

# The Philosopher and the Dialectician in Aristotle's *Topics*

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I claim that, in the *Topics*, Aristotle advises dialectical questioners to intentionally argue fallaciously in order to escape from some dialectically awkward positions, and I work through the consequences of that claim. It will turn out that, although there are important exceptions, the techniques for finding arguments described in *Topics I–VII* are, by and large, locations that Aristotle thought of as appropriate for use in philosophical inquiry. The text that grounds this claim, however, raises a further problem: it highlights the solitary nature of philosophical inquiry, which puts into question the philosophical relevance of *Topics VIII*. I find that the *Topics* provides inadequate grounds for thinking that Aristotle saw *Topics VIII* as describing standards or techniques of argument that were appropriate for philosophy, and so these texts cannot be used by contemporary commentators to shed light on Aristotle's philosophical practice. Finally, although Aristotle saw philosophy as a solitary activity, he thought dialectic played an important part in a typical philosophical life, both as a means for defending one's reputation, and as a way of participating in an intellectual community.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, dialectic, *Topics*, *Sophistical Refutations*, sophistic

## 1. Introduction

My main goal in this paper is to overturn a widely shared and fundamental assumption in the contemporary literature on Aristotle's dialectic, and to work through the consequences of overturning such an assumption for how we understand the *Topics*, and the role of dialectical argument in the philosophical life.<sup>1</sup> The assumption I am targetting is: dialecticians reason either validly or inductively soundly.<sup>2</sup> If that assumption held, then dialecticians would share at least one important thing with philosophers, namely, a standard for acceptable inference. My main argument against the assumption will be that in the *Topics*, Aristotle instructs dialecticians to construct various kinds of fallacious arguments. Dialecticians of course use this skill to help each other practice defusing fallacious arguments, but it is

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1 Dialectic here should be understood primarily as an argumentative practice in which an answerer takes a position for or against some controversial statement, and a questioner asks a series of yes and no questions with a view to leading the answerer into contradiction. For good and detailed descriptions of the practice see either the introduction to Fink 2012, or the first chapter of Slomkowski 1997, or the introduction of Brunschwig 1967.

2 See e.g. Smith 1997, 14–15, 21; 1995, 138–139; Reeve 2012, 151. Irwin does not express it explicitly, and on his conception dialecticians probably *do* create fallacious arguments sometimes, but, since they are trying to create genuine puzzles, would not do so intentionally, see 1991, 42–45. Bolton, similarly, is not explicit in endorsing this view, but it fits very ill with his notion of dialectical justification, see: Bolton 1997, 60, 66–67. Grote 1872 thought that dialectical questioners were willing to argue fallaciously, but his position is more extreme than mine: Grote thought they would argue fallaciously without any hesitation, while I think they will only argue fallaciously as a last resort. The source of the contemporary agreement is likely Owen 1967, which argues against Grote. It is worth noting that Smith 1997, 101, 139, and Dorion 1995, 302 have remarked on the use of dubious arguments by dialecticians, but the present article is the first systematic study of these practices, and the first attempt to put them in the context of the philosophical value of the *Topics* and the relationship between argumentation in philosophical and dialectical contexts. (Smith 1997, 101, 139 are indeed surprising given Smith 1997, 14–15). Nussbaum 1986 is often cited in connection with these issues, but she judiciously avoids talking explicitly about dialectic or the *Topics*, and so is no target of mine here.

more widely applicable than that: dialecticians are to use fallacious arguments as a last resort in difficult argumentative situations. Aristotle does seem to think that fallacious arguments are inferior to other arguments, but he also thinks that in some situations a dialectical questioner will have nothing better available. Fallacious arguments are an important tool for a dialectician to get out of a tight corner.

If Aristotle taught dialecticians to construct fallacious arguments in the *Topics*, then this raises a serious problem for the relevance of the *Topics* to philosophy. If the only difference between dialectical argument and philosophical argument were the epistemic status of the premises, or if dialectical argument were a kind of philosophical argument, then we might hope that the techniques for constructing arguments detailed in *Topics I–VII* were a good guide to which arguments Aristotle saw as having strong enough inferences to use in philosophical inquiry. By philosophical inquiry, I mean whatever inquiry Aristotle imagines to be characteristically undertaken by the philosopher mentioned at *Topics VIII.1.155b10*, who I take to be someone who is primarily interested in both obtaining and exercising knowledge about the most worthwhile things.<sup>3</sup> But, once we know that Aristotle saw some of the techniques as fallacious, and intended to exploit an interlocutor's ignorance, it becomes more difficult to use *Topics I–VII* as such a guide.

Fortunately, however, as I will show, Aristotle explicitly indicates that *Topics I–VII* describes a task roughly shared by philosophers and dialecticians: the task of finding a location [*topos*] from which to argue. This evidence, I argue, allows us to suppose that Aristotle thought that, on the whole, the argumentative techniques Aristotle describes in *Topics I–VII* were good enough for philosophy. It follows that for any piece of advice in these books we are entitled to the defeasible presumption that Aristotle thought it was good enough for a philosopher.

In the same text, however, Aristotle states that the arrangement of questions is not of concern to philosophers, because arranging questions involves another person. As we will see, He makes it clear that the discussion, which follows immediately, about the questioner, is irrelevant to philosophers. Whether what he says applies to the rest of *Book VIII* is less clear. There is, however, no good reason to think it doesn't, and Aristotle describes aspects of the answerer's role that he is unlikely to have seen as having much to do with philosophy. The upshot is that there is too much doubt over how much of these texts Aristotle would have seen as describing techniques or standards appropriate to philosophy for us to use them to cast light on Aristotle's philosophical practice. The defeasible presumption that we have for *Topics I–VII* doesn't apply to *Topics VIII*.<sup>4</sup>

I will argue that the conditions under which dialectical questioners will argue fallaciously are caused by the dialectical questioner's inability to choose the conclusion to which she must argue, and her dependence on the dialectical answerer for the selection of premises. Faced with a tough conclusion and a difficult answerer, the dialectical questioner's only hope might be to argue fallaciously. These constraints do not apply to philosophers, who have the luxury of using those premises they think are true, and arguing for those conclusions that they think are most defensible. One might nonetheless suspect that, philosophers construct more or less the same arguments that dialectical questioners do, when working with an answerer who is playing fair, and who also happens to be defending a false thesis. There were, however, as I will make clear, further important differences. First, philosophical argument is not subject to

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<sup>3</sup> Philosophical inquiry, and philosophy generally, might be rather heterogeneous in the standards of argument required. The claims I make in this paper about what works and doesn't in Aristotelian philosophy should be understood as claims about what has some place therein. It may be that an argument acceptable at the beginning of an investigation is not adequate as the end product of such an investigation

<sup>4</sup> My position does not rule out something like *Kakkuri-Knuuttila 2005's* discussion of the philosophical nature of the role of the answerer in dialectic, which stems from the, surely correct, observation that the answerer in a dialectical dispute enforces the standards of argumentation, and that therefore some of the skills required to be an answerer are also required to be a philosopher.

time constraints in the way that dialectical argument is, and, second, the philosopher applies a different standard for selecting accepted opinions (*endoxa*) than the dialectician does. First, the philosopher is pickier, making an effort to select only accepted opinions that happen to be true, and, second, the philosopher selects accepted opinions relative to what she, and not somebody else (such as, for example, the most famous proponent of the position she's arguing against), believes.

In the final section of the paper I will argue that although the standards of argument for dialectic and philosophy diverge radically, dialectic played an important role in a normal philosophical life. The grounds for ruling out both the discussion of questioner and the discussion of answerer reflect a distinction that Aristotle sees as fundamental between dialectic and philosophy: dialectic is *towards another person*, and philosophy is not. In fact, philosophy is an activity that can be carried out in an entirely solitary manner. Nevertheless, Aristotle encouraged philosophers to become dialecticians. I can see two reasons for this. First, Aristotle saw being a good dialectician as an important part of maintaining one's reputation as an intellectual. Second, being subjected to a dialectical examination, and so having one's claim to knowledge tested, is no doubt a very helpful exercise for a philosopher to undergo.<sup>5</sup> Undergoing such an examination conducted by a skilled and collaborative dialectician requires little skill, but returning the favour requires considerable skill, and so full participation in an intellectual community is likely to have required dialectical ability.

## 2. The dialectician as refined sophist

My main goal in this section is to argue that Aristotle thought dialecticians would use fallacious, and even sophistical, arguments to extract themselves from tight corners in dialectical debates.<sup>6</sup> Aristotle distinguishes between sophists and dialecticians by claiming that sophists deploy merely apparent arguments, in order to create the appearance of being wise, and so to make money.<sup>7</sup> Why dialectical questioners used fallacious arguments is less clear. It is easy to imagine dialecticians constructing fallacious arguments to practice recognizing them and their solutions in the context of gymnastic arguments. But, as we will see, this would not have been their only use. A further use was to give the best possible attempt at refutation when faced with an uncooperative answerer, and a difficult conclusion. I will further argue that yet another use may have been to demonstrate the ignorance of an interlocutor in an examination argument. While dialecticians generally tried to avoid fallacious arguments when they could, they were willing to use them as a last resort.

In saying that dialecticians were willing to use fallacious arguments as a last resort, I fall into opposition with two more extreme views about the relationship between dialectic and sophistic. To find the one extreme, we have to go back to *Grote 1872*, where we find the following description of the relationship between dialectic and sophistic:

The sophistical discourse is not (as Aristotle would have us believe) generically distinguishable from the dialectical; nor is Sophistic an art distinct from Dialectic while adjoining itself to it, but an inseparable portion of the tissue of dialectic itself. If the sophist passed himself off as knowing what he did not know, so also did Sokrates, the most consummate master of the art. The conflict of two minds each taking advantage of

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<sup>5</sup> Here I understand the word 'philosopher' to include people who are still in pursuit of wisdom.

<sup>6</sup> By a fallacious argument I mean one that appears to meet certain standards of acceptability, but actually doesn't. By a sophistical argument I mean one that Aristotle would describe as sophistical (*eristikos*).

<sup>7</sup> *SE* 1.165a20–25; 11.171b28–30

the misconceptions, short-comings, and blindness of the other, is the essential feature of dialectic as Aristotle conceives it. (101–102)

The important thing for our purposes is Grote's claim that sophistical discourse is not distinguishable from dialectical discourse. Far from arguing honestly, dialecticians attempt to take advantage of their interlocutors' 'misconceptions, short-comings, and blindness'. If Grote is to be believed, dialecticians not only argue fallaciously, they show no hesitation in so doing.

