

The Common Topic in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*: Precursor of the Argumentation Scheme

A.C. BRAET

*Dutch and Speech Department, Universiteit Leiden
Postbus 9515,
2300 RA, Leiden,
The Netherlands
E-mail: a.c.braet@let.leidenuniv.nl*

ABSTRACT: In the present article I attribute to the common topic in the *Rhetoric* a two-fold suggestive function and a guarantee function. These three functions are possible because this type of topic, while often quite abstract, nevertheless contains thought-steering, substantial terms, and formulates a generally empirical or normative *endoxon*. Assuming that according to Aristotle an enthymeme has at least two premises, it would appear that a common topic is the abstract principle behind the often implicit major premise. This means that the topic may be regarded as the – generalizing – if-then statement in a modern argumentation scheme. Therefore it should be possible to see the enthymemes of *Rhetoric* 2.23 as a combination of a logical argument form (which can usually be reconstructed as *modus ponens*) and an argumentation scheme – even though we may not attribute this idea to Aristotle himself.

KEY WORDS: argumentation scheme, Aristotle, enthymeme, rhetoric, topics/*topoi koinoi*

1. INTRODUCTION

The ideas of classical rhetoricians (and dialecticians) on the concept 'topic' and those of modern argumentation theorists on the related concept of 'argumentation scheme' display a parallel development. In both cases the initial impetus was formed by checklists of types of argumentation contained in highly practical books, such as the *Rhetoric to Alexander* and American debate textbooks used in the nineteen-fifties. The classification and formulation of the types of argumentation left much to be desired. In a second phase, which actually marks the beginning of theory formation, the focus in both periods was on the design of better classifications and a more precise description of the types of argumentation. At some point these descriptions began to strive for a more or less uniform formalization. In antiquity we first see this in the *Rhetoric to Alexander* (see Braet,

2004) and Aristotle's *Topics* and *Rhetoric*, while in the modern era the trendsetters are Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1958) and Hastings (1962) (for classification) and Schellens (1985) (for formalization). A third parallel moment appears to be the interest in the question of what is actually meant by a 'topic' or an 'argumentation scheme'. Although the notorious lack of a satisfactory definition of 'topic' in Aristotle would appear to be proof of the contrary, I believe that this moment, too, can be found in his work. At any rate, one of the guiding concepts in the present article is that in his *Rhetoric* (and in his *Topics*: see below) there is an implicit distinction between the notions 'form of argumentation' (which belongs to formal logic) and 'argumentation scheme' (which belongs to the not totally formal field of argumentation theory). If this is correct, then Aristotle anticipates a modern distinction in the work of the pragma-dialecticians according to which a concrete argumentation is invariably based on two structures: on a logical level a form of argumentation such as *modus ponens*, and on a pragmatic level an argumentation scheme such as analogy (van Eemeren and Grootendorst, 1992, pp. 94–102) (see the *a maiore* example in section 5 below).

This hypothesis that there are two structural levels in a concrete argumentation, put forward by the pragma-dialecticians, has not gone unchallenged (logicians, in particular, apparently believe that argumentation schemes can ultimately be covered by logical forms which often have yet to be developed), and it is worthy of a closer examination. I believe that the following interpretation of the common topic in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* may make some contribution to the discussion – here the topical principles from the *Rhetoric* will be regarded as the core of a modern argumentation scheme, for example the principle 'If the cause is present, the effect must occur' (*Rhetoric* 2.23.25) forms the if-then statement in the causal argumentation scheme 'If the cause is present, the effect must occur; well then, the cause is present, therefore the effect will occur'.

It follows from my interpretation that in distinguishing between the two structures, as much attention should be given to the function as to the nature of the two forms. An important functional difference is that a valid form of argumentation guarantees the logical validity of the derivation of the conclusion from the premises, and an argumentation scheme, when correctly chosen and applied, guarantees the persuasive power of the argumentation, so that the person who must be persuaded will accept the standpoint on the basis of the argumentation presented. The difference in the nature of the two concepts is reflected, among other things, in the possibility of formalization: forms of argumentation can be formalized in a logical language, while argumentation schemes appear to resist this process, due to the presence of substantial terms such as 'cause' and 'effect'. It should be noted that

there appears to be a connection between these two differences, as the two concepts can only fulfil their function by virtue of their nature.

I should mention here that the main objective of this article is not to promote modern theory formation on argumentation schemes. My primary aim is to contribute to our understanding of the history of argumentation theory and, from the perspective of present-day argumentation theory, to present a new interpretation of the Aristotelian topic. Naturally, I will also deal with the questions which are of central importance in the modern literature, with its largely logical orientation. This will entail such questions as the following. Which of the two functions of a topic which have been defined since de Pater (1965 and 1968) predominates in Aristotle: the selective function or the guarantee function? What is the basis of the guarantee function? According to de Pater, this function can be traced to a logical principle which is linked to the topic.¹ Another ticklish matter is the question of whether the topical principle should be regarded as an – implicit – premise (as Slomkowski, 1997 has recently maintained), or as an external inference principle (in the view of Primavesi, 1996).

I will concentrate on the topical principles in the *Rhetoric*, specifically on the list of topics in Book 2, Chapter 23. In most of the studies no distinction is made between this list and the list of dialectical topics from the *Topics*, in that it is seen as a shorter variant. However, this is not automatically the case. Dialectical and rhetorical argumentation differ too much with regard to subject matter, structure, aim and audience (for a survey, see van Eemeren et al., 1996, Ch. 2). This means that Aristotle did not arrive at his dialectical topics in the same way as his rhetorical topics: the former seem to have been devised deductively and the latter inductively, from rhetorical practice (cf. Brunshwig, 1994 and 1996). This seems to me to be one of the reasons that the topics from the *Rhetoric*, with all the causal types which do not appear in the *Topics*, is closer to today's argumentation schemes. As the scope of the present article does not allow for a systematic discussion of the differences between the two sorts of topics, I will confine myself to a number of incidental clarifications in the notes.

