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Dialectic and Refutation in Plato and Aristotle

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The papers in this dossier were written within the framework of two research projects on the refutation strategies of radical adversaries in Plato’s and Aristotle’s writings. Both projects, directed by Graciela Marcos and based in the Institute of Philosophy “Dr.

Alejandro Korn” (Instituto de Filosofía “Dr. Alejandro Korn”) of the *Facultad de Filosofía y Letras* of the *Universidad de Buenos Aires*, were subsidised by the *Secretaría de Ciencia y Técnica* of this university and by the *Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica* (ANCyPT), to whom we would like to express our gratitude. Special thanks also to Fabián G. Mié, who, for several years, has been working on the question of dialectic in Plato and Aristotle and with whom, even if he has not formally joined our team, we have had the good fortune to exchange ideas and discuss many of the issues related to both projects. Fabián Mié’s work is therefore added to the works presented by Lucas M. Álvarez, María E. Díaz, Martín S. Forciniti, Julián Macías and Graciela E. Marcos in this dossier.

The general aim of the aforementioned research projects has been to shed light on the particular refutation strategy used by Plato and Aristotle when establishing theses and key principles of their philosophies, which, due to their foundational character, do not admit of demonstration in their own sense, but are implicit in all use of language. Hence, it is possible to establish them by refutation by showing that whoever attempts to deny them is plunged into a contradiction. This is the core of the strategy at the heart of these investigations, which led us to delimit the notion of the radical adversary –the one who sustains paradoxical theses that, according to both philosophers, go against our most basic beliefs– and to identify the argumentative pattern common to their various applications in the selected works.

Concerning the development of such a strategy in Plato, the focus was initially on two late dialogues, *Theaetetus* and *Sophist*; in the case of Aristotle, on two texts in which he seeks to establish the principles of both physics and first philosophy, *Physics* I and *Metaphysics* IV. Many of the works produced in the framework of the project refer to these sources and show the theoretical impact of the refutation of radical adversaries in the architecture of the thought of master and disciple.

In relation to Plato, the project has aimed to show that the main theses defended in the *Sophist* are established thanks to the application of the refutation strategy investigated. The Eleatic Stranger resorts to the very conditions of language when it comes to establishing the mutual combination of the forms, the inclusion of motion and rest among the highest *genera* of being, or the conception of not being as difference. As for Aristotle, we show that in contexts in which he deals with the principles of ontology and physics, he resorts to the same strategy to show their validity through the refutation of radical adversaries who question them (e.g. the denier of the principle of noncontradiction, or the Eleatic who denies motion and multiplicity). We show that in this type of strategy, recourse to language plays a key role: insofar as the principles at stake concern the conditions of all discourse (combination, noncontradiction, multiplicity, motion), in all these cases it is a matter of making the adversary speak so that the contradiction becomes apparent. This feature evokes the refutation procedure (*elenchos*) practised by Socrates in the early Platonic dialogues, which is an antecedent of the refutation strategy under investigation.

One of the main results of our research is that there is a continuity throughout Platonic dialectic and even between this one and Aristotelian dialectic, by virtue of their essentially refutational character. Strictly speaking, we find that not only do the early Platonic dialogues serve as an antecedent of such a strategy, but also that different formulations of the method by hypotheses presented in the later ones (*Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Republic*) anticipate it in many respects. We show that in all these cases the recourse to hypotheses, constitutive of dialectic, makes the *elenchos* a fundamental resource in the search for truth and the construction of his philosophy. In the case of the *Phaedo*, where there are no radical adversaries as such but where Socrates debates with his followers, the logos which is “the most difficult to refute” is aspired to, in line with the description of the dialectician’s work in terms of “traversing all refutations” (*Rep.* VII, X). The constructive dimension of the *elenchos* is thus evident in certain prescriptions that are addressed to the philosopher-dialectician and which emphasise the importance of attending to all