Owen developed a view in 1968 that lies at the antipodes of Grote's, a view on which a dialectical questioner is a most genteel character in argument, one who would never even *dream* of presenting a sophistical argument.<sup>8</sup> Owen's view remains popular, partly, I think, because on Owen's view sound dialectical argument is very closely related to sound philosophical argument:

The distinction between dialectic and eristic is one to which Aristotle comes back time and time again: eristic [≈sophistic] employs methods and materials of argument to which dialectic must not stoop.<sup>9</sup>

Where Grote sees sophistic as 'an inseparable portion of the tissue of dialectic', Owen sees a clear separation. Sophists are willing to use arguments that dialecticians will never stoop to using. The arguments he has in mind are, in particular, sophistical arguments: arguments which give the appearance of having accepted premises and an acceptable inference, while failing to have at least one or the other.<sup>10</sup>

My own view falls somewhere in between Grote's and Owen's. I agree with Grote that dialecticians will use a range of fallacious argument, much of which was undoubtedly sophistical, and that they will do so intentionally, in order to take advantage of an opponent's shortcomings. However, I think that they will only do this under desperate circumstances, and that in general, they will try to avoid doing so, in keeping with what Aristotle says about the standards for success in dialectic in *Topics I.3*.101b5–10<sup>11</sup>:

We will possess the method completely when we have it to much the same extent as with rhetoric and medicine and capacities of these sorts; this means being able to do those things we choose from that which is appropriate. For neither does the rhetor persuade nor

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<sup>8</sup> Except, perhaps, to give an interlocutor a chance to practice solving it; but certainly *never* to 'exploit an opponent's ignorance'. Dialecticians might, according to Owen, use the techniques of concealment, such as adding in unnecessary premises and asking questions out of order, but only in order to get their interlocutor to answer more honestly.

<sup>9</sup> See fn. 1. Owen's article was the death-knell for positions like Grote's, which were already unpopular. *Smith 1993* presents the closest to a neo-Grotian position I have read, but even Smith's dialectician would struggle to get through a low door.

<sup>10</sup> I use the term 'acceptable' inference so as not to anachronistically attribute one or another contemporary notion of validity to Aristotle, and to take into account some of the strictly invalid, but reasonable, argumentation we find throughout Aristotle's work.

<sup>11</sup> I have provided the Greek from the *Oxford Classical Texts* series editions in the footnotes; the translations are my own (but very orthodox) unless otherwise stated (on both counts). I don't think anything hinges on controversial points of translation in this paper.

does the doctor heal using every method, but if he leaves aside none of the appropriate methods, we will say that he has sufficient knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

The dialectician must omit *none* of the accepted means to have an adequate grasp of the science. I will argue that this works in two directions. In the first direction, it means that if the dialectician uses an inferior argument when a dialectical one is available, the dialectician has fallen short of the standard; much more contentiously, I will argue that it also means that if a dialectician makes no attempt at refutation, when only an unphilosophical argument is available, then the dialectician has fallen short as well. This amounts to saying that some unphilosophical arguments are appropriate in dialectic.

The first step will be to secure the conclusion that dialecticians sometimes stoop to using techniques that are either typically associated with sophists, or at least constitute stooping as low as any sophist. I call these techniques: omission, conflation, and argument from ambiguity. *Omission* involves presenting an argument which emphasises the evidence supporting a conclusion, while leaving out relevant evidence against the conclusion. It amounts to presenting an intentionally biased argument. Omission, although fallacious, is not a technique that finds application in a philosophy. *Conflation* involves asking for a premise that *sounds like* something an interlocutor believes, but which is in fact importantly different, in the hopes of confusing an interlocutor, or perhaps as revealing an interlocutor's confusion. Conflation is sophistical, because it involves arguing from something that is merely apparently accepted. *Argument from ambiguity* is the similar, and paradigmatically sophistic, technique of relying on different meanings of a term throughout an argument. Aristotle includes all of these techniques among those to be mastered in the *Topics*.

Aristotle recommends using omission in a variety of places. It is perhaps the dialectician's most respectable tool for exploiting an opponent's ignorance: but, because it depends on an opponent's ignorance for its success, it's certainly not a kind of argument that is oriented at the truth, and so is unphilosophical. I don't know whether Aristotle would have seen arguments by omission as characteristically sophistic arguments, but skill in arguing from omission is an important respect in which the dialectician's skill deviates from the philosopher's, and in which Grote's picture of a dialectical encounter as a battle of wits finds some vindication.

One clear way in which dialecticians are to argue from omission is through induction. In a dialectical induction, the questioner exhibits a number of individual cases of a particular class that have a particular attribute, and then claims that every member of the class has that attribute. For example, they may claim first claim that the prime ministers of Australia Kevin Rudd, John Howard, Chris Watson and Tony Abbott were all men, and then try for the conclusion that all the prime ministers of Australia were men. An answerer who cannot exhibit a counterexample must accept the universal conclusion – in this case, any answerer unaware of Julia Gillard would have to accept the conclusion that all the prime ministers of Australia were men. One might expect that Aristotle would advise questioners to formulate inductions only when counterexamples eluded them, but his advice is rather different:

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12 Ἐξομεν δὲ τελέως τὴν μέθοδον ὅταν ὁμοίως ἔχωμεν ὡσπερ ἐπὶ ῥητορικῆς καὶ ἰατρικῆς καὶ τῶν τοιούτων δυνάμεων· τοῦτο δ' ἐστὶ τὸ ἐκ τῶν ἐνδεχομένων ποιεῖν ἃ προαιρούμεθα. οὔτε γὰρ ὁ ῥητορικὸς ἐκ παντὸς τρόπου πείσει οὔθ' ὁ ἰατρικὸς ὑγιάσει, ἀλλ' ἐὰν τῶν ἐνδεχομένων μηδὲν παραλίπη, ἱκανῶς αὐτὸν ἔχειν τὴν ἐπιστήμην φήσομεν.

It is necessary to put forward any propositions that hold in many cases, and where it is not possible to see an objection either generally or on the surface. For those who cannot see those cases in which it is not so, will set down it down, thinking that it is true.<sup>13</sup> (*Topics VIII.2.158a3–6*)

You shouldn't try to obtain a conclusion through induction when there is an obvious objection; but when there is an objection, and it is not obvious, you should. This advice is clearly unphilosophical. One might try to wave this away by saying: but of course, dialecticians need to play both roles, that of questioner and that of answerer. So dialecticians will need to be aware of uncommon objections, so as to avoid this trap, and so they can avoid making these arguments in a philosophical context. And that much is true. However, in order to make sound inductions in philosophical inquiry, philosophers could get by just knowing the exceptions. Dialecticians needed to retain the insight that the exceptions were not widely known.

Aristotle advises dialecticians to use omission in arguments that aren't inductive as well. In *Topics III.2.117a5–15*, Aristotle states that one might use what something entails to assess how good it is: if it entails good things, then it is good, and if it entails bad things, then it is bad. He then draws the reader's attention to the fact that things can entail things both before and after them. Aristotle gives the example of learning, which entails being ignorant before and knowing after. He advises his students to 'therefore take whichever one of the two consequences which is useful'.<sup>14</sup> I take it he means something like this: in the case of learning, if you wanted to argue that learning was bad, you would emphasise that learning entails being ignorant before you have learned, and not draw attention to the fact that it entails knowing after. This kind of imbalance is reasonably common: being cured entails being sick; being rescued entails having been in danger. The ability to use this common imbalance to quickly generate misleading arguments is unphilosophical, and certainly constitutes stooping. But it's a good trick if one wants to secure a conclusion that something is good or bad from an inexperienced interlocutor.

Conflation is a technique that one would expect Aristotle to associate with sophists. Aristotle outlines two different kinds of sophistic syllogism: arguments that have received opinions as premises but which only appear to be valid deductions, and arguments which only appear to have received opinions as premises. Since conflation is the technique of using a premise that *looks like* something one's interlocutor accepts, in the hopes that the interlocutor will get confused and accept it, conflation is a technique for generating arguments of the second kind.

The evidence that dialecticians ought to use conflation lies in Aristotle's instructions of what premises they ought to collect. At *Topics I.14.105b3–8* Aristotle advises his students to collect not only received opinions 'but also those that are like these, e.g. "The perception of contraries is the same" – the knowledge of them being so – and "we see by admission of something into ourselves, not by an emission"; for so it is, too, in the case of the other senses'.<sup>15</sup> Aristotle does not explain *why* his students should collect such premises, so it is slightly speculative to say that he intended his students to use them

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13 Δεῖ δὲ προτείνειν ὅσα ἐπὶ πολλῶν μὲν οὕτως ἔχει, ἔνστασις δὲ ἢ ὅλως μὴ ἔστιν ἢ μὴ ἐπιπολῆς τὸ συνιδεῖν· μὴ δυνάμενοι γὰρ συννοῶν ἐφ' ὧν οὐχ οὕτως, ὡς ἀληθὲς ὄν τιθέασιν.

14 λαμβάνειν οὖν τῶν ἐπομένων ὁπότερον ἂν ᾖ χρήσιμον.

to trick their interlocutors, but I can think of no other use that they might have in the context of a dialectical argument.<sup>16</sup>

That Aristotle instructed his students to employ argument from ambiguity is perhaps the most striking way in which he advised his students to stoop to sophistical techniques. Aristotle, in fact, makes the recommendation at least twice. In *Topics I*.18.108a26–31, in explaining why his students should develop a feeling for ambiguity, Aristotle says:

When we are asking we will be able to construct paralogisms, if the answerer happens not to know in how many ways it is said<sup>17</sup>

Aristotle does qualify this advice – and we will come to his qualifications shortly. But the motive for his advice is clear enough: when an answerer doesn't know the different meanings of a word, and the questioner does, this provides an advantage to the questioner. Aristotle rightly saw that the promise of an advantage over an opponent would provide motivation for his students to work hard at learning the different meanings of the term. As we will see shortly, his concern at the unfairness of the advantage is rather restricted.

