



Dialectic: Not Just a Game for Schoolboys

James M. Tallmon, Ph.D.

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Boethius' *De topicis differentiis*ⁱ (*De topicis*) contributes a great deal to the attempts by modern rhetoricians to revive some semblance of a *topoi* system.ⁱⁱ As I make clear in these pages, Boethian doctrine on topical logic is indispensable when it comes to those practical judgments with which we are faced nearly every hour of every day. In the process of fleshing out that doctrine, Boethius juxtaposes rhetorical with dialectical topics such that he uniquely maps the crossroads of rhetoric and dialectic. "[I]n order best to define and situate rhetoric," notes Chaim Perelman in the opening lines of *The Realm of Rhetoric*, we must "clarify its relationship to dialectic."ⁱⁱⁱ The academic's interest in understanding the relation of dialectic to rhetoric is eclipsed by Richard M. Weaver's trenchant comment that, "In the restored man dialectic and rhetoric will go along hand in hand as the regime of the human faculties intended that they should do."^{iv} If the regime of human faculties are designed such that rhetoric and dialectic walk hand in hand, students and teachers of rhetoric will certainly benefit from understanding Boethius on the matter! But also, in the realm of public affairs, where rhetoric thrives, those invested in the restoration of civil discourse will find useful these observations from Boethius' *De topicis differentiis*.

Finally, it is this author's hope that *De topicis* will enjoy a place amongst rhetorical scholars on par with that of Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy* amongst philosophers. Indeed, *De topicis* contributes to efforts to restore to a place of centrality in both theory and practice, rhetorical invention or inquiry or rhetorical reason (see rhetoricring.com's "Rhetorical Reasoning" page). Following is a thumbnail sketch of Boethius's formulation of dialectic, and a discussion of the implications for understanding the relation of dialectic to rhetoric derived from that sketch.

Unpacking Dialectic in Boethius's *De topicis differentiis*

De topicis differentiis was written sometime before 523 and was the last in a distinguished line of works by Boethius on various dimensions of logic.^v Boethius clearly states his purpose from the outset: to provide an abundance of arguments and differentiate between dialectical and rhetorical topics. Hence his title: *De topicis differentiis*. Boethius further states that his is a general philosophical examination of the argumentative function of topics, geared for the learned and not a primer on topics; dialectical nor rhetorical. Perhaps the strongest evidence for *De topicis*' philosophical nature is the sheer volume of

meticulous distinctions over which Boethius broods. Four of those distinctions are especially germane, given present purposes: (1) between argument and argumentation, (2) between *propositum* and *causa*, (3) between opinion and truth, and, finally, (4) between the following four disciplines: dialectician, orator, philosopher, and sophist. A brief consideration of these particular distinctions will take us deep into matters dialectical.

After his brief introductory gloss of the differences between a proposition, a question, and a conclusion, Boethius draws a distinction that serves as an axis to divide the first two books:

Argument and argumentation are not the same ... for the sense (*vis sententiae*) and the reason enclosed in discourse (*oratio*) when something [that was] uncertain is demonstrated is called the argument; but the expression (*elocutio*) of the argument is called the argumentation. So the argument is the strength (*virtus*), mental content (*mens*), and sense of argumentation; argumentation, on the other hand, is the unfolding of the argument by means of discourse (*oratio*) (1173D 22-30).

Book I examines the substance, parts, uses, and kinds of argument. Book II begins with a similar handling of argumentation and then lists and explicates the Aristotelian Topics. Boethius's treatment of argument in Book I has an important bearing on this study because of the distinctions he draws between two other notions: Two types of questions and four types of arguments.

After asserting that a question is a "proposition in doubt," Boethius explains and exemplifies both kinds of question:

One is that called 'thesis' by the [Greek] dialecticians. This is the kind of question which asks about and discusses things stripped of relation to other circumstances; it is the sort of question dialecticians most frequently dispute about--for example, 'Is pleasure the greatest good?' [or] 'Should one marry?' By us, this sort of question is called 'proposal' (*propositum*). The other kind of question the Greeks call 'hypothesis,' and we call 'case' (*causa*). This sort is a question involving persons, times, deeds, and other circumstances ..." (1177C 1-1177D 10).