the objections that one's own position might deserve, not in order to weaken it of course, but to strengthen it. Already in the *Sophist*, the *elenchos* evidences a clear constructive dimension, given that a privileged way to establish truths is to radically refute (that is, by resorting to the same conditions of possibility of the formulation of the thesis by the adversary) the theses contradictory to the one that will be demonstrated. In the case of Aristotle we see the same strategy: refutation is placed at the service of the demonstration of the thesis that he intends to defend, constituting an extremely valuable resource to pave the way to the principles, as stated among the utilities of dialectic in the *Topics*. On the basis of a study of the proofs in favour of the principle of non-contradiction (PNC) in *Metaphysics IV* and the principle of multiplicity (in turn, a condition of the principle of motion) in *Physics I*, we have pointed out a parallelism in the argumentative strategy that Aristotle uses. In both cases Aristotle resorts to a particular use of dialectic that has been called "strong dialectic" by Irwin and offers proof of a refutational character. He then uses radical adversaries, the denier of the PNC and the denier of multiplicity, in order to put forward in turn a radical refutation that resorts to the very conditions of all discourse and which have undeniably transcendental aspects. Moreover, as we show, the contact points between the two texts are not only manifested in the recourse to the radical adversary, but the role played by both proofs is analogous. Just as in *Metaphysics IV 4*, the refutation of the denier of the PNC is the occasion to establish dialectically the first of the principles of the science of being, in *Physics I* the refutation of the monist enables the establishment of the first of the principles of physical science. We have thus exhibited the very close relationship between the treatment of the monist in *Physics I* and that of the denier of the principle of non-contradiction in *Metaphysics IV*.

The argumentative resource that allows both Plato and Aristotle to establish the central theses of their own philosophies relies, in short, on the Socratic *elenchos* deployed in the early Platonic dialogues and on the procedure by hypotheses recommended in the dialogues of maturity. An important achievement of the project, in

this sense, has been to show the unitary character of the method that under the name of *dialectic* Plato considers inseparable from philosophy, against those interpretations that insist on distinguishing the negative “Socratic” dialectic of his early dialogues from the positive and constructive dialectic of his later ones. Even when dialectic assumes different features throughout his work, its refutational essence remains unchanged even in the late dialogues, in which it becomes a fundamental resource in the service of the demonstration of positive theses.

In the dialectical training (*gymnasia*) prescribed in the *Parmenides* we find a methodology that bears affinity with the dialectical prescriptions of *Republic* VII and which anticipates, at the same time, the strategy of the *Sophist*. The object of the refutation ceases to be a “flesh and blood” interlocutor to become a thesis. The anonymity of the adversary is total, hence many of the hypothetical arguments that are deployed culminate in self-refutations which, unlike the refutation practised in the early dialogues, are achieved without having to resort to any other belief of the interlocutor: the thesis is revealed to be untenable *per se*. Assuming that it would be wrong for the philosopher to concentrate his attention on a certain thesis or concept without subjecting the opposing thesis to equally careful examination, the *gymnasia* of the *Parmenides* creates the conditions for the refutation of one hypothesis to establish, indirectly, the truth of the other, giving way to the *Sophist*’s strategy, which constitutes a direct antecedent of a certain use of dialectic that Aristotle will assume when he paves his way towards the principles.

A fundamental dimension of the research carried out concerns the distinction between the descriptions of dialectic that Plato and Aristotle offer in their writings and the dialectic “at work”, that one which they actually practise in the texts we investigate, in the light of which we make visible essential features of the method and of the argumentative strategy that are the object of the project. In this sense, the argumentative pattern studied can be projected onto different texts and its investigation yields interesting results concerning the way in which dialectic intervenes not only in the exposition but also

in the very shaping of the object of study. Most of the studies presented in this dossier deal with this dimension of dialectic in action and they investigate precisely how refutation is linked to other dialectical resources offered in Plato's and Aristotle's works. Thus, in the case of the former, the focus is on the way in which refutation is linked to irony, the noble lie, hypotheses; and, in the case of Aristotle, to the taxonomies he offers of the adversaries or predecessors in a certain type of investigation, to sense data, and so on. I will then refer briefly to each of the articles that make up the dossier and to the contributions made in relation to dialectic and its refutational character.