One might be tempted to think that Aristotle was joking in this passage. And the joke would be one we're all surely familiar with – it's similar to the joke teachers in critical thinking courses make when they promise a study of the fallacies will ensure that their students never lose another argument. But we needn't pull Aristotle's reputation through the mud by attributing such a weak joke to him; he says much the same thing in *Topics II*.3.110a24–28:

Moreover when it is said in many ways, and it has been set down that it holds or does not hold of something, prove it in one of the various ways of saying it, if you cannot in both. This is to be used in cases where the ambiguity has been missed. For if someone does not miss that it is said in many ways, that person will object that you have not argued dialectically [οὐ διείλεκται] about that one for which he raised a difficulty but the other one.<sup>18</sup>

The form of argument Aristotle describes here is argument from ambiguity: the idea is that when one finds oneself in a position where one can prove a conclusion for one meaning of an ambiguous term, but

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<sup>15</sup> Smith has also drawn attention to this passage in outlining the way the dialectician uses accepted opinions. See his 1993.

<sup>16</sup> As a trick, though, it is not necessarily *cheating* in dialectic. Aristotle importantly rejects the distinction between arguments that are directed at the thought, and those that are directed at the word. See *SR* 10.170b12ff. This suggests that he would see accepting a premise that merely looked like something one believed as a sign that one hadn't fully mastered the contents of one's beliefs. Nevertheless, although not cheating, it is still an inferior way of arguing from the point of view of the standards of Aristotelian dialectic.

<sup>17</sup> αὐτοὶ τε ἐρωτῶντες δυνησόμεθα παραλογίσασθαι, ἐὰν μὴ τυγχάνη εἰδῶς ὁ ἀποκρινόμενος ποσαχῶς λέγεται.

<sup>18</sup> Ἐπι ἐὰν πολλαχῶς λέγηται, κείμενον δὲ ἢ ὡς ὑπάρχει ἢ ὡς οὐχ ὑπάρχει, θάτερον δεικνύει τῶν πλεοναχῶς λεγομένων, ἐὰν μὴ ἄμφω ἐνδέχεται. χρηστέον δ' ἐπὶ τῶν λανθανόντων· ἐὰν γὰρ μὴ λανθάνη πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον, ἐνστήσεται ὅτι οὐ διείλεκται ὅπερ αὐτὸς ἠπόρει ἀλλὰ θάτερον.

not the other, one should try to pass off the proof one does have as working for the sense of the word that it doesn't work for. In this case, the term will mean one thing in the premises, and something else in the conclusion. But if Aristotle advises his students *twice* to use arguments from ambiguity, then it seems difficult to maintain the position that dialecticians don't stoop.

But although dialecticians deploy omission, conflation and arguments from ambiguity, they aren't simply sophists, because dialecticians will use the arguments for different reasons, and on different occasions. In particular, dialectical questioners will use these techniques when and because no better techniques are available to achieve a refutation, precisely because they constitute better dialectical argumentation than remaining silent. This situation can arise because of two different factors that are characteristic of a dialectical encounter: first, dialectical questioners are not free to argue from whatever premises they choose; second, they must establish that whatever an answerer has laid down is false – they have no choice of their conclusion. These constraints are particularly severe when a dialectical questioner finds herself stuck with an uncooperative answerer. These constraints do not apply to a philosopher, who may choose whichever premises she is justified in believing, and follow them to whichever conclusions they may lead.

Aristotle draws attention to these constraints, though not very explicitly, each time that he recommends arguing from ambiguity. In *Topics I* his qualification is more strongly worded than in *Topics II*, since Aristotle goes so far as to say that argument from ambiguity is not appropriate (*oikeios*) for dialectic, but in both cases his advice is the same: use it only when there's no other way to argue for the conclusion. But on each occasion, he leaves it unclear why one may be unable to argue honestly for a conclusion; these reasons he outlines at *Topics VIII.11.161a16–b10*.

At *Topics VIII.11.161a16–b10*,<sup>19</sup> Aristotle draws a distinction between criticism of an argument in itself, and criticism of a person for putting forwards that argument. The primary motivation for drawing the distinction is that answerers are sometimes uncooperative; they answer in as obstructive manner as possible. Although Aristotle doesn't mention argument from ambiguity explicitly in this passage, it seems likely that he had it in mind, given the previous passages that we have considered. The passage is worth looking at in detail. The passage begins:

Criticism of an argument in itself and the argument when it is asked are not the same. For often the person being questioned is the cause of not arguing dialectically well – through not assenting to those things from which it was possible to argue dialectically well in support of the thesis – since bringing the common work to completion well does not depend on just one of the two participants. It is therefore sometimes necessary to attempt to argue against the speaker and not the thesis, namely whenever the answerer keeps watch for whatever will obstruct the questioner and

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<sup>19</sup> My reading of the following passages is in many regards similar to that of *Smith 1997*, who recognises that here Aristotle allows dialecticians to engage in 'contentious' argumentation. However, *Smith 1997* elsewhere repeatedly emphasises that dialecticians *do not* engage in contentious or deceptive argumentation. See e.g p. 104. Although Smith has noticed these passages, he does not seem to have put them in context with the dubious advice in the central books, or to have come to terms with their significance for how we should understand dialectic.

opposes him insolently. Uncooperative people therefore make arguments competitive and not dialectical.<sup>20</sup> (*Topics VIII.11.161a16–23*)

Aristotle's justification for distinguishing between an argument *in itself* and *when it is put in questions* stems from an all too familiar experience: sometimes when we argue with someone they seem so desperate to appear to win that they stubbornly pretend to believe the most extraordinary claims, so as to make their position appear at least consistent. Aristotle points out that the answerer can be the cause of the argument going badly; dialectic is cooperative, and the answerer fails to cooperate if they simply choose whichever answers will make the questioner's life the most difficult. If the answerer acts in this way, then the argument becomes a competition.

In our next passage, Aristotle discusses the use of false premises in dialectical debate. This passage describes the use of false premises as a perfectly normal part of dialectic:

Because these sorts of arguments are for the sake of exercise and examination, but not teaching, it is clear that because it is necessary to argue not only for the true but also for the false, it is not always necessary to argue through true things but sometimes also through false things. For often it is necessary for the person engaging in a dialectical argument to destroy true things that have been set down, and so it is necessary to use false things as premises. Sometimes also it is necessary to destroy true things that have been set down using false things. For nothing prevents it seeming to someone that *these* things are the case, and not the true things, so that he will be best persuaded or benefited from an argument that arises from things that seem so to him.<sup>21</sup> (*Topics VIII.11.161a24–32*)

Aristotle discusses here two cases in which one might have to use false premises. In the first case, an answerer has selected a true thesis, and the questioner must argue against it; in this case, because it's impossible to build a valid argument from true premises that has a false conclusion, one must make use of false premises.<sup>22</sup> The second case is where some things that are false seem true to an answerer; in this case it is fair to use them in a dialectical argument. But Aristotle never says here that the use of false

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20 Ἐπιτίμησις δὲ λόγου κατ' αὐτόν τε τὸν λόγον καὶ ὅταν ἐρωτᾶται οὐχ ἡ αὐτή. πολλάκις γὰρ τοῦ μὴ καλῶς διειλέχθαι τὸν λόγον ὁ ἐρωτώμενος αἴτιος διὰ τὸ μὴ συγχωρεῖν ἐξ ὧν ἦν διαλεχθῆναι καλῶς πρὸς τὴν θέσιν· οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἐπὶ θατέρῳ μόνον τὸ καλῶς ἐπιτελεσθῆναι τὸ κοινὸν ἔργον. ἀναγκαῖον οὖν ἐνίοτε πρὸς τὸν λέγοντα καὶ μὴ πρὸς τὴν θέσιν ἐπιχειρεῖν, ὅταν ὁ ἀποκρινόμενος τάναντία τῷ ἐρωτῶντι παρατηρήῃ προσεπηρεάζων. δυσκολαίνοντες οὖν ἀγωνιστικᾶς καὶ οὐ διαλεκτικᾶς ποιοῦνται τὰς διατριβάς.

21 ἔτι δ' ἐπεὶ γυμνασίας καὶ πείρας χάριν ἄλλ' οὐ διδασκαλίας οἴτιοιοῦτοι τῶν λόγων, δῆλον ὡς οὐ μόνον τᾶληθῆ συλλογιστέον ἀλλὰ καὶ ψεῦδος, οὐδὲ δι' ἀληθῶν ἀεὶ ἄλλ' ἐνίοτε καὶ ψευδῶν· πολλάκις γὰρ ἀληθοῦς τεθέντος ἀναρεῖν ἀνάγκη τὸν διαλεγόμενον, ὥστε προτατέον τὰ ψευδῆ. ἐνίοτε δὲ καὶ ψευδούς τεθέντος ἀναρετέον διὰ ψευδῶν· οὐδὲν γὰρ κωλύει τινὲς δοκεῖν τὰ μὴ ὄντα μᾶλλον τῶν ἀληθῶν, ὥστ' ἐκ τῶν ἐκείνων δοκούντων τοῦ λόγου γινομένου μᾶλλον ἔσται πεπεισμένος ἢ ὠφελιμένος

22 Aristotle points out that the arguments are for examination and training. A questioner might have one of at least two motivations for arguing with an answerer who is maintaining a true thesis. They may want to see if the answerer knows the thesis (as opposed to merely truly believing it) and both the questioner and the answerer may simply wish to rehearse the objections to the position. Since knowledge requires an ability to answer a range of objections, this is perhaps a way of ensuring that one does not forget that which one knows.

premises constitutes doing dialectic badly, and an answerer with some false beliefs can be a perfectly cooperative answerer; the answerer's duty is simply to answer according to how things seem, either to themselves or to some person that they are representing, or to people at large.<sup>23</sup> In a sense, the answerer might be the *cause* of the questioner's use of false premises, because it was the answerer who selected to defend a true claim. But it's hardly fair to accuse an answerer of being uncooperative for wishing to defend something true.

