Lesson Twenty-Six
The Dialectical Syllogism

Selections from Aristotle’s *Topics*
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Our treatise proposes to find a line of inquiry whereby we shall be able to reason from opinions that are probable about every problem propounded to us, and also shall ourselves, when standing up to an argument, avoid saying anything that will obstruct us. First, then, we must say what syllogism is, and what its varieties are, in order to grasp the dialectical syllogism: for this is the object of our search in the treatise before us.

Now the syllogism is an argument in which, certain things being laid down, something other than these necessarily comes about through them. (a) It is a ‘demonstration,’ when the premises from which the syllogism starts are true and primary, or are such that our knowledge of them has originally come through premises which are primary and true; (b) syllogism, on the other hand, is ‘dialectical,’ if it reasons from opinions that are probable. Things are ‘true’ and ‘primary’ which are believed on the strength not of anything else but of themselves: for in regard to the first principles of science it is improper to ask any further for the why and wherefore of them; each of the first principles should command belief in and by itself. On the other hand, those opinions are ‘probable’ which are accepted by everyone or by the majority or by the philosophers – i.e., by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and illustrious of them.

Next in order after the foregoing, we must say for how many and for what purposes the treatise is useful. They are three – intellectual training, casual encounters, and the philosophical sciences. That it is useful as a training is obvious on the face of it. The possession of a plan of inquiry will enable us more easily to argue about the subject proposed. For purposes of casual encounters, it is useful because when we have counted up the opinions held by most people, we shall meet them on the ground not of other people’s convictions but of their own, while we shift the ground of any argument that they appear to us to state unsoundly. For the study of the philosophical sciences it is useful, because the ability to raise searching difficulties on both sides of a subject will make us detect more easily the truth and error about the several points that arise. It has a further use in relation to the ultimate bases of the principles used in the several sciences. For it is impossible to discuss them at all from the principles proper to the particular science in hand, seeing that the principles are prior to everything else: it is through the opinions generally held on the particular points that these have to be discussed, and this task belongs properly, or most appropriately, to dialectic: for dialectic is a process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries.

Definitions

dialectical syllogism – a syllogism that gives us opinion.
probable opinion – a statement accepted by all, by most, or by the wise; a statement accepted by all of the wise, or by most of the wise, or the wisest.
dialectical tool – method for finding the premises of the dialectical syllogism.

Lesson

Modern interpreters of Aristotle often find fault with the method he follows in his philosophical treatises. Since Aristotle was the first to define demonstration, they expect him always to proceed demonstratively. However, as he clearly states above, while demonstration...
may be the most perfect method in itself, it is not always the best way to begin within a given discipline. In the *Topics*, Aristotle presents a less rigorous method of proceeding, a method which Plato called dialectic. In this lesson we will examine the basic features of Aristotle’s dialectic.

Before we continue, however, we should see what the word *dialectic* means. *Dialectic* comes from the Greek *diálektos*, which means “discussion.” Dialectic is a way of reasoning through the *give and take* of conversation. But Aristotle defines it more formally, as we shall see below.

**The Definition of Dialectic**

According to Aristotle, dialectic in the strict sense is a kind of syllogism. We saw before that demonstration was also a syllogism, but these two kinds of syllogism differ according to what they produce. Demonstration gives us certain knowledge, but a dialectical syllogism only gives us an opinion. In fact we can define dialectic as a syllogism that gives us opinion.

What does Aristotle mean when he says that dialectic gives us opinion? Suppose we held that bad men should not govern, and suppose we also held that the majority of men are bad. One might then syllogize to the opinion that democracy is a bad form of government:

- No bad men should govern.
- Every majority is made of bad men.
- Therefore, no majority should govern.

*If no majority should govern, democracy is a bad form of government.*

Therefore, democracy is a bad form of government.

We might not have realized before, but our original opinions would force us to hold this new opinion. By the use of a dialectical syllogism, our opponent has, from our old opinions, produced a new opinion in our mind.

When Aristotle further defines demonstration, he argues that its premises must be first and true. In a parallel way, he argues here that, in order for the dialectical syllogism to produce opinion, its premises must be probable. A statement is probable when it is believed by all men, by most men, or by the wise, and among the wise, either by all, by most, or by the wisest of the wise. For example, all men hold the opinion that two physical objects cannot be in the same place at the same time, though few of them can give a reason for this; most men believe in God, though some do not; and finally, the wisest of the wise believe that happiness is contemplation. To varying degrees, then, all of these opinions are probable.

We should notice that, in contrast to the premises of demonstrations, probable opinions can contradict each other. For example, most men think happiness is pleasure, while the wise think it is contemplation. Since two contradictory opinions can each be probable, though for different reasons, the dialectician can always argue both sides of a question. This is the key to understanding the uses of dialectic.
The Uses of Dialectic

Compared to demonstration, dialectic might seem useless, since it cannot give us certain knowledge. Aristotle points out, however, that dialectic can perform certain functions that demonstration cannot. Demonstration always reasons from what is true and better known, and so it cannot argue for both sides of a point. But a debater must argue both sides of a point. Dialectic, then, is more useful than demonstration for debate and other forms of intellectual training.

Next, in casual conversation, people often fail to grasp first principles. Since we cannot use demonstration in these cases, we must use dialectic. For example, most educated men in our day speak as if they were moral relativists. But moral relativism is really a denial of the first principle of ethics, the universal nature of the human good. So the moralist cannot demonstrate any truth to a modern man; he must argue with him dialectically.

Finally, dialectic has two uses within philosophy. First, dialectic helps us to consider both sides of a difficult question. For example, when Aristotle tries to figure out whether time really exists outside the mind, he argues both sides of the question before he determines the truth. The dialectical consideration prepares the way for demonstration. Second, dialectic can be used to clarify first principles. As we have seen, we cannot demonstrate first principles. In fact, we seem often to assent to them in a rather indistinct way, and sometimes even to misunderstand them. But we can clarify the meanings of first principles by disputing them with dialectic. For example, the moral philosopher can use dialectic to manifest that the absolute nature of the good for man is implicit in every moral judgment.

The dialectical syllogism, then, has three important uses: intellectual training, casual conversation, and philosophical clarification. Because of the importance of these uses, it is important to touch on the nature of the dialectical syllogism, even in an introduction to logic.

Exercises

Exercise 1: Give brief answers to the following questions.

1. What is the difference between the demonstrative and the dialectical syllogism?

2. What makes a statement probable?

3. Why is it that the conclusions of dialectical syllogisms can contradict each other? Does this apply to demonstrative syllogisms?

4. What are the uses of the dialectical syllogism?

5. Why is dialectic important to philosophy, when only demonstration gives us certain knowledge?

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