2. THE PRESENTATION OF THE COMMON TOPIC IN THE RHETORIC

Aristotle introduces the concept of a 'common topic' during a discussion of three properties of the enthymeme in Book 1, Chapter 2 (Braet, 1999). On the third property he says: in the case of an enthymeme, as a rhetorical variant of the *sylogismos*, we refer to *topoi* such as 'more and less' (1358a10–14) (references to the Kassel edition 1976). In this context he stresses the distinction between enthymemes based on this type of topic and those based on *eidê*. In the recent literature

these *eidê* are generally regarded as special topics. Neither this type, nor the other types of topics which appear in the *Rhetoric* (for an overview, see Sprute, 1982) will be discussed here.

In 1.2.21–22, Aristotle merely points to the fact that *topoi* such as ‘more and less’ are ‘common’ (*koinoi*, 1358a12, 28 and 32), and ‘not related to a specific subject’ (*peri ouden... hypokeimenon estin*, 1358a22). Thus these topics ‘are applicable in common (*koinêi*) in various fields, such as law, physics, politics etc.’ (1358a12–14). There is no further clarification, and no examples of topical enthymemes are given, but fortunately one example of this sort of topic is mentioned by name: the topic of ‘more and less’ (*mallon kai hêtton*, 1358a14). It is dealt with in Chapter 2.23, together with at least² 27 other types. We may conclude from the introductory and retrospective comments in 1.2.22 and 2.22.13–17 that the types in this chapter belong to the *topoi* referred to in 1.2.21–22, even though the topics discussed in 2.23 are presented as common to each of the three types of speech and not to all fields.³ It is in the discussion of these types that we find a starting point for interpretation (supplemented with some of the very few additional remarks, such as the ‘definition’ of a topic in 2.26.1–2 as something under which various enthymemes can be ranked).⁴

Even a cursory inspection tells us that the discussions of the various topics in 2.23 differ widely, notably in length. And yet there are a number of fixed ingredients which recur in several discussions. If we include only those that appear in two or more discussions, we arrive at the following list.⁵

1. A name or description of the topic in the typical ‘from’ form, as in ‘from the more and less’, *ek tou mallon kai hêtton* (2.23.4: 1397b12).
2. Advice to the speaker to do something, namely ‘to investigate’ something (*skopein*, including 2.23.1: 1397a8; 21: 1399b31; 23: 1400a15), sometimes with an indication of the purpose (to demonstrate or to refute).
3. A formulation of a more or less abstract principle (see below for examples).
4. One or more concrete examples of texts, invented or taken from a speech or tragedy (!), in which the principle is applied (see also the examples below; in only one case, in 2.23.19, is this example explicitly referred to as an enthymeme).
5. Supplementary remarks, especially on the conditions for using the topic (whereby mention is sometimes made of fallacies).

Of these five components, 1 is always present and 4 almost always. Strangely enough, 3 – which would appear to provide the best example of the actual topic – is not always present. Moreover, the degree of abstraction of the principles under 3 vary widely. Not all the topics

would appear to be 'subjectless', whatever Aristotle meant by that term. In other words, it is doubtful whether all the topics in 2.23 conform to the ideal contours for a common topic which – although vague – are given in 1.2.21–22.

Not only the topic from 'more and less', but also the first topic in 2.23, the topic from contraries (*ek ton enantiôn*), would appear to fit the ideal image. Since the discussions of these two topics together encompass all the above mentioned components (with the exception of the more optional 5), these forms provide a good point of departure for an analysis.⁶ The two discussions are sketched below; in the case of 'more and less' I will confine myself to the first abstract principle, i.e., the first variant of this type of topic. (The translation here and below, in some cases slightly modified, is taken from Kennedy 1991).

1 name:	<i>ek tôn enantiôn</i> from contraries	<i>ek tou mallon kai hêtton</i> from the more and less
2 Advice:	'Consider whether the contrary of a predicate belongs to the contrary of a subject (corresponding to the subject in question), refuting the argument if it is not, confirming it if it is' (1397a8–9)	–
3 Principle:	–	'If a predicate does not belong to a subject to which it is more likely to belong, it clearly does not belong to a subject to which it is less likely to belong (corresponding to the subject in question)' (1397b13–15)
4 Example:	'Self-control is good, for lack of self-control is harmful (397a10–11)	'If not even the gods know everything, human beings can hardly do so' (1397b12–13)

It is important to note that the above diagram represents the entire treatment of the two topics by Aristotle. Moreover, these are relatively detailed treatments: the other topics are often discussed in an even more brief and elliptical manner. This is all the reader has to go on. Therefore, we cannot expect to find explicit answers to the questions which occupy modern researchers. For example, there is no mention of the fact that it is component 3 which best expresses the 'actual' topic. Nothing is said about the function or functions of the topic, let alone the selection and guarantee functions distinguished by de Pater (1965 and 1968). And as regards the question of whether or not a topic is a premise, it is possible that this point never occurred to Aristotle. The few remarks which go beyond the treatment of the individual topics contain little or nothing in the way of explicit references (see Section 5 on the value of the 'definition' of 'topic' in 2.26.1).

