

Philosophy Versus Majority Opinion: Epistemic Opposition

written by Tinay Mushdiyeva

The idea that philosophy can only be understood by a chosen few, instead of everyone, is not a novelty. Accordingly, the images of philosophers, depending on their time and place, have gone through all the transformation from the master living in the cave to a weird person bothering the people with his questions, from an ascetic dervish to reckless person living in a barrel, from a holy person in a temple to an asocial scoundrel. In these images, what makes philosophers different from the masses are their acquired knowledge through philosophy rather than their singularity in ethical, emotional, and other aspects. The singularity of philosophers is epistemic (conditioned by knowledge) in nature. In other words, “philosopher versus majority” (or “philosophy versus majority opinion,” which will be referred as PvE, meaning “*philosophia* versus *endoxa*” throughout the text) opposition lies in the epistemological dimension, that is, it is an epistemic opposition.[\[1\]](#) In this article, we are interested in the epistemic superiority of philosophy against majority opinion. By making the epistemic dimension our starting point, we want to demonstrate that the PvE opposition, in essence, is the opposition between justified and unjustified opinions.

For this, we will refer to the ancient Greek philosophy, or to be more precise, to Aristotelian dialectic. We believe that the ancient Greek philosophy had a rich tradition in the PvE opposition of which epistemic character had been vividly expressed. In this regard, Aristotle’s service is more interesting. Aristotle not only examines the theoretical aspects of Socratic dialectic, which were written down by Plato, but also changes the arrogant view towards “majority opinion” by raising it to a new status. In his *Topics*, we see that “majority opinion” (*endoxa*) became an important factor

for philosophical thinking and is presented in a certain theoretical framework, which, in turn, opened a new phase in the Greek philosophy.

For the ancient thinking in which philosophy was considered to be in the top of the hierarchy of sciences, the PvE opposition is not so surprising. The status of contemporary philosophy as well as the questions that it engages with are very different from those of the ancient Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, the PvE opposition (though not in the same scale as it was in the ancient Greeks) is not a rare phenomenon in today's discussions. While one of our aims in addressing the Aristotle's dialectical dispute method is to present a model that sheds light on the contemporary contours of the PvE opposition, our other goal is to invite us to question and think about our individual and co-thinking behavior in our society.

Majority Opinion – *Endoxa*

As mentioned above, we will refer to the Aristotelian dialectic, to his *Topics*, to explain the PvE opposition. Before explaining the concept of *endoxa* presented here, let us briefly summarize the Socrates method (*elenchos*). For the dialectical method presented by Aristotle in *Topics* was based on Socrates's question-and-answer technique. *Topics* is Aristotle's theoretical refraction of the routine *elenchos* games at Plato Academy. Aristotle analyzes these game-disputes in terms of logic, as well as provides strategic guides for success in such disputes (books I and VII). At the same time, based on majority opinion he enumerates the possible argument patterns (*topoi* – place) that can be used in these disputes (books II-VII).

The Socrates method (*elenchos*), as we have seen, is a question-and-answer based method used by Socrates in disputes. Two people participate in the question-and-answer game, the questioner and the interlocutor, the party that answers the

questions with “yes” and “no.” The goal is to “seek the truth” in the subject of discussion. Technically, an opinion raised at the beginning of the dialogue is either denied or confirmed.[\[ii\]](#) This opinion is usually an opinion that is shared by majority of people rather than any scientific provision. In Aristotle’s term, an opinion accepted by majority is called *endoxa*. Aristotle defines *exdoxa* in the following way: “Those are *acceptable* [*exdoxa*], on the other hand, which seem so to everyone, or to most people, or to the wise – to all of them, or to most, or to the most famous and esteemed.”[\[iii\]](#)

What we see here is that the criterion for the definition of *endoxa*, that is, majority opinion is the reputation (1) and the ranking of this reputation based on the quantity and quality of those who accept it (2). This means that *endoxa* is not a random opinion. To be considered as *endoxa*, an opinion needs to have some degree of social esteem and weight. In the above-mentioned situation, we see that this social esteem is ranked with “or” by a number of different instances. Here the opposed poles are majority opinion and expert opinion. If the first sign of *endoxa* is its been accepted by everybody, its last sign is its been accepted by the most esteemed experts. That is, majority opinion and expert opinion are defined as criteria that compensate each other. If one opinion is poorly accepted by experts, it must have at least a public support to be considered *endoxa*. And vice versa: if an opinion that is considered *endoxa* is not accepted by majority, then it must be supported at least by experts. Only opinions that fulfill these requirements may be discussed in a dialectical dispute. That is, the opinions (positions, themes), which are included in the dialectic dispute, are first filtered. Otherwise, these opinions are not worthy of being analyzed in a dialectical dispute. But what is the reason (and consequence) of this selection?