The most fundamental difference between dialectic and rhetoric is the concern of the former with general questions and of the latter with situated questions. Boethius's distinction between *propositum* and *causa*, is important later in the treatise when he compares rhetorical topics to dialectical. It is of more immediate importance to us because Boethius establishes the broad parameters by which we may identify the special *provinces* of dialectic and rhetoric. That is not to say that rhetoric and dialectic never overlap; the very spirit of an examination such as *De topicis* highlights their common ground. However, dividing (with a permeable skin) rhetoric and dialectic in terms of relative abstractness and case-centeredness is a productive move. Boethius's *propositum/causa* division is grounded in the axiom that one must not insist on more precision than the nature of the subject admits. In other words, abstraction is suitable for treating some questions, but not all. Boethius advances another four-part division (for various species of argument) in observance of another important axiom: One must, likewise, not assert more **certainty** than the nature of the subject admits. Some questions admit of a high degree of probability; others do not.

Boethius categorizes arguments as either: "readily believable and necessary, readily believable and not necessary, necessary but not readily believable, or neither readily believable nor necessary." That is, some arguments are positive in nature (such as geometric proofs) while others are only probably true, based on opinion. Boethius views probable truth as no less true than the necessarily true. It is a different kind of truth than the truth that entails fact, to be sure, but truth nonetheless. One important role of opinion (non-necessary truth) is to reveal the limits of necessary truth. In other words, only a limited number of issues can be discussed in terms of causality, while many important questions are fundamentally contingent; they admit of variables and must therefore be approached differently than questions of fact. Such is, for example, the traditional justification for distinguishing between Natural and Moral Philosophy.^{vi} One could, then, understand Boethius's four categories in terms of a positive/contingent dichotomy and, under each side, include both "readily believable" and "not readily believable" arguments.

The four kinds of argument ultimately serve as *differentiae* for the various species of the artisans of argumentative discourse: dialectician, orator, philosopher, and sophist.

The dialectician and the orator occupy themselves with a kind of argument common to them both, for each of them aims at arguments that are readily believable whether they are necessary or not. ... The philosopher and demonstrator investigate only truth alone; and it makes no difference whether the arguments are readily believable or not, provided they are necessary (1181C 15-1182A 30).

Boethius asserts that the dialectician and the orator are concerned alike with matters contingent; with opinion. As we noted above, dialecticians investigate abstractions and rhetoricians argue specific cases. Boethius ascribes the label “philosopher” to the artisan who, like the dialectician, investigates general questions; but the philosopher (in Boethius’s particular usage) investigates necessary arguments. The philosopher investigates the first principles of science and the “demonstrator” documents specific cases of first principles in action. In one sense, the orator and the demonstrator practice allied arts; in another, they are worlds apart. The orator uses topics to invent arguments; the demonstrator describes phenomena. The orator argues for a judgment on a specific moral case; the demonstrator renders facts relevant to particular scientific propositions. So then, the dialectician and the orator employ mostly arguments that are readily believable; the philosopher and demonstrator employ only necessary arguments and the sophist employs what is “not even rightly called an argument.” Sophistry is utterly discounted; dismissed as bankrupt “art.” Boethius concludes Book I:

So the usefulness and purpose of the Topics have both been made clear, for they aid both competence in speech and the investigation of truth. Insofar as knowledge of the Topics serves the dialecticians and orators, it provides an abundance [of materials] for speech (*oratio*) by means of the discovery [of arguments]; on the other hand, insofar as it teaches philosophers about the topics of necessary [arguments], it points out in a certain way the path of truth (1182C 22-28).

Another way of expressing all that has been said above is that contingent matters call for invention; positive matters call for demonstration. The former employs artistic and inartistic proof, the latter demonstrative proof alone. As Aristotle expresses it, “Dialectic is merely **critical** where philosophy claims to **know**.” These various divisions and relationships are best illustrated by means of a diagram:

	POSITIVE	CONTINGENT	
	-science-	-opinion-	
	(necessary truth)	(probable truth)	
(abstract)	philosopher	dialectician	<i>(propositum)</i>
(specific)	demonstrator	orator	<i>(causa)</i>

The diagram serves to arrange and illustrate Boethius's doctrine. It also functions, as models often do, to suggest how that doctrine may entail some oversimplification. As soon as we advance for consideration any model its limitations leap forth and demand attention. The four classifications are too tidy; too symmetrical. Surely philosophers do much more than investigate abstract scientific theses. Surely orators have occasion to use demonstrative proofs.

Dialectic similarly defies such narrow bracketing and, despite their differences, all four disciplines share an identical mode of reasoning: dialectical inference. Thus, to confine dialectic to a method of disputing general and contingent questions is to understand only one facet of dialectic and to use the word in a too narrow sense. Although Boethius gives the impression that he holds an oversimplified view of dialectic, the problem may have more to do with the trajectory of his treatise than with his understanding of dialectic, per se. This is a problem similar to the one teachers of rhetoric face regarding the ambiguities surrounding the word "rhetoric." When, for example, one refers to an individual's rhetoric, one could be referring either to a rhetorical artifact or to a treatise on rhetoric. The word permits both meanings. How else then can the word "dialectic" be understood? Boethius clearly defers to Aristotle's authority in such matters, so, like him, to Aristotle we shall turn.