In other words, all modern interpretations are, at best, plausible explanations or extrapolations of what Aristotle may have meant.

By way of introduction to the interpretation, it is clear from the two treatments in the schema that the advice and the principle imply one another. This means that Aristotle can make do with only one of the two components, since one can be derived from the other. In the first schema the following principle can be supplemented: ‘If the contrary of a predicate belongs to the contrary of a subject (corresponding to the subject in question), then this predicate belongs to this subject’. In the second schema the fitting – simplified⁷ – advice is: ‘ascertain if the more likely thing is present, since if that is so, it proves that the less likely thing is certainly not present.’

This reciprocal derivability does not take away the fact that in some cases the principles indicate more clearly the essence of a topic. Moreover, the principles provide the motivation for each advice and not the other way around. Regardless of the question for which of the two components Aristotle reserves the designation *topos* (which is only of historical importance), it seems clear that the principle best represents the topic in question.⁸ I will proceed on the assumption that this is true, and in the following I will work with the ‘if..., then...’ formulation of the principle. Not only is the latter used by Aristotle (although not exclusively), it is also the most convenient form for purposes of a discussion.

3. THE FUNCTIONS OF THE COMMON TOPIC

In the first place, I will attempt to determine the function or functions implicitly attributed to topics in the treatments of topics in the *Rhetoric*. I will take as my departure point the purpose Aristotle must have had in mind when writing his treatments, namely to help orators to find enthymematic arguments for their standpoints. Although Aristotle is not explicit on this point – in discussing these standpoints we can think of the standpoints and sub-standpoints of the two parties with respect to the issues (*amphisbêtêseis*, in later rhetoric known as *staseis*) which present themselves in judicial, political and ceremonial speeches.⁹

Let us take the example that Aristotle gives in 2.22.5 (see also 1.4.9) of a political discussion in the Athens public meeting on the question of whether or not the country should go to war. It is quite conceivable that during the discussion someone will express his opposition to the proposal to make war on a particular enemy. The speaker might adopt the standpoint that the war cannot be won (this is a standpoint related to the effectiveness issue, see 3.17.4: 1417b34–35). It is then his task to develop an argument by which he can persuade the meeting of the truth of this standpoint. How can he make use of topics such as those discussed in 2.23? (It should be noted here that the topical

method apparently assumes that he has more than one topic at his disposal, but not a long, unwieldy series of topics. Thus the question here is how helpful a more or less surveyable list of topics such as that in 2.23 would be to the speaker).

The first thing that the speaker can and should do with this list is to make his standpoint more specific, i.e., provide an example of a certain type of statement: such as a less likely case that will not present itself, an effect that will not occur, etc. While the standpoint which he is defending will have been broadly established beforehand, it can still be 'seen' in various ways (within reasonable limits: for example, a descriptive standpoint can never be presented as normative). By going through the list of topics, the speaker can find specifications. When he arrives at the topic of 'more and less', he may consider the possibility of presenting his standpoint as a less likely case that will not occur. In other words, he comes up with the idea of presenting his standpoint as a concrete substitute for the type of standpoint in the 'then' part of the topical principle 'more and less'. So he fills in 'if that did not succeed in a more likely case, then we are certainly not capable of winning'. Another possibility is provided by the topic 'cause and result', whereby the standpoint can be seen as a result that will not occur (see 2.23.25). We can now fill in: 'if the cause is lacking, then our victory, which is the result, will not take place'.

In a second step, the possible specifications of the standpoint are then tested to determine their defensibility. Given the possible substitutions of the standpoint, the speaker is advised to look around for a specific type of argument:¹⁰ the types which in the 'if' part of the topical principles are indicated with such general expressions as 'more likely case' and 'cause'. Here the speaker is on his own: without the help of the topical principle, he must do two things: come up with a concrete argument that falls under the argument type of the 'if' part, and then determine whether this argument is acceptable to the audience. This requires a knowledge of the subject and of the views of the audience.¹¹ In our example this can lead to substitutions such as 'as you know, even another city with a stronger army than ours did not succeed in conquering our enemy' (more likely case) and 'you will no doubt agree that we do not have at our disposal the necessary allies' (cause). When no suitable substitutions can be found for a suggested type of argument, the corresponding substitution of the argument is invalid. When such a substitution is found, the standpoint in the chosen form is defensible.

Let us assume that the orator comes to a positive conclusion for at least one proposed type of argument with respect to both points: the availability and the acceptability of a concrete argument. Then he can take the third decisive step: he can formulate an enthymeme that will persuade his audience, i.e., will make them accept his standpoint. For example: 'another state with a stronger army than ours did not suc-

ceed in conquering our enemy', therefore we certainly will not be able to conquer them.' While the topical principle does not guarantee the availability and acceptability of a concrete argument, it does ensure that the audience will accept his standpoint *provided that* an acceptable argument can be presented to them which falls under the 'if' part.