Types of Syllogism and the Specificity of Dialectic Syllogism

Aristotle does not explain the reason behind the criteria of *endoxa*. However, if we focus on what has been written about the types of syllogisms in *Topics*, we will have some degree of clarity on the reasons for this selection practice.

Aristotle believes that a research process is organized in deductions [iv] (*sullogismos*). Deductions, in a way, are some of the units of the research process. Therefore, deduction is such an argument that if the premise [v] (proposition, assumption) is given, then it is as a matter of fact that something different from this premise will necessarily be produced. [vi] Aristotle divides deductions into three parts: **scientific** deduction, **dialectic** deduction, and **eristic** deduction.

The differences in deductions are the quality of their premises. The premises of the scientific deduction are true and original sentences, or sentences derived from true and original sentences. That is, they are either the axioms or the proven sentences in science. The dialectic deduction, on the other hand, is a result of *endoxa*. The difference is that the persuasiveness of true and original sentences comes from themselves, not from other sentences. There is no need to ask "why" question for these sentences since they are self-persuasive. [vii] For *endoxa*, which is the premise of dialectical deductions, there is no such epistemological insurance. *Endoxa* is an opinion that can be questioned since it is not self-persuasive. Another type of deduction is the eristic deduction. Eristic deduction differs from the other two types in terms of the quality of its premises. The premises of eristic arguments or the logical connection between them is based on a deceptive relationship: "A *contentious* [eristic] deduction is one from what appears to be acceptable but is not, or an apparent deduction from what is actually or only apparently acceptable." [viii]

That is, the eristic deduction is a deceptive deduction. There are three things that are deceptive about it: **the premises**

look like *endoxa* although they are not. Even though conclusions from them are logical, they are unacceptable for a dialectical dispute (1). **Their premises are *endoxa*; however, they produce wrong conclusions,** which, nevertheless, are presented as true conclusions (2). **Neither their premises are *endoxa*, not the conclusions from them are logically correct** (3).

Hence, the dialectic argument takes a specific position between the scientific argument and the eristic argument. Selective approach to *endoxa* as the premise of the dialectical argument is to prevent the involvement of eristic premises into dialectical disputes. As Aristotle emphasizes, “for not everything which appears to be acceptable actually is so.”[\[ix\]](#) That is, the goal is to distinguish opinions that are worthy of discussing from opinions that are not worthy of discussion. For it is an epistemic priority (privilege) to be discussed as *endoxa*.

In a dialectical dispute – in the question-and-answer game we have described above – the premises that have been accepted as *exdoxa* can be accepted or rejected. If accepted, this lead them to be acknowledged as true premises for deductions as well as to be included in the list of esteemed *endoxa*. However, this does not mean that the validity of this *endoxa* cannot be disputed again. For instance, we want to use the opinion that “vaccination causes autism” as a premise in a dialectical dispute. First, we need to verify whether this opinion is *endoxa*. Let us assume that this opinion is shared by majority, that is, the majority of people believes that vaccination causes autism. Simultaneously, let us assume that experts denied this opinion, namely, that the opinion shared by experts is that “vaccination does not cause autism.” According to the definition of *endoxa*, both the first and the second opinions are considered *endoxa*. In this case, we are faced with two conflicting *endoxa*. A dialectical dispute must accept only one of them. As a result, the opinion that has been proven to be accurate dismisses the other as *endoxa* until

it is denied by such a dialectical dispute. That is, an opinion that is considered *endoxa* can eventually lose that status by verification. Until that, the opinion remains to be considered as *endoxa*. By doing so, it also become difficult to present opinions as *endoxa* by using eristic tricks even though they are not. It is pointless to use an opinion as *endoxa* in a dialectical dispute when it is not accepted by majority or experts. For example, the opinion that “Philosophy is mysticism” (or “mysticism is philosophy”) is one of the disqualified opinions since it is neither supported by majority, nor experts.