The next passage must be read in light of the discussion to this point. The topic is how to deal with contentious arguers, and failing to realise that might lead to misunderstanding the point of the following passage:

It is necessary to develop an argument well dialectically and not sophistically, whether the conclusion is true or false, just as in geometry it is necessary to argue geometrically. What a dialectical syllogism is, we said earlier.<sup>24</sup> (*Topics VIII.11.161a33–7*)

Without the context, the passage could reasonably be read as insisting on the use of arguments that meet the standard of a dialectical syllogism. In fact, the lesson to take away from this passage is that it is *precisely* arguing sophistically that Aristotle is sanctioning. The uses of false premises he's mentioned so far can meet the standards of dialectical argument, which Aristotle here states is appropriate; they can simply be false received opinions.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle's reminder here is that in order to count as arguing badly in a dialectical context, an argument would have to be sophistical rather than dialectical. And Aristotle has said that sometimes arguing badly is not the fault of the questioner. To explain that, he should say that sometimes the questioner's presenting a sophistical argument is not the questioner's, but rather, the answerer's fault. And he proceeds to do that:

Since someone preventing the common task is a bad companion, it is obvious that this is the case in argument. (For there is something common laid down in these, except in competitive arguments. For in these the goal cannot be the same for both, since no more than one can win). It makes no difference whether one does this [sc. prevents the common task] through asking or answering. Someone who asks sophistically does a bad job of arguing dialectically, as does someone who in answering does not concede what appears and does not grant something whenever the person asking wants to hear it. It is therefore obvious from the things said that one must not criticize the argument itself and the asker in the same way.<sup>26</sup> (*Topics VIII.11.161a38–b6*)

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23 I discuss the answerer's task in detail in the next section of this paper

24 δεῖ δὲ τὸν καλῶς μεταβιβάζοντα διαλεκτικῶς καὶ μὴ ἐριστικῶς μεταβιβάζειν, καθάπερ τὸν γεωμέτρην γεωμετρικῶς, ἅν τε ψεῦδος ἅν τ' ἀληθὲς ἢ τὸ συμπεραϊνόμενον· ποῖοι δὲ διαλεκτικοὶ συλλογισμοί, πρότερον εἴρηται.

25 Owen 1968 claims that false premises in dialectical debates may only be used in *reductio* arguments – but the passages here seem to sanction the use of false premises in a far greater number of cases.

26 ἐπεὶ δὲ φαῦλος κοινωνὸς ὁ ἐμποδίζων τὸ κοινὸν ἔργον, δῆλον ὅτι καὶ ἐν λόγῳ. κοινὸν γάρ τι καὶ ἐν τούτοις προκειμένον ἐστὶ, πλὴν τῶν ἀγωνιζομένων. τούτοις δ' οὐκ ἔστιν ἀμφοτέροις τυχεῖν τοῦ αὐτοῦ τέλους· πλείους γὰρ ἐνὸς ἀδύνατον νικᾶν. διαφέρει δ' οὐδέν, ἅν τε διὰ τοῦ ἀποκρίνεσθαι ἅν τε διὰ τοῦ ἐρωτᾶν ποιῆ τοῦτο· ὅ τε

This is a development of the argument at *Topics VIII.11.161a16–23*, that the questioner’s arguing badly may be the answerer’s fault. Here, we get a defence of the idea that dialectic is a cooperative enterprise (with the exception of competitive arguments), and a claim that someone who obstructs the common enterprise is a bad collaborator. Aristotle points out that there are ways for both askers and answerers to be bad collaborators. The emphasis here should be understood as being on the claim that *answerers* can be bad companions, because this is what will support Aristotle’s claim that sometimes answerers are the cause of bad arguing. They fail to be cooperative when they answer not according to what seems to be the case, but rather by refusing to say anything that the asker wants to hear.

At this point in Aristotle’s discussion of the two different kinds of criticism, it would still be possible to think that Aristotle was not sanctioning arguing sophistically in *Topics VIII.11.161a33–b6*, but simply excusing failures to come up with any arguments at all. Perhaps the questioner argues badly through failing to come to any conclusion whatsoever. Such a reading is difficult even against the passages we’ve seen so far, because if it’s true, then it’s unclear how criticism of the questioner contrasts with criticism of an argument in itself. If the questioner *has* presented an argument the contrast is easy to see: the argument may be bad in itself, but the questioner’s use of it acceptable. For some readers of Aristotle, however, it might appear more tasteful to attribute to him this minor sloppiness in thought than the bizarre idea that dialectical questioners might sometimes be correct in arguing sophistically. However, Aristotle’s concluding remarks here are decisive:

For nothing prevents it being the case that although the argument is bad, the questioner has argued dialectically as well as possible against the answerer. For against uncooperative people one cannot simply make the syllogisms that one wants but those that one can manage.<sup>27</sup> (*Topics VIII.11.161b6–10*)

The questioner is described as making arguments, but arguments that are bad. This constitutes carrying out dialectic as well as possible against the answerer (although it won’t constitute doing so particularly well). If Aristotle had thought the appropriate thing to do against a difficult answerer was simply not to try to draw any conclusions, then he wouldn’t have said that we make those syllogisms that we can. The issue in this passage wasn’t about the conclusions that questioners must argue for; it was about what premises questioners might be able to obtain. Aristotle’s advice is that one may stoop to the level of a sophist in order to bring about an apparent refutation, but only if one’s interlocutor’s behaviour has left one with no other choice.

But what does the questioner gain by bringing about a merely apparent refutation? The questioner is not trying to make some claim to knowledge she doesn’t possess. The clue I think is in that Aristotle says the questioner will have argued ‘dialectically as well as possible’. The questioner’s goal is ultimately good dialectical argument, and what this passage reveals is that a sophistical argument is, by dialectical

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γὰρ ἔριστικῶς ἐρωτῶν φαύλως διαλέγεται, ὅ τ’ ἐν τῷ ἀποκρίνεσθαι μὴ διδοὺς τὸ φαινόμενον μὴδ’ ἐκδεχόμενος ὅ τί ποτε βούλεται ὁ ἐρωτῶν πυθέσθαι. δῆλον οὖν ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων ὅτι οὐχ ὁμοίως ἐπιτιμητέον καθ’ αὐτόν τε τῷ λόγῳ καὶ τῷ ἐρωτῶντι

27 οὐδὲν γὰρ κωλύει τὸν μὲν λόγον φαῦλον εἶναι, τὸν δ’ ἐρωτῶντα ὡς ἐνδέχεται βέλτιστα πρὸς τὸν ἀποκρινόμενον διειλέχθαι. πρὸς γὰρ τοὺς δυσκολαίνοντας οὐ δυνατὸν ἴσως εὐθὺς οἴους τις βούλεται ἀλλ’ οἴους ἐνδέχεται ποιῆσθαι τοὺς συλλογισμούς.

standards, better than no argument at all. On the other hand, in philosophical inquiry, the risk of being misled by a sophistical argument presumably means it is better to remain silent.

According to Aristotle's discussion in *Topics VIII.11.161a16–b10* (cited above), sophistical syllogisms are required when the answerer is behaving badly. It may well be that there were other cases in which they were required. For example, an answerer with very sound beliefs defending a true thesis may be all-but irrefutable without attempting to cheat. In such a case, it would still be better dialectical argument to offer a sophistical argument, than to offer no argument at all, and a dialectician may be stuck in such a position. Recall, however, that at *Topics VIII.11.161a24–32*, Aristotle recommends the use of false premises to destroy true conclusions. I read this advice as indicating that Aristotle thought that interlocutors who did not have some false beliefs from which a good dialectical attack on any true, but controversial, conclusion could be mounted to be rare. Arguing from false an opponent's false beliefs was preferable to arguing sophistically: it's a dialectician's job to sniff out the relevant ones. Therefore, it seems unlikely that Aristotle would have recommended arguing sophistically simply to knock down a true conclusion.

A further motivation dialectical questioners might have for using fallacious arguments is in examination. A fallacious argument might reveal important misunderstandings on the part of an alleged expert who cannot see through them. For example, a true expert should not, I would think, succumb to omission or conflation: she should be able to come up with the appropriate counter-example or disambiguation. A failure to do so might well have been a sign of a lack of expertise.

Perhaps even argument from ambiguity could be used to test experts. In his taxonomy of kinds of argument, Aristotle distinguishes sophistical syllogisms from another kind of paralogism.<sup>28</sup> This kind of paralogism appears to be a proof within a science, while not really being one. There is good reason to think that Aristotle sees offering paralogisms as a fair way of testing the knowledge of experts. After all, he sees the solution of certain paralogisms as part of a science:

For it does not concern him to solve everything, but only insofar as someone cheats while demonstrating from the first principles. Insofar as they don't, it doesn't. For example the solution of the squaring of the circle by means of segments is for the geometer, that of Antiphon's proof is not for the geometer.<sup>29</sup> (*Physics I.2.185a14–17*)

A geometer is not bound to solve Antiphon's proof that the circle may be squared, but is bound to refute the 'squaring of the circle by means of segments'. If a dialectician happened to know how the proof that used segments went, I can see no reason why the dialectician shouldn't use this to show that the person she was dealing with was not a geometer. It's hard to see how this would be different in kind from arguing from a false premise that an opponent had accepted, since it would make perfectly clear that an alleged geometer was a fraud. This is speculative, since there's no strong textual support for this claim, and Aristotle's remarks about the use of arguments from ambiguity suggest that they were a last resort.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Topics I.1.101bff.*

<sup>29</sup> ἅμα δ' οὐδὲ λύειν ἅπαντα προσήκει, ἀλλ' ἢ ὅσα ἐκ τῶν ἀρχῶν τις ἐπιδεικνὺς ψεύδεται, ὅσα δὲ μή, οὐ, οἷον τὸν τετραγωνισμὸν τὸν μὲν διὰ τῶν τμημάτων γεωμετρικοῦ διαλύσαι, τὸν δὲ Ἀντιφῶντος οὐ γεωμετρικοῦ

<sup>30</sup> Though against an alleged geometer who had simply memorised a stack of theorems, such a paralogism may be one's best hope

But even if the dialectician ought not to employ paralogisms in the course of the respectable examination of experts, Aristotle was clearly committed to the claim that, in dialectic, offering a fallacious argument constitutes arguing better than offering no argument at all. As such, dialectical questioners need to know how to construct not only arguments with real logical force, but also arguments with merely apparent logical force. This reflects a difference in the standards for reasonable inference between philosophical argumentation and dialectical argumentation: in philosophy, the presence of a merely apparent argument to a conclusion gives no further reason to believe that conclusion than no argument whatsoever. This distinction is important, and has largely been overlooked by commentators on the *Topics*.