In a chronological¹² schema (with the topic of 'more and less' as example):

Pre-topical step 0:	Broadly formulated standpoint ('we cannot win the war')
Topical step 1:	Possible specifications of the standpoint as suggested by the standpoint types in the 'then' part of topics, with as precondition the nature of the broad formulation (e.g., 'then we certainly won't be able to win the war')
Topical step 2:	Possibly concrete arguments as suggested by the argument types in the 'if' part of the topics with as precondition availability and acceptability of the concrete arguments (e.g., 'a different state with a stronger army did not succeed in winning either')
Topical step 3:	When the preconditions have been met: formulation of an enthymeme that will definitely be convincing, i.e., will make the standpoint acceptable (e.g., 'a different state with a stronger army has not been able to win from this enemy, therefore we will not be able to either')

Thus, to begin with, a common topic has a double suggestive function (for my extended description of the selection function, see note 15). The standpoint type in the 'then' part of the topical principle suggests proposing the standpoint as a representative of a certain type, in order to make it defensible. The argument type in the 'if' part suggests examining whether there is an acceptable argument available that falls under this part, with which to defend the standpoint. If the suggestions produce positive results, then the enthymeme can be formulated in which the common topic fulfils its guarantee function: The topic guarantees that the enthymeme, consisting of the substitution of the 'then' and 'if' part of the principle, will persuade the audience, i.e. that the audience will accept the standpoint.¹³

4. THE NATURE OF THE COMMON TOPIC

The next question is which characteristics make a common topic suitable for the dual suggestive and the guarantee function. In other words, what is the nature of a common topic? In order to answer this question for all the topics from 2.23, the text base has been expanded: to the three topics above an additional four have been added, so that we now have a representative choice from all the topics in 2.23 (from topic 4 on, the section number is one number higher).

1. If the contrary of a predicate belongs to the contrary of a subject (corresponding to the subject in question), then this predicate belongs to this subject (*ek tôn enantiôn*, from contraries).
4. If a predicate does not belong to a subject to which it is more likely to belong, then it clearly does not belong to a subject to which it is less likely to belong (corresponding to the subject in question) (*ek tou mallon kai hêtton*, from the more and less).
5. If one would have granted a request in the past (before accomplishing anything), then one may not refuse the same request in the present (after accomplishing something) (*ek tou ton chronon skopein*, from looking at the time).
11. If an authoritative judgment is made about the same or a similar or contrary issue, then this judgment or the contrary of this judgment also applies in the present question (*ek kriseôs*, from a (previous) judgment).
12. If none of the species of a genus belongs to a subject (corresponding to the subject in question), then this genus does not belong to this subject (*ek tôn merôn*, from the 'parts', i.e., species).
13. If an act (corresponding to the act in question) has both good consequences and bad consequences, then on the basis of the good/bad consequences this act can be exhorted/dissuaded, defended/accused, praised/blamed (*ek tou akolouthountos*, from the consequence).
24. If the cause exists, then the effect does; if it does not, then there is no effect (*apo tou aitiou*, from the cause).

In all these principles a certain substantial connection is established between two more or less general statements. However, the nature of this connection and that of the statements which it connects differ quite radically. In principle 12, for example, it is primarily a matter of a connection between the predicate terms from the 'if' and the 'then' statement: this is a relationship of species and genus. The nature of the constituent statements in this principle is quite general: these are subject-predicate statements which, for example, can be interpreted as both descriptive and normative. Principle 5 is quite another story. Here it is mainly a question of a connection between conditions under which a statement is valid, specifically a relation between two points in time at which something can lay claim to having been promised (past versus present, before and after the act). The constituent statements still have a certain generality (they are about 'the granting of a request' and an otherwise unspecified 'past' and 'present'), but both the fact that it is limited to the subject 'granting of a request' and the normative nature of the statements make this principle much more specific than principle 12.

Principles 12 and 5 represent two extremes of the topics from 2.23. Principle 12, like principles 1 and 4, belongs to the topics which rheto-

ric and dialectics have in common: it is a highly abstract and thus subject-independent principle. Principle 5 is much less abstract, and thus much narrower, being limited to a discussion on whether a request is justified or not. Although it does have a certain universality, it clearly does not fit the ideal picture of a common topic, such as that described in 1.2.20–22. The other principles are on a sliding scale from more to less general, between 12 and 5. But in relation to the functions of a topic, it is decisive that even the most general principle, 12, is still a substantial rather than a formal principle: no matter how abstract, terms such as *genus* and *species* stand for substantial concepts.¹⁴

I will now take a closer look at the relationship between the somewhat changeable nature of the topical principles and the functions differentiated above. In the first place, there is an unmistakable link between that fact that the topical principles are concerned with more or less general, and yet always substantial common terms and the dual suggestive function. Terms such as ‘the contrary of’, ‘more likely’/‘less likely’, ‘in the past’/‘in the present’, etc., are abstract, but they are sufficiently substantial to be thought-guiding. It is no coincidence that the from-designation and, where the occasion arises, the formulation of an advice in the topic discussion refer to these terms. It is through these terms that both the naming and the advice fulfil the dual suggestive function of the topic.¹⁵ Take, for instance, a designation as ‘from contraries’. This suggests, first, ascertaining whether the standpoint can be seen as a member of a pair of contraries. In the case of a statement such as ‘self-control is good’, this is possible, since both the subject term and the predicate term have contraries. Second, this designation clearly indicates the direction in which to search for an argument: a substitution of the ‘if’ statement of the principle, such as ‘lack of self-control is harmful’. Again, it must be said that with no knowledge of the subject under discussion, not a single concrete argument can be conceived, no matter how suggestive a previously specified standpoint and the corresponding substantial characterization of the argument may be.

In the second place, the guarantee function of the topical principles also depends on the presence of the above mentioned substantial common terms. Here this is due to the fact that in each topical principle a relation is created between the ‘if’ statement and the ‘then’ statement, which links up with the substantial common terms in the two statements. Thus the relationship in ‘If the cause exists, then the effect does’ is established via ‘the cause’ and ‘the effect’: there is a causal connection between the two situations which the two statements describe. This means that the guarantee function is based on causal and other relationships which exist between the statements in the ‘if’ and the ‘then’ part of a topical principle. These are the relations which, for the audience, guarantee the correctness of the standpoint on the basis of the argument presented – provided that that argument is in itself accept-

able to them. In the case of the audience we can be sure, for example, that the effect exists (standpoint) if the cause exists (argument).