Dialectic Dispute and the PvE Opposition

What are our basis for comparing the PvE opposition with the dialectical dispute model in *Topics*? What are some common and comparable things between the PvE opposition and the dialectic dispute model? How can we say that Aristotle’s dialectic dispute model is based on the PvE opposition? If we want to seek the evidence in *Topics*, we can first see it in the explanation of the difference between the dialectical argument and the scientific argument at the beginning of the text. We discussed this difference in the previous section. It is clear from the general context of Aristotle’s philosophy as well as the certain part of *Topics* that the scientific deduction is far superior to the dialectical deduction.[\[x\]](#) On the other hand, when Aristotle enumerates the areas in which the dialectical method can be beneficial, in *Topics*, he clearly distinguishes majority (*polloi*) and encounters (communication) from philosophy. The dialectical dispute method is useful for three things: **exercise** (1), **encounters with majority** (2) and **philosophy or philosophical sciences** (3). Let us look at the relevant section in *Topics*:

“Next in order after what we have said would be to state the number and kinds of things our study is useful for. There are, then, three of these: exercise, encounters and the philosophical science. Now, that it is useful in relation to

exercise is obvious at once, for if we have a method we shall be able more easily to attract whatever is proposed. And it is useful in relation to encounters because, once we have reckoned up the opinions of the public, we shall speak to them, not from the beliefs of others, but from their own beliefs, changing their minds about anything they may seem to us not to have stated well. It is useful in relation to the philosophical science because if we have the ability to go through the difficulties of either side we shall more readily discern the true as well as the false in any subject.”[\[xi\]](#)

Moreover, we know that, unlike Plato, philosophy in Aristotle is not verbal. In Plato’s philosophy, under the influence of the Socratic tradition, verbal form is transformed into written texts. In Plato’s dialogues, philosophy is staged, that is, a fictional place is created for its verbal form. Philosophy, even if it is already written, is given in the format of conversation (interpersonal) among characters. In Aristotle, however, this commitment to verbal format is broken. According to Aristotle, philosophy is not connected to dialogue, and it also should be written. The dialectical disputes presented in the *Topics*, nevertheless, is conditioned by a live conversation. That is, here the guides for question-answer games are intended for live rather than fictional conversations. This puts the dialectical method, at least under the condition that the premises are *endoxa* as well as due to its “second benefit” (encounters), against philosophy, which, in turn, justifies the PvE opposition. Primavesi explains this with reference to Aubenque:

But the opposite is true: in Plato sometimes we can see the conversation of spirit with itself; In Aristotle, however, “dialectic” indeed depends on real conversations.[\[xii\]](#)

... therefore, [dialectic] is contrarily presented by Aristotle as something opposite to philosophy...[\[xiii\]](#)

We did not randomly choose the term “opposition” for the PvE

conflict. First of all, "opposition" as a word has political connotations (mainly for the Azerbaijani readers). Accordingly, one side of this confrontation can be described as a "power." In this duality, it is clear which side is seen as "power" by Aristotle. Philosophy, which stands in the highest place in Aristotle's hierarchy of sciences, is "commanding" the other sciences and the sciences below philosophy are in its "service." That is, in this context, the rhetoric, which has a "power" or "government" connotation, is also not unknown to Aristotle. Our expression of "opposition," therefore, should not be considered irrelevant. But what are the conditions that ensure the position of "power" to philosophy in this opposition?

Elitism of Philosophy

The factor that ensures the power of philosophy in the PvE opposition is elitism of philosophy. Elite means a few and the best of all. That is, something that is (positively) different from the majority both quantitatively and qualitatively. Majority opinion, because it is the opinion of majority of people, is automatically ceases to be elitist (*quantitative factor*). Furthermore, according to Aristotle's ideas about humans and their cognitive capabilities, everyone cannot be good. Being good belongs to elite, that is, the minority. Now, let us see what is meant by the elitism of philosophy.

In order to know the meaning of philosophy (in the original: *philosophia*), it is necessary to look at the explanation of *sophia* (σοφία) described in *Metaphysics* by Aristotle. For *sophia* determines the meaning of philosophy. *Sophia*, which is a part of the word *philosophia*

1. covers as many things as possible
2. is difficult
3. requires more accurate knowledge
4. requires (high level of) explanation of reasons
5. should be conditioned as an end in itself (that is, a

science that is an end in itself is more *sophia* than a science that is used as a means for something else or for its results)

6. Those sciences, which are more superior and are more likely to command the others, are more *sophia* than sciences, which are more inferior and are more likely to serve to more superior sciences.

If we generalize these six conditions, we define three main aspects of *sophia* (and, thus, *philosophia*): **epistemic** aspect (1 and 4), **accessibility and communication** aspect (2 and 4), and **practical [power]** aspect (5 and 6).