Martin Forciniti (2022) deals with dialectic in action in "Ironía y refutación: el *elenchos* de Calicles en el Gorgias de Platón", in which he examines the role played by irony in Socrates' *elenchos* on Calicles' opinions. The author assumes as his starting point the Socratic intention to modify the psychological disposition of his interlocutor so that the latter adopts a philosophical way of life. To do so, he tries to show, Socrates develops an ironic *elenchos* that involves presenting himself precisely with the mask of what Calicles longs to be, in order to establish a long-lasting bond with him, by virtue of which the speaker is initiated into the philosophical way of life. The author identifies three distinct moments in the refutation: a feigned acceptance by Socrates of the dichotomy presented by Calicles between the politician's life, which should be imitated, and the philosopher's life, which, instead, would be worthy of reproach; at a second moment, a reversal of this dichotomy is established; and, thirdly, a questioning of this reversal is offered. The real opposition from this conclusion would not be between an aristocratic orator and a servile philosopher, but between the true politician and orator and, on the other hand, the sycophantic orator. The author then shows that even when Socrates is aware that, *de facto*, the effects of his activity may not be mostly positive in terms of instilling justice into the souls of his interlocutors (which characterises such goal of the true politician), he has the conviction that the best way of life can only be achieved through dialectical examination, the path that must necessarily be taken by one who intends to exercise true politics.

In “La asociación entre *mythos* y *logos* en el *Fedón*, o sobre cómo alcanzar el *logos* más difícil de refutar”, Julián Macías (2022) studies the way in which recourse to myth is linked to dialectic and to refutation, but this time taking into consideration not the cathartic dimension of the latter, but the constructive one. Indeed, as stated in *Phaedo* and *Republic*, when postulating his own theses, the philosopher must uphold the most solid of the *logoi*, which will be in this case, in the words of Simmias, “the best and the most difficult to refute” (*Phaedo* 85c9-d1). In this light, the article examines the role of the eschatological myth presented at the end of the *Phaedo* in the framework of an argument that aims to establish -in connection with the immortality of the soul, in favour of which various *logoi* have been offered- the necessity of leading a virtuous life. Taking into consideration the rules that, according to *Republic* II-III, should govern the composition of stories in the just polis, among which those related to the attitude towards death and the chosen way of life are particularly relevant, we seek to establish that the myth at the end of the *Phaedo* conforms to these conditions and exhibits the useful character that Plato assigns to such stories in the *Republic*. As for the inclusion of the myth, it would be explained in terms of the need to establish a thesis whose truth is difficult, if not impossible, to prove, but whose pursuit cannot be avoided by the philosopher. The myth, the author concludes, aims to create the right conditions in the soul of the audience so that the argumentation developed so far can be accepted and the belief in the immortality of the soul and in the need to lead a righteous life is affirmed. In this way such *logoi* become better and more difficult to refute.

In “Usos de la refutación y postulación de principios no hipotéticos en *República* VI-VII y *Sofista*”, Lucas Álvarez (2022) addresses the connections between the methodological procedures developed by Socrates in the early dialogues, in *Republic* and in the late dialogues, and he tries to show that, among the latter, the *Sophist* constitutes a point of confluence of the Socratic-style refutation and the hypothetical method. The enterprise of studying such links leads him to reconsider, on the one hand, the relationship between Plato and his master and, on the other, the place of the *Sophist* and his main

interlocutor, the Eleatic Stranger, in Plato's philosophical project. This is so due to the fact that in the contexts where Plato puts non-hypothetical principles into the mouths of his spokesmen, he simultaneously makes them reflect on the status and role of the philosopher, since such principles are only accessible to the philosopher after training and practice in dialectics. Reflection on the scope of non-hypothetical principles and on the figure of the philosopher who gains access to them are thus presented as two sides of the same coin. As far as the role of the philosopher is concerned, Plato positions himself in relation to his masters, showing himself faithful to both Parmenides and Socrates, but also surpassing them both, insofar as the Eleatic Stranger comes to embody novelty. Plato's intellectual journey would be marked by a path that goes from young Socrates, eager to learn, to the Eleatic Stranger, who fulfils that desire by establishing irrefutable truths about the combination of the Forms.

Graciela Marcos studies the inseparable relationship between refutation and dialectic, both in the maturity period of Plato's work and in the late period, in "Dialectic and Refutation in Plato. On the Role of Refutation in the Search for Truth" (2022). Here she shows that, far from being limited to the Socratic period, refutation continues to be a fundamental tool of the philosopher, no longer to refute the opinions of others, but to establish one's own thought. First, she discusses the constructive role that refutation assumes in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, texts in which the best *logos* is the most difficult to refute. She also shows that the recourse to refutation acquires new force from *Parmenides* onwards, where Plato puts in the mouth of the Eleatic philosopher the affirmation that in order to reach the truth it is necessary to go through all the alternatives. This ideal of exhaustiveness, the author argues, finds a strong echo in the *Sophist*, where the analysis of all the hypotheses that are open to the search, after the refutation of those that represent obstacles to one's own position, allow the Eleatic Stranger to demonstrate the validity of fundamental principles. Thus, the antinomic structure of *Parmenides'* intellectual *gymnasia* gives way in the *Sophist* to a constructive dialectic, in which one thesis is demonstrated through the refutation of the contradictory one. This is especially clear in the