The heterogeneous nature of the topical principles means that the relations on which the guarantee function rests differ considerably.¹⁶ Most relations in the topics from 2.23 express relationships which the audience regularly sees in real life. The most frequent are all manner of more or less general forms of causal relations (above, topic 24 and, to some extent, topic 13). These are usually based on human experiences, such as the fact that having a good motive and committing a crime often coincide (see, in addition to topic 24, topic 20 in 2.23.21). Furthermore, certain principles are concerned with similarities and differences between matters (the topics 1 and 4 above). These reflect such findings as the fact that when a stronger man is unable to lift something, a weaker man will normally not be able to either. Other relationships have to do with normative generalizations familiar to the audience, such as the consideration that the desirability of an action depends on the advantages and disadvantages which accompany it (topic 13). Only a few principles appear to be based on elementary logical-semantic notions, such as the idea that a species or a whole cannot exist if it has no sub-species or parts (see topic 12 and topic 9 in 2.23.10, respectively).

In general, most topical relations appear to be based on empirical and normative generalizations of human experiences and preferences; a small minority are based on simple and insightful logical-semantic principles.¹⁷ The degree of abstraction of the generalizations varies considerably. This has also led to a degree of overlap between the topics in 2.23, for example between the most abstract variant of more and less in 2.23.4 and a specific variant in 2.23.7. Despite these differences its – varying – guaranteeing power rests in the same feature: in the words of Aristotle,¹⁸ it is always about *endoxa*. In other words, about principles which, while they are accepted by a more or less expert, or quite large group of people, are not necessarily true or universally valid. What the group sees as a fairly high degree of likelihood, or normative or logical validity is sufficient. To take an example: It is by no means impossible that a weaker man, by means of special training, can lift more than a strong man, but for the audience this exception does not negate the general acceptability of the principle that it is the more likely case that the stronger man can lift a heavier load.¹⁹

5. THE COMMON TOPIC AS IMPLICIT PREMISE OR EXTERNAL INFERENCE PRINCIPLE; COMPARISON WITH THE MODERN ARGUMENTATION SCHEME

Purely on the basis of the treatments of the topics in 2.23, it would appear that everything that can be said about the function and nature of

this type of topics has already been said. On the basis of these treatments it would appear that such a topic can be formulated as an 'endoxal' if-then principle with certain abstract, but nevertheless substantial common terms. By means of substitution, a standpoint can be derived from the 'then' part and an argument from the 'if' part. This produces a convincing enthymeme which consists of two statements: 'standpoint, since argument.' It would appear that a great many examples of this type of dual enthymemes are given in 2.23.²⁰ All these enthymemes derive their persuasive power from the fact that they are substitution cases of an accepted topical principle. This principle is the basis of the enthymeme, but it is not part of it as an argument (in logical terminology [see note 10]: as premise). It is an external rule from which the enthymeme draws its persuasive force. *In this respect*²¹ such a rule may be compared to a logical inference rule such as 'from the collection of premises {if p, then q; p} follows q'. For this last line must not be added to a *modus ponens* argument, rather it has the status of an external rule which bestows logical validity on an argument in this form.²²

If we look beyond 2.23, then we can find not only passages which tally with this interpretation but also passages which appear to contradict it. For example, this interpretation corresponds to the description in 2.26.1 of a topical principle as that by which a series of enthymemes can be classified. As we know, an infinite number of concrete enthymemes can be classified under a topical principle such as 'more and less' by means of variable substitutions. But the combination with Aristotle's views on the enthymeme as expressed in various places outside 2.23 is more troublesome. As is clear from Braet (1999), Aristotle did not see an enthymeme as consisting simply of two statements, i.e., standpoint and argument. While in practice many enthymemes present themselves as twofold, Aristotle appears to be saying that in such cases an argument/premise has been suppressed. If we assume that Aristotle had this type of enthymeme in mind in 2.23 as well, then he must have been of the opinion that in each example of enthymemes which he gives (see, however, note 20) an argument/premise has been suppressed. This makes it possible to interpret the relationship between a concrete enthymeme and the accompanying topical principle differently than I have done above.

In that case, it is conceivable that the topical principle serves not only as an external rule, but also as an 'internal rule': the topical if-then principle can then be seen as an abstract variant of the implicit argument. In a full formulation of the argument, the topic – in a specified form – can now be added to the twofold enthymeme. The example given above, 'we cannot win the war, if another state with a stronger army could not do so', then becomes 'we cannot win the war, for another state with a stronger army could not do so, and if another state with a stronger army could not do so, then neither can we'. Now the

topic produces substitution cases not only for the explicit argument and the standpoint, but also for the implicit argument.²³

This interpretation is fairly close to the analysis of single argumentations in modern argumentation theory (for example van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, 94–110 and Kienpointner 1992, 231–250). In the above example it is possible to see the merging of two structures: a *modus ponens* structure on the logical level of the argumentation form and an *a maiore* structure on the pragmatic level of the argumentation scheme. The argumentation scheme employed can be described as follows, with the topic as the first statement:

- (1) If the more likely case does not occur, then the less likely case will certainly not occur.
- (2) The more likely case does not occur.
- (3) Therefore, the less likely case will certainly not occur.