Aristotle on Dialectical Reasoning: A Robust Conception

Aristotle's *Topics* is explicitly concerned with formalizing the first set of rules for disputations and the label, "dialectician" is ascribed almost exclusively to competitors in mental gymnastics. However, a close reading of the text discloses how carefully Aristotle distinguishes between the spirit of competition and the spirit of inquiry; between argument in service of individual moral growth and argument as a game.^{vii} Aristotle's final exhortation to the would-be disputant indicates a view that

transcends mere competition: “Moreover, as contributing to knowledge and to philosophic wisdom the power of discerning and holding in one view the results of either of two hypotheses is no mean instrument; for it only remains to make a right choice of one of them.”^{viii} Since virtue “is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107a) dialectic, insofar as it provides clarity in deliberations, contributes a great deal to moral growth. No mean instrument, indeed! This distinction, between dialectical disputation and dialectical inquiry, obtains throughout Aristotle's *Topics*.

Dialectic may also be understood as “A process of criticism wherein lies the path to the principles of all inquiries.”^{ix} In other words, dialectic is a process of **criticism**; not merely a tool for **discovery**. This distinction is important because the focus of Boethius's *De topicis* promotes viewing dialectic exclusively as a means of discovering arguments. The practice of dialectical disputation is indeed concerned largely with discovering arguments, but, insofar as it is a process of criticism, dialectic serves as well as a test for truth. Understanding the Socratic method helps illuminate how dialectic functions as a test for truth.

Dialectic is exemplified by the Socratic method, though its methodology, in characteristic Platonic subtlety, is not explicated. Plato either veiled the method or assumed his readership's familiarity with it. Whatever the case, reflecting on the Socratic *modus operandi* reveals a three-step process: He always begins with a proposition, pushes it to its conclusion, drawing out implications by means of question and answer, and applies the law of contradiction. The law of contradiction is later explicated by Aristotle in *Metaphysics, 1011b* when he writes, “The most undisputable of all beliefs is that contradictory statements are not at the same time true.” The law of contradiction is a statement about the manner in which the mind operates during the meaning-making process and it is at the operational core of dialectical reasoning.

Let us take, for example, the case of a wife of a man with a terminal heart condition. The particular situation that I have in mind was such that the husband was being kept alive on a ventilator, but the vent tube bothered him so much that he had to be heavily sedated. The doctors had tried unsuccessfully to wean him from the ventilator on a prior occasion, which precipitated cardiac arrest.

Now, the attending physician explained, the wife had to decide whether or not she wanted to leave her husband in a heavily sedated (and incoherent) state to prolong his life, or allow him to live a few days in a state where he could communicate with his family. Her response to the physician is telling, and is based on an implicit dialectical distinction, one that helps illustrate how the law of contradiction works. After some deliberation, with her son, she concluded that, if her husband could speak for himself, he would choose to be removed from the ventilator and the sedation because "he's not really living, he's just existing." Implicit in the distinction, is the premise that, for her husband, living entails the capacity to communicate with family, and that state of being which incapacitates one to such an extent is more like existing than living. In other words, merely existing contradicts the husband's likely preference for and understanding of life. So, the law of contradiction informs choice-making by "holding in one view the results of either of two hypotheses." It only remained for the wife to make a right choice of one of them.

The above analysis underscores both how dialectic may be understood as a test for truth, founded on the law of contradiction, and how it serves as a guide in moral deliberations. Given this context, consider the following passage:

The means whereby we are to become well supplied with reasonings are four: (1) the securing of propositions; (2) the power to distinguish in how many senses a particular expression is used; (3) the discovery of the differences of things; (4) the investigation of likeness.^x

The first means above, "the securing of propositions," epitomizes the function of dialectic as a test for truth. Propositions are not secured during the course of disputation; they should be secured prior to argument. A proposition is dialectically secured when it passes the muster of the "most undisputable of all beliefs": the law of contradiction. Therefore, the mental operation of securing propositions by checking for contradictions is dialectic reduced to its purest function. But what about dialectic in its pure essence?