Once we recognise that dialecticians must learn to construct fallacious arguments as well, not only in the study of sophistic, which is necessary for avoiding apparent refutations, but also in the study of dialectic itself, the question of the philosophical respectability of the advice Aristotle gives in the *Topics* becomes particularly acute.<sup>31</sup> If Aristotle thought that dialecticians should stick to arguments with good inferences, then dialectical arguments may well have differed from philosophical ones only in the status of the premises. If that were true, then, for example, it would be fair game to consider the locations in *Books II–VII* of the *Topics* as describing argumentative moves Aristotle saw as available both to the dialectician and to the philosopher, and perhaps also that the *organa dialectica* in *Topics I* described techniques for finding good philosophical arguments, as well as good dialectical ones.<sup>32</sup> The evidence presented here should make us hesitate to argue in this way. However, we can argue in a different way for the claim that Aristotle saw much of the advice in *Topics I–VII* as applicable to philosophers. That will be the main task of the next section.

### 3. Philosophy and the *Topics*

My purpose in this section is two-fold. First, I want to argue that Aristotle saw most of his advice in *Topics I–VII* as applying to a philosophical audience. This will make clear that we shouldn't, on the basis of the considerations raised in the previous section, consider these parts of the *Topics* to be useless as evidence for which inferences Aristotle would have seen as following in a philosophical context. However, in constructing this argument, I will encounter a problem, namely that the same evidence which indicates that Aristotle saw much of the advice in *Topics I–VII* as philosophically, as well as dialectically, sound, indicates that he took the opposite attitude to *Topics VIII*. My second task will be to evaluate how serious a problem this is for *Book VIII*. I will consider the possibility of defending the relevance of some of this material through the similarity of the task of the answerer to the task of recognizing sound philosophical argument, but argue that there are simply too many differences between the two for this defence to work, and I will conclude that, although, with appropriate caution, we can hope to learn much about Aristotle's views on which arguments were good enough for use in at least some parts of philosophical inquiry from *Topics I–VII*, we cannot hope to learn much at all about the argumentative techniques or standards that Aristotle saw as applying to philosophy from *Topics VIII*.

My argument that we can treat much of the advice Aristotle gives in *Topics I–VII* as being advice he saw as philosophically, and not only dialectically, sound, is that he says we can. In particular, he says *that that advice in Topics I–VII which applies to finding the location from which to argue* is, for the most part,

<sup>31</sup> Owen 1968 makes this point in responding to 1872

<sup>32</sup> Note that, e.g. if, as Irwin 1991, Nussbaum 1967, Bolton 1997 think, dialectic is just one of the tools that philosophers have at their disposal, then the situation is even starker: both a standard for an acceptable inference, and a standard for acceptable premises, will be shared by the philosopher and the dialectician.

philosophically sound. This is good news, because the central books of the *Topics* especially provide a treasury of argumentative strategies that can at times be useful for analysing an argument in Aristotle's philosophical work, which can be used for considering whether Aristotle *would have seen* some argument as following or not, and which sometimes only make sense as having any inferential strength at all if Aristotle took one or another view on some philosophical problem.

The key passage is *Topics VIII.1.155b3–17*:

Next it is necessary to talk about arrangement and how it is necessary to ask questions. It is necessary first for the person intending to ask questions to choose the location<sup>33</sup> from where it is necessary to argue dialectically, secondly to ask and arrange each question individually to oneself, thirdly and finally to say these to the other person. So far as choosing the location goes, the inquiry is the same for the philosopher and the dialectician; arranging them and asking them is peculiar to the dialectician; for all things of this sort are towards another person. For it also doesn't bother the philosopher investigating alone, when the syllogism is from things which are true and obvious, that the answerer would not set them down because of being too close to the thing asked at the beginning and because he sees what follows, but perhaps they even desire that the axioms be especially well known and close; for the scientific syllogisms are from that sort of thing.

From where it is necessary to take the location, we have already discussed.<sup>34</sup>

In this passage, Aristotle describes the task of the first part of *Topics VIII*. People putting questions must go through three phases: selecting the location; putting the questions to themselves; and actually putting them to the other person. Philosophers and dialecticians approach the first task in a similar way; but the latter two are interesting to only the dialectician, because they make reference to another party – and another is not involved in philosophy. Aristotle then exemplifies a difference in the philosopher's concerns and the dialectician's, and remarks that the task of selecting the location has already been discussed. In other words, so far as constructing arguments goes, the task relevant to the philosopher has been discussed already.

For our purposes, the key remarks in this passage are 1. philosophers and dialecticians approach the task of finding the location in a similar (*homoiōs*) way, and 2. we have already discussed where to take the

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33 I'm using the word 'location' to translate the Greek *topos* which literally means 'place'. There is a debate about what a *topos* is, but very broadly a *topos* is akin to an argument scheme: it's a pattern of argument that is instantiated in different particular arguments. The reason I choose 'location' to translate *topos* is that the medieval tradition of translating *topos* with *locus* and preserves the spatial metaphor.

34 Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα περὶ τάξεως καὶ πῶς δεῖ ἐρωτᾶν λεκτέον. δεῖ δὲ πρῶτον μὲν ἐρωτηματίζειν μέλλοντα τὸν τόπον εὑρεῖν ὅθεν ἐπιχειρητέον, δεύτερον δὲ ἐρωτηματίσαι καὶ τάξαι καθ' ἕκαστα πρὸς ἑαυτόν, τὸ δὲ λοιπὸν καὶ τρίτον εἰπεῖν ἤδη ταῦτα πρὸς ἕτερον. μέχρι μὲν οὖν τοῦ εὑρεῖν τὸν τόπον ὁμοίως τοῦ φιλοσόφου καὶ τοῦ διαλεκτικοῦ ἢ σκέψις, τὸ δ' ἤδη ταῦτα τάττειν καὶ ἐρωτηματίζειν ἴδιον τοῦ διαλεκτικοῦ· πρὸς ἕτερον γὰρ πᾶν τὸ τοιοῦτον. τῷ δὲ φιλοσόφῳ καὶ ζητοῦντι καθ' ἑαυτὸν οὐδὲν μέλει, ἐὰν ἀληθῆ μὲν ἦ καὶ γνώριμα δι' ὧν ὁ συλλογισμός, μὴ θῆ δ' αὐτὰ ὁ ἀποκρινόμενος διὰ τὸ σύνεγγυς εἶναι τοῦ ἐξ ἀρχῆς καὶ προορᾶν τὸ συμβησόμενον, ἀλλ' ἴσως κἄν σπουδάσειεν ὅτι μάλιστα γνώριμα καὶ σύνεγγυς εἶναι τὰ ἀξιώματα· ἐκ τούτων γὰρ οἱ ἐπιστημονικοὶ συλλογισμοί. Τοὺς μὲν οὖν τόπους ὅθεν δεῖ λαμβάνειν, εἴρηται πρότερον.

location.<sup>35</sup> These two remarks provide us with good reasons to think that Aristotle saw the discussion of how to find a location in the *Topics* as containing advice that was largely philosophical. If the task is similar for philosophers and dialecticians, then advice on how to carry out the task should usually be useful advice for both of them.

Furthermore, for the contrast between the dialectician and the philosopher to be at all relevant to the change of topic, the remarks have to be indicating that the *discussion* of where to find the location was relevant, or useful, to both philosophers and dialecticians, whereas the subsequent discussion, of arrangement, is of use only to dialecticians. Without this thought, the remarks here constitute an incomprehensible digression. Although Aristotle may occasionally indulge in incomprehensible digressions, interpreting him as doing so when a perfectly sensible alternative is available would be perverse.

Although *Topics VIII.1.155b3–17* makes it clear that much of the advice in *Topics I–VII* is advice that philosophers could take on board, it raises the question of whether philosophers could get much out of *Topics VIII*. For starters, it says explicitly that they won't get anything out of the rest of the discussion of the questioner, which runs to the end of *Topics VIII.1*. But more significantly, the reason given, that this task is *toward another person*, seems to apply also to the discussion of answering questions and probably to the standards for assessing dialectical argument, which make up much of what's left of *Topics VIII*. Finally, an explanation has been given for a philosopher's interest in the *Topics* – they are interested in finding locations from which to argue. While it's possible that philosophers have further interests in the *Topics*, there's no real reason to think that they do. These reasons, I think, while not conclusive, certainly should make us hesitate to use *Topics VIII* for evidence of which standards Aristotle held philosophical argument to, and what argumentative techniques Aristotle thought of as being applicable to philosophy.

A possible line of defence here would be to show that the answerer's task was to impose standards of argumentation that would be acceptable in philosophy. Certainly, the considerations I raised in the first section of this paper do not apply to the answerer: a competent answerer should be able to avoid falling for arguments by omission, conflation and argument from ambiguity, and there are no doubt important aspects of the answerer's role that involve doing things that philosophers also do.<sup>36</sup> But there are some considerations that undermine such a defence.

First, there's reasons to think that Aristotle thought good philosophers may not have been good answerers, and this suggests that the requirements on the two are rather different. At the very least, answerers must do in some ways *more* than philosophers, and isolating which advice applies to both philosophers and answerers may at times be difficult. For one thing, Aristotle says at *Sophistical Refutations* 8.169b27–29 that sophists sometimes entangle people who have knowledge. Although Aristotle has in mind here the particular sciences, he is explaining why sophistical refutations aren't good tests of people's ignorance. If true philosophers couldn't be caught in them, then sophistical refutations would be one effective test of whether someone was truly a philosopher. Aristotle doesn't seem to have thought that they were:<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> I am opting to translate *homoiōs* as similar rather than as the same, because of the considerations I raised in the first section.

<sup>36</sup> For a good discussion of these similarities, see *Kakkuri-Knuuttila 2005*

<sup>37</sup> οἱ δὲ σοφιστικοὶ ἔλεγχοι, ἃν καὶ συλλογίζωνται τὴν ἀντίφασιν, οὐ ποιοῦσι δῆλον εἰ ἀγνοεῖ· καὶ γὰρ τὸν εἰδότα ἐμποδίζουσι τούτοις τοῖς λόγοις.