This interpretation is attractive mainly because it emphasizes the fact that the guarantee function of the topic is in a class of its own. It makes it possible to counter the threat of confusion with the function of a logical ‘inference rule’ (or argumentation form).²⁴ Because in this approach a logical argumentation form and a pragmatic argumentation scheme go together in a single argumentation (an enthymeme), it is more obvious that the guarantee function does not refer to the logical validity of the inference of the conclusion (in the standpoint) from the premises (in the arguments). This is obvious from the argumentation form - in this case the formal *modus ponens* form. The guarantee function refers to the acceptability of the standpoint in the eyes of the audience, given the acceptability of the two arguments to that audience. Translating this to the logical level of logic textbooks: the guarantee function ensures not only the validity, but also the soundness of the reasoning.²⁵ In particular, as *endoxon* the topic sees to it that the if-then argument (which is usually suppressed) is acceptable – the topic is in this case the substantial *a maiore* principle. (As noted above, the topical method cannot ensure the acceptability of the second, ‘explicit’ argument).

For Aristotle this interpretation in terms of modern argumentation theory, with the explicit combination of an argumentation scheme and an argumentation form in one enthymeme, is of course anachronistic. And yet such a view can certainly be seen as following from Aristotle’s views. The question is which aspects of this view can be attributed to him. Given the differences of opinion in the literature, this is no easy task.

To begin with, there is the question of the topic as external principle or as internal (implicit) premise. From Solmsen (1929, 163–166) to Primavesi (1996, 87–88), most interpreters are of the opinion that the explanation as external principle is closest to Aristotle’s views. On the basis of the treatments in *Rhetoric* 2.23, this would appear to be

correct: we find no evidence of the topic as an implicit premise/argument. The only indication in this direction is found in examples such as ‘if the gods do not know everything, then humans certainly don’t know everything’. Due to its general nature and the if-then form, this example does suggest an if-then premise rather than a normal enthymeme.²⁶ A somewhat less strained view is that Aristotle simply intended this example as an enthymeme, consisting of an argument and a standpoint – despite the fact that the conditional formulation is somewhat misleading and the universality is less appropriate in rhetoric.

Slomkowski, who in Chapter 2 of his book (Slomkowski, 1997, 43–67) presents the most extensive defence of the topic as internal – implicit – argument, has in fact only one strong argument: the reason which I have already put forward, namely that in the case of the enthymeme – and the dialectical *sylogismos* – Aristotle supposes more than one premise. In other words, the interpretations with a topic as external principle assume the existence of enthymemes – and dialectical *sylogismoi* – which do not conform to Aristotle’s definition.²⁷ But no matter how strong this argument is, it does not alter the fact that in the treatment of the topics in 2.23 no trace of the ‘multi-premisseness’ of the enthymeme is to be found, let alone the view that the topics discussed there should be seen as a general formulation of implicit premisses. We cannot get around the fact that again the *Rhetoric* – possibly as a result of ‘stratification’ (Solmsen, 1929) – proves inconsistent or, at the very least, not explicitly consistent.

Given this state of affairs, it would of course be going too far to attribute to Aristotle in 2.23 forms of argumentation such as *modus ponens*, if only because the necessary premisses are lacking. In a more general sense, however, there is also no sufficiently elaborated propositional logic. But aside from the question of the extent to which Aristotle was heading in this direction and whether one can use the beginnings of such a development in the interpretation of 2.23,²⁸ it is generally acknowledged that, from a later logical viewpoint, the enthymemes in 2.23 can best be treated in a propositional-logical manner.²⁹ In other words, it is generally accepted that, objectively speaking, what we see in 2.23 is a combination of a topical level and a logical or propositional-logical level. However, an aspect which is not generally known or acknowledged is the fact that this can be explained as a combination of an argumentation scheme and a form of argumentation in a single argumentation. The relationship between the topical and the formal-logic level is complicated: it was not until centuries later – in the late Middle Ages and due largely to Ockham – that scholars were able to shed some light on the question.³⁰

6. CONCLUSION

Aristotle's treatment of the common topic in the *Rhetoric* is highly implicit. This means that any attribution of one or more functions or characteristic properties must be speculative. Nevertheless, in view of the task facing a speaker, it is reasonable to attribute to this topic a dual suggestive function *and* a guarantee function: a topic suggests that the standpoint to be defended should be represented in such a way that it is defensible by means of a particular type of argumentation, and then suggests to the speaker that he should search for that type of argumentation. When the dual suggestion has provided the speaker with the representation of his standpoint and an appropriate argument, the topic guarantees that the audience will be convinced by the standpoint, on the basis of the argument put forward. The topic is able to fulfil these functions because the topical principle, while occasionally quite abstract, always contains enough substantial thought-guiding terms, and formulates an *endoxon*.

This interpretation leaves open the question of whether the topic is an external inference principle or an abstract variant of an implicit premise. Assuming that according to Aristotle an enthymeme contains at least two premises, the latter interpretation imposes itself upon us. This makes it possible to see the topic as the generalized if-then statement in a modern argumentation scheme. Thus, objectively speaking, it would seem possible to see in the enthymemes in 2.23 a combination of a logical argumentation form (which can generally be reconstructed as *modus ponens*³¹) and an argumentation scheme. In view of Aristotle's later inclination to see syllogistic forms of argumentation as alternatives for enthymematic topics (see Braet, 1999), this idea can hardly be attributed to Aristotle himself.³²

NOTES

¹ See note 16 for the interpretation which de Pater gives in de Pater and Vergouwen (1992) of 'a logical principle' from de Pater (1965 and 1968).