A profitable way to grasp the essence of dialectic is to understand it in relation to demonstrative reasoning. In the *Topics*, Aristotle refers to deduction simply as "Reasoning." Deduction works by means of inference. So, for example, a synonym for deduction is "syllogistic logic," and syllogistic logic

is also known as “mediate inference.” Now is not the time to fully explicate a notion as complex as mediate inference. Happily, however, in the process of demarcating four types of inference, Aristotle establishes the scope of dialectical reasoning by distinguishing it from demonstrative. Attending to this move in Aristotle will complete the account of dialectic which informs the analysis which follows.

Aristotle’s four types of inference are: (1) the **philosopheme** which is a demonstrative inference, (2) the **epichireme** which is a dialectical inference, (3) the **sophism** which is a contentious inference, and (4) the **aporem** which is an inference that reasons dialectically to a contradiction.^{xi} Note how Aristotle’s four classifications of inference imply that reasoning other than demonstrative is either dialectical or contentious. Although Aristotle identifies four types of inference there are, then, only two modes of inference: demonstrative and dialectical. The former employs hypothetico-deductive reasoning; the latter is informal.

Now reasoning is prior to disputation. Disputation requires two competitors; reasoning can, and most often does, take place in the mind of the individual. Dialectical reasoning (as a mode of inquiry rather than as a method of disputation) operates in both instances because, in the final analysis, the human mind works by philosopheme and epichireme. No wonder dialectic is so elusive; in its essence, it is a nearly unintelligible concept—cloaked in the mystery of meaning-making. The manner in which human beings intuit is the end of the intellectual road.

As the above analysis shows, Book I covers all the necessary ground before embarking on Boethius's philosophical examination of the role of topics in various kinds of argument. That is, in Book I, Boethius explicates foundational distinctions: Between argument and argumentation, between *propositum* and *causa*, between opinion and truth and, finally, between the four disciplines derived from the genera of arguments: dialectician, orator, philosopher/demonstrator, and sophist. All these distinctions notwithstanding, Boethius’s focus on dialectical disputation does give the impression that he holds a simplistic view of dialectic (i.e., merely as a tool for disputants). Hence, I turned to Aristotle to ferret out a more robust conception of dialectic (one that is likely presupposed by Boethius). But, of course, I have not yet sufficiently supported the claim that Boethius presupposes an Aristotelian conception of dialectic. Given present purposes, that support is critical, because, Boethius's view of

dialectic colors his treatment of rhetorical topics in Book IV. This is so because rhetoric and dialectic, as was established at the outset, are best understood relative to one another.

As noted above, Book II distinguishes argumentation from the conception of argument developed in Book I. Argumentation is defined as “the unfolding of an argument by means of discourse (*oratio*).” Boethius then subdivides argumentation into syllogism and induction with their counterparts; enthymeme and example. Boethius makes a telling point at the conclusion of that movement.

All these are drawn from the syllogism and obtain their force from the syllogism. For whether it is an enthymeme, induction, or example, it takes its force as well as the belief [it produces] most of all from the syllogism; and this is shown in Aristotle’s *Prior Analytics*, which we translated. So it suffices to discuss the syllogism which is, as it were, principal and inclusive of the other species of argumentation (1184D 7-1185A 15).

The earlier analysis of Aristotle’s conception of “Reasoning” applies equally as well to Boethius’s conception of “Syllogism.” What Aristotle calls Reasoning, Boethius calls Syllogism and both view this concept as the essence of inference, hence “principal and inclusive of the other species of argumentation.” Boethius draws understanding from Aristotle on the nature of deduction, inference and therefore, also the nature of dialectic. This suggests that Boethius did view dialectic as more than a method of disputation, but that his concern with argumentation committed him to the line of inquiry that he follows unwaveringly throughout *De topicis*. The remainder of Books II and III involve Boethius’s development of topical doctrine. In Book IV he returns to the relationship of dialectical to rhetorical topics and, in order to study rhetorical topics, he extenuates the divisions established in Book I. “Every difference between these [disciplines] consists in matter, use, or end . . . In *matter*, because thesis and hypothesis are the matter put under the two of them. In *use*, because one disputes by question, the other by unbroken discourse . . . In *end*, because one attempts to persuade a judge, the other attempts to wrest what it wants from the opponent” (1206C 9-1206D 16). Boethius has prepared the student to fully grasp the doctrine of rhetorical topics expounded in Book IV.

Dialectic and Rhetoric in Book IV

Beyond the fact that, in Book IV, the provinces of dialectical versus rhetorical topics are fully established, Boethius's final narrative seems to subordinate rhetoric to dialectic.

For as the disciplines are distinguished from one another by the universality [of the one] and the particularity [of the other], so also their Topics differ in range and restriction, because the range of dialectical Topics is greater. ... So the rhetorician always proceeds from dialectical Topics, but the dialectician can be content with his own Topics. For since a rhetorician draws cases from circumstances, he takes arguments from the same circumstances; but these must be confirmed by the universal and simple, namely the dialectical [Topics]. The dialectician, on the other hand, is prior and has no need of anything posterior ... (1215D 13-1216A 27).