argument for the *symploke ton eidon*, which is the truth that remains when all those hypotheses that contradict it have been refuted. The *elenchos*, then, according to Marcos, far from being restricted to the negative and purifying function typically associated with Plato's early philosophy, assumes a decisive role in establishing certain theories whose demonstration, as prescribed in *Rep.* VII, 534c1-1, is achieved by exhausting every *elenchos*.

In “La influencia de la negación anaxagórica de la *genesis* en la física aristotélica. Diversos sentidos de *genesis* en la refutación aristotélica de Anaxágoras”, María Elena Díaz (2022) offers a study about the Aristotelian dialectic put into action in *Physica* I. There, when referring to those who have studied how many and which the principles of the *physis* are, Aristotle criticises the position of the first physicists and, in this context, he uses a dialectical resource consisting, according to the author, in the homogenisation of disparate concepts, as part of the assembly of his taxonomy of positions on the principles. This would constitute, according to Díaz, a propaedeutic refutation strategy, which consists in the construction of a progression and a genealogy of the positions of physicists based on Eleatism. The main aim of the paper is to show the specific meaning of the concept of separation in Anaxagoras' physics and the transformations it undergoes in the Aristotelian critique. The author tries to show that the basis of Anaxagoras' denial of the *genesis* and its reworking in terms of separation and mixture lie on original theses of his own physics, which is why they do not admit an assimilation to the conceptual systems of any of the other physicists presented by Aristotle. Neither his denial of generation has Eleatic origins, nor does the sense of his critique of generation bring him closer to Empedocles or any of the other pre-Socratics, as the Stagirite claims. On the other hand, she shows that the notion of relative non-being that Aristotle uses in *Physica* I to account for motion has a clear antecedent in the physics of Anaxagoras, as does the causal action of *Noûç* as something different from mixture. The author argues that while Aristotle was a harsh critic of the coexistence of causal layers in Anaxagoras' thought, whom he characterised as a philosopher who never quite grasped the implications of his own theses, in this very

statement he implicitly acknowledged himself as the heir of the Clazomene philosopher: he himself drew the conclusions that followed from Anaxagorean physics in order to adapt them to a different theoretical framework. Thus, through the treatment of Anaxagoras, the author shows that in the Aristotelian dialectic refutation is not exhausted in pure negativity, but constitutes a constructive strategy.

In “Aristotle on Dialectic and Definition in Scientific Inquiry”, Fabián G. Mié (2022) takes scientific research and demonstration as a framework and discusses the place of dialectic, beyond its attested methodological role in discarding contradictory opinions and of its possible application to prove the principle of non-contradiction via refutation. The article takes up the discussion about the usefulness of the most reputable opinions (*endoxa*) in reaching the principles of the sciences, in accordance with what the Stagirite stated in *Topics* I.2. Such usefulness, according to the author, cannot imply the replacement of logic and of the intrinsic objectives of demonstration by those of dialectic. However, Mié attributes to the latter a contribution that, although modest, is substantial in linking it to the most important principles of demonstration, i.e. definitions. The author's proposal is that dialectic works in tandem with observation and plays a role of its own in providing the hybrid empirical basis for inquiring about principles. Since the perception involved in the discursive basis for accessing principles is not only constituted by *sense data* and it necessarily involves interpretation, the interpretable resources of *endoxa* justify the claim of their substantive contribution to scientific research. *Endoxa* would thus provide an ingredient of the initial knowledge required to understand facts and to elaborate on their basis definitional principles. To show that dialectic operates in a pre-demonstrative instance of research, the paper finally examines *Physics* IV 1-5.

Such are briefly the themes developed throughout the papers in this dossier, which provides only some of the results achieved in the research carried out by the team in the framework of the above-mentioned projects. Their authors include not only researchers with

high academic background in the field of ancient philosophy, but also doctoral students at different stages of their postgraduate training in this area. Consequently, you will find in these pages a diversity of approaches, emphases and even interpretations, a diversity that we value and have tried to preserve.

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