the dialectician shall keep the best, more useful and consistent positions and give up the worst ones, because of their inconsistency or groundlessness (in fact the dialectician must reject his/her position when he/she is confuted). This means that one of the opponents wins, and the other loses the debate. A thorough and accurate debate focusing on policy positions can indeed help the voters to then take their decisions on grounds of sound arguments.

The dialectical method, according to Aristotle, shall analyse each and every proposition put forward by the interlocutors. By doing so, dialectics has indeed a crucial role in the political debate. This way, in fact, disagreement is not rejected, it is fully integrated in the political arena and used to trigger first a deep and accurate analysis of the proposals, and then a competition between them, in order for the best ideas to emerge.

In fact, it is of a crucial importance that voters can actually choose between rival political groups. Those groups are composed by candidates who have rival political programs, and they compete for the leadership. This is a key concept in the democratic competition: voters can actually reward or punish political leaders on basis of their proposals.

Looking closer at this issue, two sides of the decision making process can be singled out: an input side and an output side. The so-called democratic competition is an issue at stake mostly at the input side level. In fact, the input side of this procedure is crucial in order to distinguish democracy from despotism (in fact, an enlightened despotism can produce good policies). The competition takes place just at this level, where different and rival positions are discussed within the scope of a competitive debate. Competition at the input level is highly beneficial for the output, for it fosters political debate and deliberation, as well as a well developed public opinion (*ivi*: 5).

The Aristotelian dialectics, if understood in a competitive way (as I have tried to outline before) can be a useful tool for the democratic competition at both input and output levels. The application of the Aristotelian method seems to be twofold: in fact dialectics is useful when it comes both to critically evaluating arguments and to produce new ones.

For what concerns the critical function, dialectics is a fundamental instrument especially when it comes to reviewing political proposals in the political debate. In fact, dialectics provides the so-called *metron*, *i. e.* a standard (or a criterion) which is meant to be a guidance which helps evaluating any position.

Dialectics allows an accurate check of any position and issue at stake, because, according to Aristotle, dialectics analyses both sides of a question, and it distinguishes the true one from the false one. When the false side is recognised, it can be easily rejected. This method is not incapable of error, but it is a good way to conduct an inquiry in a non-logical issue.

On the other side, dialectics is useful in order to produce new arguments that are sound and consistent, thanks to its specific tool, the *topos*. The *topos* selects the best and more appropriate premises among the many which can be possibly used in order to build an argument.

At a more general level, dialectics is to be understood as a competitive method, whose aim is not to reach consensus or a compromise, but to win the dispute. Nevertheless, even if the opponents aim at winning the contest, the method has some

rules of the game which guarantee that the opponents fight in a fair way. When the dispute is closed, one of the positions should win, and it becomes a law or a policy. If we see politics and the political arena as a marketplace, the most important issue is that voters can actually choose between rival candidates supporting rival proposals, and only this kind of democratic competition can offer the voters the best policy. Only by acknowledging the existence of the disagreement, and by integrating it in the democratic debate it is possible to guarantee this crucial competitive debate. Therefore the Aristotelian dialectics seems to be the most suitable instrument in order to organise the democratic debate and to ensure it happens in a fair way.

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