On the other hand sophistical refutations, even when they argue to the contradiction [of the answerer's thesis], do not make it clear whether the answerer is ignorant; for they also tie up the person who knows with these arguments. (*SE* 8.169b27–29)

Further, in *Sophistical Refutations* 16.175a17–26, Aristotle discusses solving sophisms. He distinguishes two different abilities: the ability to recognise sophisms reliably, and the ability to both recognise and solve them under pressure:

Answerers must somehow reply to these arguments, it seems, if we spoke correctly about the sources of paralogisms, and if we have sufficiently separated the varieties of ways in which they come about. But it is not the same [a] to be able to recognise the fault and solve it when we have taken up the argument, as [b] it is to be able to do so quickly with everything one is asked. For what we know, we often do not recognise when it has been rearranged. Moreover just as in other cases speed and facility arise particularly through training, the same also holds in argument and so, even when it is obvious to us, if we are unpracticed, we will often be too late for opportunities.<sup>38</sup>

Aristotle here distinguishes between two different levels of ability at solving sophisms. On one level one can solve arguments reliably but slowly. Aristotle recognised that this would not be enough for use in a dialectical debate, because with only that measure of mastery one would often be too late for the right moment. Being able to recognise a fallacy immediately, no matter how the argument's arranged, requires practice. But it's not at all clear that philosophers need to be so quick. Furthermore, Aristotle saw the need for answerers to pay attention to appearances:

First then, just as we say that sometimes it is necessary to choose to argue according to received opinion rather than the truth, so also it is sometimes necessary to solve according to received opinion rather than according to the truth. In general it is necessary to fight sophists not as if they were refuting but as if they were seeming to do so; therefore we say that they do not argue validly, and so one must work to correct the appearance that they do.<sup>39</sup> (*Sophistical Refutation* 17.175a31–36)

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38 Ἀποκρινομένοις δὲ πῶς ἀπαντητέον πρὸς τοὺς τοιούτους λόγους, φανερόν, εἴπερ ὀρθῶς εἰρήκαμεν πρότερον ἐξ ὧν εἶσιν οἱ παραλογισμοί, καὶ τὰς ἐν τῷ πυνθάνεσθαι πλεονεξίας ἱκανῶς διείλομεν. οὐ ταῦτ' ὁ δ' ἐστὶ λαβόντα τε τὸν λόγον ἰδεῖν καὶ λύσαι τὴν μοχθηρίαν, καὶ ἐρωτώμενον ἀπαντᾶν δύνασθαι ταχέως· ὁ γὰρ ἴσμεν, πολλάκις μετατιθέμενον ἀγνοοῦμεν. ἔτι δ', ὡς περ ἐν τοῖς ἄλλοις τὸ θᾶττον καὶ τὸ βραδύτερον ἐκ τοῦ γεγυμνάσθαι γίνεται μᾶλλον, οὕτω καὶ ἐπὶ τῶν λόγων ἔχει, ὥστε, ἂν δῆλον μὲν ἡμῖν ᾗ, ἀμελέτητοι δ' ὦμεν, ὑστεροῦμεν τῶν καιρῶν πολλάκις.

39 Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν, ὡς περ συλλογίζεσθαι φαμεν ἐνδόξως ποτὲ μᾶλλον ἢ ἀληθῶς προαιρεῖσθαι δεῖν, οὕτω καὶ λυτέον ποτὲ μᾶλλον ἐνδόξως ἢ κατὰ τᾶληθές. ὅλως γὰρ πρὸς τοὺς ἐριστικοὺς μαχετέον οὐχ ὡς ἐλέγχοντας ἀλλ' ὡς φαινομένους· οὐ γὰρ φαμεν συλλογίζεσθαι γε αὐτούς, ὥστε πρὸς τὸ μὴ δοκεῖν διορθωτέον.

Again, this looks like advice that makes sense in the context of a dialectical debate, but which makes little sense in philosophy, because the advice is for fighting contentious people. But for Aristotle, since philosophy need not concern another person, it certainly need not concern difficult people.<sup>40</sup> But this is a distinction between the requirements on an answerer and the requirements on a philosopher, which means the two roles come apart, and which jeopardises a defence of the use of *Topics VIII* on the basis of the similarity of the practices of philosophy and philosophical answering.<sup>41</sup>

But Aristotle did not leave behind a breakdown of the answerer's role or an explanation of which parts correspond well to doing philosophy. It's not possible to rule out that Aristotle saw the discussion of the answerer's role as required reading for his purely philosophical students. But there are good reasons to doubt that he did, and this level of doubt severely undermines the value of an argument about what norms of argumentation Aristotle thought might apply to philosophy based on appeals to the *Topics* anywhere in *Topics VIII*.<sup>42</sup>

Can we get more precise about the similarities and differences between finding the location, as practiced by the philosopher and by the dialectician? Doing so would provide a heuristic for approaching *Topics I–VII* as evidence for which argument strategies Aristotle saw as being sound enough to play at least some role in philosophical inquiry. It remains difficult to provide such an answer, since Aristotle says very little about it. One view that one might take is that, when arguing to the negation of a false conclusion with an honest answerer, the philosopher and the dialectical questioner argue in the same way. On this view, a philosopher doesn't need the skills for dealing with bad interlocutors, but uses precisely the skills a dialectical questioner uses for dealing with good ones. We can, at least, show that matters are not so straightforward.

Although a dialectician dealing with an honest interlocutor will reason in a way that resembles philosophical reasoning far more closely than how a dialectician dealing with a dishonest one argues, there are three good reasons to doubt that they argue in exactly the same way. The first reason is simply to do with the time available in a dialectical encounter; some of the best philosophical arguments may be extremely drawn out and take days or weeks to come to understand. A dialectician needs to know to avoid these arguments, and prefer arguments that can be concluded in the course of a dialectical debate, even if they are less decisive.

But a deeper difference lies in their use of received opinions. In *Topics I.14*, Aristotle outlines the first of the tools of dialectic: the collection of propositions. One should, according to Aristotle, collect propositions which are received opinions, or at least sufficiently like received opinions. These will provide a collection of premises to be used in arguments. At *Topics I.14.105b30–31*, Aristotle says:

It is necessary to proceed in the case of philosophy following the truth,  
dialectically towards opinion.<sup>43</sup>

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40 One is left with the thought that the Lyceum may have been an unusually well administered institution.

41 I'm not trying to say they're not similar in many important ways. My point here is that the similarity is not enough to ground a presumption that in describing something about the answerer's role, Aristotle is describing something that applies to philosophy.

42 Appeals to the *Sophistical Refutations* shouldn't succumb to such doubts however.

43 Πρὸς μὲν οὖν φιλοσοφίαν κατ' ἀλήθειαν περὶ αὐτῶν πραγματευτέον, διαλεκτικῶς δὲ πρὸς δόξαν

Aristotle here is referring to the action of collecting premises.<sup>44</sup> Both the philosopher and the dialectician are to work selectively through things that experts and the many believe. But they are to apply different methods of selection: the dialectician is to consider which premises people actually believe, and so build up a supply of premises that are likely to be accepted in a dialectical context.<sup>45</sup> The philosopher is to try to select those premises that are likely to be true. This reflects the fact that a premise being a received opinion is often sufficient for a dialectician, but not for a philosopher.<sup>46</sup>

A third reason to doubt that philosophers' and dialecticians' techniques converge when they are arguing adequately is in the advice Aristotle gives to answerers in a dialectical debate. Answerers are to answer according to one of several different standards:

If therefore the thing laid down is straightforwardly a received opinion or a rejected opinion, then it is necessary to make comparisons about how things seem straightforwardly. If the thing set down is neither straightforwardly received or rejected but is so to the arguer, then it is necessary for him to affirm or not to affirm by choosing what seems or does not seem to him to be the case. And if the answerer defends somebody else's belief, it is obvious that it is looking towards this person's judgement that he must affirm and deny each one. Therefore those attending to the beliefs of others, such as that the good and the bad are same, as Heraclitus said, do not concede that opposites cannot belong to the same thing at the same time, not because this does not seem to the case to them, but because it is necessary to say this according to Heraclitus.<sup>47</sup> (*Topics* VIII.5.159b16–33)

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44 *Smith 1997*: 92 takes this line as referring to the three-fold division of premises, and saying that a similar division holds in philosophy than in dialectic. The line is fairly dark. But I find it hard to both render the force of the gerundive *πραγματευτέον*, and make the comment relevant to the discussion, on *Smith's* reading. On my reading both *desiderata* are easily obtained.

45 For arguments that this is how the dialectician uses accepted opinions, see *Smith 1993*

46 Whether it's necessary for the philosopher that the premise be a received opinion – and why that might be necessary – is beyond the scope of this paper. *Bolton 1999* equates being a received opinion with being *prior for us*. Note that *Irwin 1988* distinguishes between strong dialectic and weak dialectic. Strong dialectic, supposedly a discovery of the *Metaphysics*, makes use of a more strictly curated set of received opinions, namely, those the dialectician thinks are true. My reading of the *Topics* indicates that the philosopher's use of received opinions is similar to what Irwin would call strong dialectic. This suggests both that the method Irwin calls strong dialectic was not a discovery of the metaphysics, and, further, that calling it 'dialectic' may be a misnomer, since it is here contrasted with a dialectical method.

47 εἰ δ' ἔνδοξος ἀπλῶς ἢ θέσις, δῆλον ὅτι τὸ συμπέρασμα ἀπλῶς ἄδοξον. θετέον οὖν τὰ τε δοκοῦντα πάντα καὶ τῶν μὴ δοκούντων ὅσα ἤττον ἐστὶν ἄδοξα τοῦ συμπεράσματος· ἱκανῶς γὰρ ἂν δόξειε διειλέχθαι. ὁμοίως δέ, εἰ μὴτ' ἄδοξος μὴτ' ἔνδοξός ἐστιν ἢ θέσις· καὶ γὰρ οὕτως τὰ τε φαινόμενα πάντα δοτέον καὶ τῶν μὴ δοκούντων ὅσα μᾶλλον ἔνδοξα τοῦ συμπεράσματος· οὕτω γὰρ ἔνδοξοτέρους συμβήσεται τοὺς λόγους γίνεσθαι. εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀπλῶς ἔνδοξον ἢ ἄδοξον τὸ κείμενον, πρὸς τὰ δοκοῦντα ἀπλῶς τὴν σύγκρισιν ποιητέον. εἰ δὲ μὴ ἀπλῶς ἔνδοξον ἢ ἄδοξον τὸ κείμενον ἀλλὰ τῷ ἀποκρινόμενῳ, πρὸς αὐτὸν τὸ δοκοῦν καὶ τὸ μὴ δοκοῦν κρίνοντα θετέον ἢ οὐ θετέον. ἂν δ' ἑτέρου δόξαν διαφυλάττη ὁ ἀποκρινόμενος, δῆλον ὅτι πρὸς τὴν ἐκείνου διάνοιαν ἀποβλέποντα θετέον ἕκαστα καὶ ἀρνητέον. διὸ καὶ οἱ κομίζοντες ἀλλοτρίας δόξας, οἷον ἀγαθὸν καὶ κακὸν εἶναι ταῦτόν, καθάπερ Ἡράκλειτός φησιν, οὐ διδάσκει μὴ παρεῖναι ἅμα τῷ αὐτῷ τάναντία, οὐχ ὡς οὐ δοκοῦν αὐτοῖς τοῦτο, ἀλλ' ὅτι καθ' Ἡράκλειτον οὕτω λεκτέον.