² Counting the number of topics in 2.23 is complicated by the fact that each section appears to focus on a single topic, (of the 'from' type, such as 'from opposites'), but that the designation sometimes covers more than one topical principle (see, for example, 2.23.4, with various principles under 'from the more and less').

³ This also includes the topics of the apparent enthymemes, in view of the statement in 2.22.17; to avoid complications, they will not be discussed here.

⁴ Since in 1.20–22 Aristotle clearly draws a parallel between rhetoric and dialectics with respect to such topics as 'more and less', and because in 2.23 he deals mainly with topics that are also discussed in the *Topics* (to which he sometimes refers his readers for clarification), the latter work also provides points of departure for an interpretation of topics of the 'more and less' type. This must, however, be undertaken with a degree of caution, in view of the differences between dialectical and rhetorical arguments.

⁵ For these components, see the literature in notes 8 and 13 (which, however, focuses mainly on the *Topics*; this means, among other things, that the examples in component 4 are different).

⁶ Component 5 will not be discussed here. The most interesting remarks are those on the use of fallacies, a subject which is worthy of treatment in a separate study.

⁷ Aristotle himself uses this simplified formulation when formulating the second principle under the heading ‘from the more and less’: if the less likely thing is true, the more likely is true also’ (2.23.4: 1397b16).

⁸ With respect to this historical question, but then in connection with the *Topics*, see Stump (1978, 166–178) versus the in my view correct interpretation of de Pater (1965, especially 116 and 143 and 1968, especially 166 and 173–174) (with later qualifications in Green-Pedersen 1984, 23–24 and 1987, 409 and Kakkuri-Knuutila 1993, 37–39). For the derivability of advice and principle, likewise in the *Topics*, see also Primavesi (1996, 98–99) and Slomkowski (1997, 55 and 170).

⁹ It is here that rhetoric, which has to do with single practical standpoints on issues in speeches, distinguishes itself from the dialectics of the *Topics*, which are concerned with general theoretical - philosophical, and above all definitoric - standpoints. This involves a difference in argumentation; it also helps to explain why many topics from 2.23, especially those which are causal in nature, do not have a counterpart in the *Topics*.

¹⁰ In relation to the term ‘standpoints’, here and in the rest of the article I will use the term ‘arguments’ as the pragmatic counterpart of the logical term ‘premises’. Thus on the pragmatic level I refer to ‘standpoint and arguments’, where on the logical level ‘conclusion and premises’ is appropriate.

¹¹ In the literature (see notes 8 and 13) insufficient attention has been given to the fact that on these two points there is not only a parallel but also a difference with regard to the dialectical discussion. As regards the latter, the arguments sought for the general dialectical standpoint are themselves general statements (*endoxa*) which are acceptable to the answerer. In rhetoric one needs single arguments for single standpoints (which must be acceptable to the audience, but which cannot actually be called *endoxa*). This also involves a different way of ‘finding’ arguments (Sprute 1982, 159 does contain a comparison between the *Topics* and the *Rhetoric* on this point, but does not make the differences sufficiently explicit. The role which the ‘instruments’ in the *Topics* play in this connection (see recently de Pater and Vergauwen [1992, sec. 9.3]) must also be adjusted in the *Rhetoric*.

¹² In practice, not only the top-down approach of step 1 and 2 is possible, but also a bottom-up approach – first 2 and then 1 – or a similar simultaneous interaction. From a present concrete argument, the speaker can arrive at the topical principle, plus the interpretation of the standpoint, or argument and principle plus concrete standpoint can present themselves more or less simultaneously.

¹³ In many respects this functional interpretation tallies with previous interpretations, notably on the basis of the *Topics*, since de Pater (1965 and 1968) (of particular importance is the partly assenting and partly dissenting discussion in Sprute, 1982, 157–168) and Brunschwig (1967, XXXVIII-XLVII) (important further development in Primavesi, 1996, 83–88). This applies on the one hand to the functions of topical steps 2 and 3 of the schema (in de Pater the search/selection functions and the guarantee/probative function respectively), and on the other hand to the idea that the argument and the standpoint are substitutions (‘concretizations’ in Brunschwig) of the topical if-then principle. The major difference is my insertion of step 1 (which explains the change from ‘selection function’ to ‘twofold suggestion function’): one fails to notice that the given standpoint admittedly imposes conditions for the choice of the topic, but that conversely the topic further determines the standpoint, which then becomes defensible. Aristotle himself indicates in his *Topics* – not in every case, but quite regularly – (e.g. 2.2: 109a34–35 and 2.6: 112b21–22) that the questioner must begin by interpreting the standpoint that the answerer has adopted in terms of a topical principle. For a

further clarification of the guarantee function and commentary on the somewhat ambiguous characterization by, for example, De Pater, see below in the body of the text.

¹⁴ Cf. Green-Pedersen (1984, 26 and 1987, 408) and Kienpointner (1989, 139 and 1992, 127). It should be noted here that this holds true according to customary formal-logical standards. Here de Pater takes a different view, following from Medieval intentionally oriented logicians: see note 16.

¹⁵ In the post-Aristotelian topical tradition, a distinction is made in Boethius and later scholars between two types of designations of topics, by means of a *differentia* (for example, *a genere*, from the genus) and by means of a *maxima propositio* (for example, 'what belongs to the genus, belongs to the species). According to modern interpretations (Stump, 1978, 196–197; Green-Pedersen 1987, 410–411) the *differentia*, which refers to the characteristic term in the first half of the maxim, is used to find the premises of a topical syllogism. This is clearly a continuation of Aristotle, even though the enthymemes in 2.23 do not have a syllogistic form (in the stricter sense, with three terms).

