

Marta Spranzi. *The Art of Dialectic between Dialogue and Rhetoric: The Aristotelian Tradition.*

Controversies 9. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011. xii + 239 pp. \$158. ISBN: 978-90-272-1889-6.

Marta Spranzi situates her project at “the crossroads” of important questions for those of us generally interested in the history of a philosophical tradition and for those of us specifically interested in dialectic (1). Aristotle’s *Topics* also sits at the crossroads. This early work of Aristotle’s is both conceptual (books 1 and 8) and technical (books 2–7). Spranzi focuses on the legacy of books 1 and 8, although one must know the topics in order for her analysis of the “invisible thread” of Aristotelian tradition to be meaningful (2). This thread, to which she refers thrice in her introduction, affords the structural metaphor of “the tightly knit character of a tradition of thought,” wherein her role is to follow the thread that weaves texts, and their authors, into a tradition (4). Spranzi is admirably candid about which texts and which authors she selects, and why: I wish she were more self-conscious about her own narrative authority, however, which is after all the occasion for her book. Her central argument (developed over seven chapters) is that the *Topics* gives rise to two kinds of Aristotelian dialectic, namely the disputational and the aporetic, where the former consists of a normative disputation between two interlocutors and the latter an open-ended examination of views that could be held by a single thinker. While Aristotle’s aporetic method takes opposing views as intrinsically plausible and examines them without necessarily resolving the aporia, aporetic dialectic examines whether the opposing views can withstand debate

and “can be both a preparatory step as well as a by-product” of disputational dialectic (21).

The opening chapter lays out Spranzi’s basic premise about two dialectics even as it argues, by way of the *endoxa*, for a stronger epistemological purpose than has been attributed to dialectical reasoning. Since dialectic is the science of discourse, *endoxa* should be understood as authoritative because they are held by the majority of people or by experts, and thus *endoxa* should be translated as “reputable opinions” rather than “probabilities” (as some interpreters do). The second chapter, devoted to Cicero, Boethius, and the Scholastics, is less coherent, though no less learned, and serves as my opportunity to note that Spranzi organizes the chapters into units. These give the book an encyclopedic usefulness; here, however, they call attention to “the tenuous thread” through Scholastic dialectic, and they occasionally diffuse the narrative thrust of the book (53). Chapter 2 brought to mind Walter Ong’s earlier claims in *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* (1958) and leads me to suspect Spranzi is in secret dialogue with him.

This is most obvious in the next section, really the heart of the book: chapter 4 is devoted to Rudolph Agricola and chapter 5 to Agostino Nifo. Chapter 3 introduces this section as a concise apologia that mischaracterizes Ong’s project in a single quotation in order to align Petrus Ramus with Scholasticism, even as Spranzi acknowledges the blurry contours of Renaissance dialectic (63). Would it not be better to say Ong was teasing a different thread in the fabric of dialectic? Is it not that traditions of thought depend in some measure on the historian’s narrative and textual selections? For Ong, Agricola’s notion of the topics enable Ramus’s visualized dialectic, which leads to a decay of dialogue; for Spranzi, Agricola’s notion of the topics enable the humanist rhetoricized dialectic, which revivifies dialogue. Using Spranzi’s own terms of analysis, moreover, I could easily imagine Nifo developing Agricola’s invention in the direction of disputational dialectic and Ramus developing it in the direction of aporetic dialectic. Early on, Spranzi promises that “the important question” for studying the tradition is not about correct interpretations but about how interpreters understood the text (5). I agree. By the end of this important section, however, Nifo is “fundamentally faithful to Aristotle’s own approach to dialectic,” which perhaps explains why she does not engage Ong. His work complements hers and enriches the terms of her title.

The final two chapters discuss Renaissance literary dialogues and contemporary argumentation theory as extensions of the Aristotelian tradition by way of a short conclusion about the enduring importance of dialectical explorations of truth and the conditions under which these occur. Spranzi makes a convincing case for the two dialectical conditions — the disputational and the aporetic — within Aristotle’s *Topics*.

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