The standards an answerer must apply in discussion are those of the person or group of people whose position they are defending. If the position is generally accepted or rejected, then they must grant premises that are generally accepted or rejected; if the position is held by themselves, then they must answer in accordance with what seems to them to be the case, and if they are defending someone else's position, they must answer as the other person would. It's difficult to see why a philosopher would answer in this way, rather than directly answering what seemed to be the case to them. The standard seems to be that in order to refute a view, one must be able to drive the person who held it into self-contradiction.

It's worth mentioning here that there's some reason to think that Plato thought that, in arguing against a position, one should try to refute it from premises that its most prominent defender would have accepted. In the *Theaetetus*, Socrates imagines what Protagoras would make of some of his early refutations. He imagines Protagoras saying the following:

When you are examining something of mine through questioning, then if the person being questioned is overthrown while answering as I would, I am refuted, if otherwise, then the person being questioned is refuted<sup>48</sup> (*Theaetetus* 166a–b)

The point from the *Theaetetus* is of course inconclusive. Plato may, in an ironic way, be highlighting that Protagoras' theory will turn out to be self-refuting. Or, he might be making a playful extension of Protagoras' relativism. Further, in the passage cited the focus shifts from refuting a position to refuting a person. Plato may have distinguished between the refutation of a person and a position. I don't mean to settle these questions here.

But did Aristotle argue from premises that his opponents would have accepted in his philosophical works? The passage from the *Topics* is not good evidence that he does, given its position after the shift in target audience at the beginning of *Topics VIII*, so we must consider how he actually argues in his philosophical works. There's not the space here to do a thorough analysis of Aristotle's practice, but I will provide some preliminary reasons to suspect that he didn't apply this standard.

Consider his arguments against the Platonist's position that there is a form of a good in *Nicomachean Ethics I.6/I.4*. Two of Aristotle's arguments against the forms depend on a division of beings as outlined in the *Categories* – quality, quantity and so on. It's unclear that Aristotle's Platonist opponents accepted the division that Aristotle spelt out in the *Categories*. Furthermore, Aristotle's final argument involves an appeal to *how the applied sciences actually work*, which, given that Platonists are unlikely to have shared Aristotle's unqualified ascription of knowledge to applied scientists, fails to argue from premises which Aristotle's opponents accept:

Perhaps it will seem to someone that it is better to know this [sc. the good itself] when considering the obtainable and practical goods. For having this as a kind of paradigm we will better know our own goods, and if we know it, we will obtain them. This argument has some

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48 The translation is mine based on the text from *Blake et. al. 1995*: ὅταν τι τῶν ἐμῶν δι' ἐρωτήσεως σκοπῆς, ἐὰν μὲν ὁ ἐρωτηθεὶς οἷάπερ ἂν ἐγὼ ἀποκρινάμην ἀποκρινάμενος σφάλῃται, ἐγὼ ἐλέγχομαι, εἰ δὲ ἄλλοῖα, αὐτὸς ὁ ἐρωτηθεὶς

plausibility, but it seems to be in discord with the sciences; for all of these, although they aim at some good and seek to provide what is missing, leave aside knowledge of this [sc. the good itself].<sup>49</sup>  
(*Nicomachean Ethics* I.6.1096b35–1097a5)

Aristotle's implicit assumption here is that his contemporaries working in the applied sciences more or less know what they are doing, and so he can appeal to their practices to provide evidence about what one needs in order to obtain knowledge<sup>50</sup>. One can imagine a Platonist making one of several responses. One might be: so much the worst for the applied sciences. Another might be: dialectic, the only true science, does indeed pay attention to the form of the good.

Of course there's room to argue that Aristotle's opponents would have accepted the premises involved both in the appeal to a doctrine like that found in the *Categories* and in the appeal to the applied sciences. Plato isn't the easiest philosopher to pin down to one position or another, and in some moods he is much friendlier to the applied sciences than in the well-known anti-science passages in the *Apology*. For instance, in *Gorgias* 463*aff.* Plato contrasts medicine with cookery and rhetoric with justice; cookery is a sham of medicine and rhetoric is a sham of justice. Plato's Socrates appears to allow that people who possess *technai* possess understanding in an important sense. This allows some room to argue he may have accepted Aristotle's appeal to the sciences, and even more room to imagine a strand of formalists about the good in the Academy who nonetheless held scientists in high esteem. Perhaps this element in the Academy rose to sufficient prominence that Aristotle thought he should address it directly.

Similarly, one might imagine that Aristotle's distinctions in the *Categories* became accepted by later members of the Academy, and that his appeal to them against the Platonists was justified by the success of that work. Or else the distinctions in the *Categories* may have been invented by someone else in the Academy. The reconstruction of the positions of Aristotle's contemporary opponents in the Academy is difficult and often highly speculative, since independent evidence of their positions is often missing. That makes it particularly difficult to say definitively whether Aristotle argued from premises that they held.

But that raises an important point about the strategy of simply claiming that Aristotle's opponents would have agreed to the premises of the arguments he used in his philosophical work. It often, as here, involves speculations that aren't really sanctioned by anything anyone actually says. The possibility that Aristotle was simply appealing to premises he thought he and his students were justified in taking as true is here, as elsewhere, certainly viable. Perhaps die-hard Platonists would continue to maintain that contemporary applied science was an example of relatively poor epistemic practice. Aristotle was not always above simply rolling his eyes at particular opponents in a philosophical context. The upshot is that we ought not lightly assume that Aristotle adopted, in his philosophical practice, the norm that one must always argue from premises that an opponent will accept.

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49 τάχα δέ τω δόξειεν ἂν βέλτιον εἶναι γνωρίζειν αὐτὸ πρὸς τὰ κτητὰ καὶ πρακτὰ τῶν ἀγαθῶν· οἶον γὰρ παράδειγμα τοῦτ' ἔχοντες μᾶλλον εἰσόμεθα καὶ τὰ ἡμῖν ἀγαθὰ, κἂν εἰδῶμεν, ἐπιτευξόμεθα αὐτῶν. πιθανότητα μὲν οὖν τινα ἔχει ὁ λόγος, ἔοικε δὲ ταῖς ἐπιστήμας διαφωνεῖν· πᾶσαι γὰρ ἀγαθοῦ τινὸς ἐπιέμεναι καὶ τὸ ἐνδεὲς ἐπιζητοῦσαι παραλείπουσι τὴν γνῶσιν αὐτοῦ.

50 By applied sciences I mean those sciences that aim at a good beyond themselves, e.g. carpentry etc. This is a gloss of the examples Aristotle gives in the above passage.

This discussion hasn't helped us to get very precise about the differences and similarities between the philosopher and the dialectical questioner's search for a location, but it should be enough to show that the philosopher's search for a location differs in at least some important respects from the dialectical questioner, even when the dialectical questioner is arguing against a false position, with a cooperative and sensible answerer.

Nevertheless, Aristotle's stated position on *Topics I–VII* seems to be that they are useful for philosophers to read, and that justifies their use by contemporary commentators as evidence for which argument strategies Aristotle saw as being philosophically acceptable. Contemporary commentators must keep in mind that the texts were primarily written for an audience of dialecticians, and this means that they should expect a small minority of the advice not to apply to philosophers. When it comes to *Topics VIII*, it is not possible to justify a similar reading. Aristotle's statements about the philosopher's engagement with the *Topics* speak more against than for using the book in this way, and there is enough divergence between both the roles of dialectical questioner and dialectical answerer on the one hand, and that of the philosopher on the other, that the applicability of these chapters cannot be justified on these grounds either.

#### 4. The philosopher as dialectician

So far my focus has been on highlighting differences between philosophical inquiry and dialectic, while nonetheless vindicating the use of much of the material in *Topics I–VII* for working out which argument strategies Aristotle thought of as acceptable to use in philosophy. Although I think it's important to recognise the various contrasts between philosophical and dialectical argument, I think it's important to recognise also that Aristotle saw the use of dialectic as playing an important role in the life of most philosophers. Aristotle clearly thought that mastery of dialectic was important for maintaining one's reputation, and Aristotle was by no means without love of reputation. Indeed, in describing the perfectly virtuous great-souled man, Aristotle says:

For the great souled man is especially concerned with honour and dishonour; and he will be moderately pleased by great honours from good people, since they happen to be appropriate for him or perhaps even beneath him. For honour is not worthy of complete virtue.<sup>51</sup>  
(*Nicomachean Ethics* IV.3.1124a4–8)

And in *Topics VIII.9.160b17–22*, Aristotle gives advice that speaks directly to maintaining one's reputation:

One must beware of supporting positions contrary to received opinion. And things are contrary to received opinion in two ways. For there is 1) that because of which it is inevitable that one will say strange things, for example if somebody says that either everything moves or nothing does, and 2) anything chosen by a bad character and against people's wishes, for example that pleasure is the good and that it is better to act

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<sup>51</sup> μάλιστα μὲν οὖν περὶ τιμᾶς καὶ ἀτιμίας ὁ μεγαλόψυχός ἐστι· καὶ ἐπὶ μὲν ταῖς μεγάλας καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν σπουδαίων μετρίως ἡσθήσεται, ὡς τῶν οἰκείων τυγχάνων ἢ καὶ ἐλαττόνων· ἀρετῆς γὰρ παντελοῦς οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο ἀξία τιμῆ

unjustly than to be unjustly treated. For they will hate them, not believing them to be supporting them for the sake of argument, but thinking that they are saying what seems to be the case.<sup>52</sup>