The range of dialectical topics is greater and, by virtue of their universality, they serve to confirm rhetorical topics. This raises certain questions of relative status. Since Boethius conceives of dialectic as logically prior to rhetoric, it seems to follow that Boethius grants dialectic superiority over rhetoric. Martha Nussbaum offers a counterpoint.

Nussbaum posits, in "Priority of the Particular" (1990) that "Aristotle's defense of the priority of 'perception,' together with his insistence that practical wisdom cannot be a systematic science concerned throughout with universal and general principles, is evidently a defense of the priority of concrete situational judgments of a more informal and intuitive kind to any such system" (66). Boethius goes on to close Book IV by returning to the differentia articulated earlier: the general/specific dichotomy.

So in dialectical Topics, arguments are taken from, say, the genus, that is, from the very nature of genus. But in rhetorical Topics, arguments are taken from the particular genus which is the genus at issue ... The dialectician [discovers arguments] from similarity; the rhetorician, from a similar, that is, from the thing which takes on similarity. In the same way, the former [discovers arguments] from contrariety; the latter from a contrary (1216A 31-1216B 18).

Boethius concludes his treatise with a pleasing sense of aesthetic unity, painting a very organic picture of the relationship between dialectic and rhetoric, that clearly demarcates the special provinces of each. What is more, Boethius illuminates how, as antistrophes, dialectic and rhetoric work “hand in hand,” to guide practical judgments; one being superior in neither function nor scope. Boethius asserts that, “Each investigates its own material but takes up that of the other so that the matter depends on the discipline more suited to it”^{1205D 24}. They are parallel faculties and coequal.

Boethius’ *De topicis differentiis* introduces an element of systematicity to the approach to shared moral inquiry that benefits the classically educated schoolboy well beyond the traditional aims of learning disputation. *HOW* dialectic and rhetoric operate, in tandem, to guide practical judgments is taken up in the next chapter, “A Grammar of Rhetorical Reason.” One may well ask, further, on what basis one has confidence that those premises secured by means of such a subtle “instrument” are actually valid? In short, what sort of rigor is derived from the combined operation of dialectical and rhetorical reasoning? It does little good to have a methodology for rendering moral judgments if the methodology lacks rigor. Rigor in the moral arena is not a simple matter. The question of rigor is fully discussed in the chapter entitled, “Toward an Ethics of Rhetoric.”

Notes

ⁱ Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (c. 480-525).

ⁱⁱ See, for example: Michael Leff, “The Topics of Argumentative Invention in Latin Rhetorical Theory From Cicero to Boethius,” *Rhetorica* 1(Spring 1983): 23-44; “Boethius’ *De differentiis topicis*, Book IV” in James J. Murphy, ed., *Medieval Eloquence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 3-24; and “Boethius and the History of Medieval Rhetoric,” *Central States Speech Journal* 25 (Summer 1974): 135-141.

ⁱⁱⁱ Chaim Perelman, *The Realm of Rhetoric*, trans. William Kluback (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982): 1.

^{iv} Richard M. Weaver, “The Cultural Role of Rhetoric,” *Language Is Sermonic*, eds., Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland and Ralph T. Eubanks, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970) 184.

^v For an excellent paleographic treatment of the manuscript see Eleonore Stump's introduction. (All references to *De topicis* are from Stump's translation and will hereafter be cited in the text by section number.)

^{vi} The distinction between the natural and moral realms is pertinent here because it is motivated by the same phenomenology as the positive/contingent dichotomy with which we are presently concerned. The realm of nature is the realm of cause and effect; the moral realm is the realm of choice, of personness. One must be cautious with these terms, however, because moral philosophy, means different things at different times. The Nineteenth Century moral geometers, for example, take as "philosophy" the application of hypothetico-deductive modes of inquiry which many contemporary theorists view as misapplied. In other words, the moral geometers exemplify the tendency to conflate causation and freedom in the name of universality and internal consistency. This is what I mean by "asserting more necessity than the nature of the subject admits."

^{vii} See especially *Topics*, Book VIII, Chapters 5 and 11.

^{viii} Aristotle, *Topics* trans. W. D. Ross, eds. Robert M. Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler *The Great Books of the Western World*, vol 8 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952):163^b 9.

^{ix} *Topics*, 101^b 4.

^x *Topics*, 105a 10 .

^{xi} *Topics*, 162^a 15-19.