¹⁶ Cf. notably Sprute, (1982, 186–189), who is opposed to the simplifying reduction of the guarantee function to a 'logical law' in de Pater (1965, 122–127 and 1968, 179). For further criticism of the latter point and for the diversity of the topical relations, see also Green-Pedersen, (1984, 26–28 and 1987, 408). (Meanwhile de Pater [de Pater and Vergauwen 1992, 229, 234–235, 238–239 and 242] further explains his views: he now indicates that a topic is 'logical' in a sense which differs from the now prevailing sense [239], namely in the Medieval intentionalistic sense of relational principles such as those between *genus* and *species* [236].

¹⁷ In this connection, we should mention two related differences between the rhetorical topics from *Rhetoric* 2.23 and the dialectical topics from the *Topics*. First, as I noted by way of introduction, the latter appear to have been invented by Aristotle himself, while the rhetorical topics were, at most, abstracted by him from rhetorical practice (and also borrowed from earlier rhetoricians, as is sometimes indicated: 2.23. 14 and 21) (cf. Brunschwig, 1994 and 1996). And second, in dialectical discussions there are attempts to make the answerer contradict himself by means of a long, artificial chain of reasoning. In view of the fact that we may be dealing with a more cultivated interlocutor, almost formal 'transformation rules' (Primavesi, 1966) for each step in the reasoning may be used which do not comply with 'common sense rules' (Sprute, 1982) of the masses. In a speech both the simple audience – to which Aristotle regularly refers – and the necessity to come up with arguments which are directly related to the standpoint preclude this type of 'chess-playing' with abstract dialectical topics: here the only argumentations that work are those based on insightful substantial relationships recognizable to the audience, with simple logical-semantic relations between, for example, species and sub-species as marginal abstract lower limit.

¹⁸ See 1.1.11: 1355a17, 1.2.13: 1357a10 and 2.25.2: 1402a34. The term is more prominently present in the *Topics*, where it is also described: 1.1: 100b21–23. It would appear to refer mainly to the general *protaseis* which are selected together with the dialectical topics, but the rhetorical common topics also meet the description.

¹⁹ It is noteworthy that in the *Rhetoric* Aristotle presents principles as general truths, without conditions, which elsewhere he discusses in a far more nuanced manner (cf. the commentary of Sieveke 1980, 272, n. 135, on the simplistic presentation of the topic from cause and consequence in 2.23.25).

²⁰ Due to their general if-then nature, the enthymeme status of the examples in 2.23 is somewhat doubtful. We will return to this point later in the main text.

²¹ See the main text below for the many important differences between a topical principle and a logical inference rule.

²² For this type of interpretation cf. Ryan, (1984, 49). See the main text below for the references to comparable interpretations by Solmsen (1929) and Primavesi (1996).

²³ In explicating the suppressed argument, I have refrained from addressing the problem of the logical and pragmatic variants of this argument (opting instead for the 'logical minimum'): see van Eemeren and Grootendorst, (1992, Ch 6).

²⁴ That confusion is promoted in part by the fact that in de Pater (1965, 122 and 133) a topical principle is also referred to as ‘formule d’inférence’. This, in combination with the interpretation of this type of principle as a logical law, creates the wrong idea, even though in note 356, p. 147 where the term ‘formule d’inférence’ is again used, the author points to the difference between this and the logical *modus-ponens* rule.

²⁵ Cf. Stump (1978, 186–187) and especially Green-Pedersen (1984, 68–71), who somewhat cautiously arrives at a comparable clarification for the topics of Boethius. (*Soundness*, which generally stands for a true conclusion which is derived in a valid fashion, is somewhat limited: the important thing is that the conclusion is acceptable.)

²⁶ Sprute (1982, 155 and 185) interprets this example ‘in a logical sense’ as the major premise of a *modus ponens* argument. However, he presents this as an anachronistic interpretation. Apparently he agrees with Solmsen that in Aristotle’s view no premises have been suppressed in 2.23.

²⁷ Slomkowski (1997, 51–52) not only points out that Aristotle’s definition of all types of *sylogismoi* assumes more than one premise, but also says that, in addition, this definition implies that the conclusion follows by virtue of the premises and not through ‘any external rule.’ De Pater (written communication, 18–3-2002), who is inclined to endorse the interpretation of Slomkowski, mentions as extra argument the fact that Aristotle refers to a topic as *stoicheion* (element).

²⁸ Slomkowski (1997) develops a line of reasoning in this direction, for the *Topics* in particular; regardless of its tenability, I believe it would be risky to project his interpretation on Chapter 2.23 of the *Rhetoric*.

²⁹ See de Pater (1965, 145), Brunschwig (1967, XLI), Schepers (1972, 530), Sprute (1982, 183 ff.), Primavesi (1996, 87) and Slomkowski (1997, 4 and elsewhere). Only Schepers and Sprute discuss the *Rhetoric*; the others focus on the *Topics*, sometimes including the *Rhetoric*.

³⁰ See the historical account in Green-Pedersen (1984, summary 1987). See also the mention in Kienpointner (1992, 30–31).

³¹ This is bound up with the fact that in ordinary arguments, including speeches, argumentations can usually be reduced to this form. In the *Topics*, which deals with artificial refutations, we find more *modus tollens* (cf. also Kienpointner 1992 for the combination of different propositional-logical forms of argumentation and topics/argumentation schemes).

³² I would like to thank W. A.de Pater and A. van Rees for their comments on a previous version of this article.

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