Notice in this passage that one should avoid being thought to hold both immoral things and absurd things. The warning against holding absurd things indicates that Aristotle thought of one's *intellectual* reputation as important, and dialectic as an arena in which one's intellectual reputation could be maintained and destroyed.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, in explaining the importance of mastering the solutions to sophistical arguments, Aristotle points out:

The third and final [use] is in furthering one's reputation of seeming to be well practiced at everything and inexperienced at nothing. For when one is taking part in arguments, finding fault with arguments while not being able to diagnose their weaknesses gives rise to the suspicion of seeming to be uncooperative not because of the truth but through inexperience.<sup>54</sup> (*Sophistical Refutations* 16.175a12–16)

But although Aristotle saw one's reputation as an intellectual as something to be defended and furthered, and to be perhaps *moderately pleased* about, he didn't see it as the essential element of the intellectual life. Contemplation is really the key, and if one has to contemplate alone, one has not lost the core value of the intellectual life:

For the wise man and the just man and the others all need the things necessary for life, but when they have been sufficiently furnished with these things then while on the one hand the just person needs other people with whom and towards whom he can practice justice, and similarly the temperate person and the brave person and each of the others, the wise person can contemplate although being on his own, and the more so the wise he is. He will perhaps do so better if he has

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52 Ἄδοξον δ' ὑπόθεσιν εὐλαβητέον ὑπέχειν. εἴη δ' ἂν ἄδοξος διχῶς· καὶ γὰρ ἐξ ἧς ἄτοπα συμβαίνει λέγειν, οἷον εἰ πάντα φαίη τις κινεῖσθαι ἢ μηδέν, καὶ ὅσα χείρονος ἦθους ἐλέσθαι καὶ ὑπεναντία ταῖς βουλήσεσιν, οἷον ὅτι ἡδονὴ τᾶγαθόν, καὶ τὸ ἀδικεῖν βέλτιον τοῦ ἀδικεῖσθαι· οὐ γὰρ ὡς λόγου χάριν ὑπέχοντα ἀλλ' ὡς τὰ δοκοῦντα λέγοντα μισοῦσιν.

53 We may be able to identify the two *moral* examples. Aristotle says of Eudoxus that people accepted his position on hedonism because they respected his character and thought he must really believe in hedonism; the implication is that if he had not had such an outstanding character, he would have been suspected of arguing for hedonism simply because he loved pleasure. (*Nic Eth X.1.1172b15ff.*) And Socrates says something similar about Glaucon and Adeimantus after they plead the case so vigorously for injustice (*Rep.II.368b*). I thank Stephen Menn for pointing out these parallels.

54 τρίτον δὲ καὶ τὸ λοιπὸν ἔτι πρὸς δόξαν, τὸ περὶ πάντα γεγυμνάσθαι δοκεῖν καὶ μηδενὸς ἀπειρώς ἔχειν· τὸ γὰρ κοινωνοῦντα λόγων ψέγειν λόγους, μηδὲν ἔχοντα διορίζειν περὶ τῆς φαυλότητος αὐτῶν, ὑποψίαν δίδωσι τοῦ δοκεῖν δυσχεραίνειν οὐ διὰ τᾶληθές ἀλλὰ δι' ἀπειρίαν.

collaborators, but he is all the same the most self-sufficient.<sup>55</sup>  
(*Nicomachean Ethics X.7.1177a27–b1*)

The point of this passage is to show that the life of contemplation is more self-sufficient (and so better) than a life characterised by any one of the other virtues. The point is that exercising the other virtues – courage or justice or what have you – requires having other people to exercise the virtues on. Since the core value of the good life is the *exercise* of virtue, the core value of the life of contemplation can be maintained even without other people. This is what makes it more self-sufficient, which confirms the contrast between philosophy and dialectic made at *Topics VIII.1.155b3–17*, namely that dialectic concerns another person, and philosophy does not.

This point is somewhat softened here, however. Aristotle concedes that a wise person can perhaps contemplate better with others, which indicates that in the usual situation, philosophers will work collaboratively. That raises the second sense in which dialectic can be a useful skill for philosophers to have: it helps them to engage in collaborative philosophical endeavours.

It's important to be careful about what this shows and what it doesn't, however. One kind of collaborative intellectual endeavour is a group of differently specialised experts working towards a common intellectual goal, and relying on each other's results. In such a collaborative endeavour, no one person understands the whole project completely; a person needs to be able to participate in the overall endeavour as part of a team, to defer to the authority of other researchers' superior expertise when appropriate, and to find protocols for synthesising and combining results. The point is not to get any person's expertise to a level where they understand a problem and can tackle it on their own in all of its details, but rather to bring the team into a state where, by working together, it can solve problems which none of its members would be able to solve individually.

Another kind of collaborative intellectual activity in which each collaborator is both a teacher and a learner of the same material. The idea is to help each person in the group build up a sense of some set of intellectual problems so that each person will be able to solve progressively harder problems. People rely on each other to help them improve, and to show them ways of solving problems, but they do not rely on each other to provide distinctive kinds of expertise. The approach to solving a problem is fundamentally individual: two people have solved a problem when both of them understand the solution fully. If either fails to understand the solution fully, then the purpose of the exercise has not been achieved.

If the point of developing some kind of understanding is that the understanding is good in itself – which Aristotle thought was the case for philosophy – then the second kind of collaboration is the most appropriate. For solving practical problems, the first kind of collaboration makes sense, but since no member of the group ever achieves complete understanding, the intrinsic good is never realised in it – or at least is only partially realised.

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55 ἢ τε λεγομένη αὐτάρκεια περὶ τὴν θεωρητικὴν μάλιστα· ἂν εἴη· τῶν μὲν γὰρ πρὸς τὸ ζῆν ἀναγκαίων καὶ σοφὸς καὶ δίκαιος καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ δέονται, τοῖς δὲ τοιούτοις ἰκανῶς κεχορηγημένων ὁ μὲν δίκαιος δεῖται πρὸς οὐδὲ δικαιπραγήσει καὶ μεθ' ὧν, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ ὁ σώφρων καὶ ὁ ἀνδρεῖος καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστος, ὁ δὲ σοφὸς καὶ καθ' αὐτὸν ὧν δύναται θεωρεῖν, καὶ ὅσω ἂν σοφώτερος ᾖ, μᾶλλον· βέλτιον δ' ἴσως συνεργοὺς ἔχων, ἀλλ' ὅμως αὐταρκέστατος.

It should not be surprising, then, that dialectic is particularly good for helping in this latter kind of collaboration. A dialectical examination, conducted correctly, can provide somebody with the important insight that they didn't understand something they thought they did. This won't necessarily show them how to gain understanding of the thing in question, but it will help them to develop their own understanding of it. Notice that the person who benefits here is the one who is acting as an answerer, and that all that is required for the benefit is for them to answer as best they can according to their own beliefs.

For these reasons philosophers were well advised to become dialecticians as well. An ability at arguing dialectically was important for maintaining one's reputation as an intellectual, which constituted an important addition to a philosopher's life. And it was important for completely participating in a philosophical community. But if I'm right and being subjected to dialectical examination was the main way participation in dialectic helped one develop as a philosopher, then one's exercise of particularly dialectical skills was primarily a service one provided to others; it was in answering as oneself that one gained the most helpful insights for one's own research.

## 5. Conclusion

Aristotle's dialecticians were willing to argue fallaciously. Grote portrayed them as vigorous, even bloodthirsty, arguers. Owen portrayed them as paragons of philosophically good behaviour. They were neither: Aristotle's dialecticians were experts at arguing with other people one-on-one. They preferred arguing honestly, but could argue dishonestly as well. Above all, they were proud collaborators in intellectual activity: collaborators, because in general their role was to examine somebody's claim to know or understand something; proud, because they were concerned for their own reputation, and wouldn't hesitate to thoroughly thrash an opponent who tried to make them look stupid with dishonest arguments by resorting to dishonest arguments themselves. Dialecticians were not primarily intellectual duelists, but they wouldn't back down when somebody's behaviour in an argument necessitated calling for seconds.

There's something somewhat street-wise about Aristotle's dialecticians which Aristotle's philosophers could lack. A philosopher was simply somebody who was pursuing the grandest and most important truths – they needn't be able to help others understand them or show others that they had. As Aristotle pointed out, they could be relatively helpless in argument; since they were slow and unable to pander to the crowd in solving sophisms, they may not have enjoyed a reputation for their wisdom.<sup>56</sup> Further, they may not have been able to step outside their own perspective enough to subject others to examination and make obvious another person's lack of understanding.

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<sup>56</sup> In this sense at least, Aristotle appears to have higher hopes for dialecticians than Plato did. In the philosophical digression in the 7th letter, Plato states that philosophers can be made to look ridiculous in a dialectical situation, when they are defending the truth – but the philosophers he has in mind are of course, according to him, first rate dialecticians. Plato thought that they were simply struggling against the inadequacy of language. But Aristotle thinks that dialecticians should be able to solve fallacious objections to the satisfaction of their audience. Aristotle probably thought the philosophers Plato imagined were getting walked over by dialecticians because it was harder to defend a false than a true position. This point is from *Menn 1994*, which provides a very interesting discussion of the relationship between Aristotle and Plato on these issues.

*Topics I–VII* was aimed both at dialecticians as dialecticians, and at philosophers as philosophers. Since dialecticians were primarily interested in arguing honestly, most of the advice in these books, particularly that which pertains to the search for a location, can be interpreted as sound advice for philosophers, perhaps particularly those engaged in inquiry. Some of it cannot, and wasn't intended as such; it was advice for dialecticians reaching for pistols. It is not at all clear that any of *Topics VIII* was intended for philosophers. While it is safe to use, with an appropriate level of scepticism, *Topics I–VII* for insight into Aristotle's philosophical method, and sometimes even to determine where he stood on various philosophical issues, it is not sound practice to use *Topics VIII* for these purposes.<sup>57</sup>

It is possible to discern in this contrast between the philosopher and the dialectician criticism towards Aristotle's more dialectically oriented teacher, Plato. In distinguishing the dialectician and the philosopher, Aristotle criticizes Plato for failing to see that ability at dialectical jousting was neither necessary nor sufficient for being a philosopher. But in the portrayal of the dialectician as a first-rate intellectual collaborator, there is, one might hope, also a hint of gratitude.

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<sup>57</sup> None of this is to say that Aristotle actually *articulates* philosophical positions in the *Topics*

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