The degree of *sophia* of a science depends on the intensity of all these aspects in that science. Sciences are hierarchically ranked in accordance with the degree of existence of *sophia*. Philosophy, according to Aristotle, has the most intense representation of these aspects; therefore, it stands on the top in the hierarchy of sciences. If, on the basis of these criteria of *sophia*, we put philosophy against *endoxa*, we can see that the PvE opposition is, in fact, is the opposition between the epistemic esteem and its opposite. That is, the opposition between justified and unjustified opinions. Here we also add the opposition between the dialectical deduction and the scientific deduction presented in *Topics*. If we recall the part in which the sequence of the benefits of the dialectic method is explained, the vectors of this opposition become obvious. Epistemic esteem is the basis of our questioning of the elitism of philosophy we have discussed above. The second (accessibility and communication aspect) and the third (practical [power] aspect) aspect of *sophia* may be interesting in terms of history (although we can also get some interesting results if we look at these aspects in the context of contemporary intellectual landscape). However, if we want to use Aristotle's dialectical dispute model to understand or interpret the contemporary PvE opposition, it is crucial to focus on the epistemic aspect.

“Dialectic conversation” as a Co-Thinking Model

Some may ask why should a model by the philosopher, who lived twenty-four centuries ago in a society that radically differs from ours, be interesting for us today?

It is not novelty that the topics, analysis tactics, and the concepts of the ancient Greek philosophy are not just used as a historical artifact in the contemporary philosophy. Return to the ancient Greek philosophy in many areas ranging from political philosophy to epistemology is due to the great argumentative potential of the ancient philosophy as well as the use of its concepts as models. For example, Jaakko Hintikka, a Finnish philosopher, argued in the presentation of Aristotle that the as a model Socratic method can be applied to epistemology, computer science among many others.[\[xiv\]](#) In political philosophy, Plato’s state concept is easily used against the defenders of epistocracy[\[xv\]](#) and so on.

The dialectical dispute method of Aristotle, based on the “Socratic question-and-answer” model, is a model that is of interest to think about our behavior in intellectual communications and disputes. We have touched on two things that can be important in this regard. One was the epistemic esteem of opinions to be used as a condition in a dispute while the other was the fact that this status should remain open to regular inspection. These two points may be a crucial impulse for our current situation where phenomena such as manipulation of public opinion and intellectual charlatanism become normal.

Another interesting aspect is Aristotle’s model of co-thinking, which is given in the case of dialectic debate. According to Aristotle, thinking is an activity that requires discipline and training. In the dialectical dispute method, these requirements are transformed from individual dimension to the collective one in which they are applied. For example, learning at Plato’s Academy was also a series of co-thinking

sessions in the form of dialectic dispute games. Let us remember three advantages of the dialectical method from *Topics*. The first benefit is identified as “for exercise.” The following statement that “its benefit as exercise is self-explanatory” is also interesting. As a reader, contrary to the claim, you may not find this benefit as self-explanatory. Primavesi states that since this part was also not self-explanatory for many researchers that it caused numerous (unnecessary) debates about whether dialectic method involves real or fictional (imaginative) dialogues.[\[xvi\]](#) The exercises mentioned here are about *gymnasia*. *Gymnasia* was the exercises of Aristotelian dialectical dispute method and it was also a methodical institution in itself. Unlike the above-mentioned other benefits of the dialectical method, the essence of the *gymnasia* is often forgotten since unlike the other two benefits (majority, philosophy and philosophical sciences), it is only known as a historical phenomenon.[\[xvii\]](#) Alexander of Aphrodisias describes these debate exercises as follows:

*This type of conversations was common in [the ancient Greeks], and they arranged most gatherings in this way; not, as it does today, using books (for such books did not exist then), but rather: First, a thesis was suggested, then they attacked this thesis and, thus, **trained** their ability to find arguments to attack. The aim was to either accept or reject the opinion under discussion on the basis of widely accepted premises.[\[xviii\]](#)*

Taking into all of the above-mentioned benefits consideration, this model of co-thinking covers the teaching (and generally, learning) area, the public discussions as well as the scientific activities. This also means that mental activity is arranged in a certain discipline rather than in a natural or unorderly rhythm in any areas, and the intellectual life of such a society will probably be similar to the Japanese garden rather than a jungle (1); the intellectual life of the society is not limited to the monologue-formed activities of individuals who differ from the masses due to their natural

mental power; in other words, it is not about “geniuses” and is not dependent on them (2); intellectual power is neither unconditional, not indefinite (3); and intellectual power is not personal (4).

This means that if we accept the PvE opposition as a project of co-thinking, the dialectic dispute model would not allow unjustified opinions to be(come) a power. On the one hand, opinions – *endoxa* – that can be a subject of the discussion should pass through a certain selection process, and their status as *endoxa* remains open for any verification in the future. On the other hand, given the rules of the dialectic method, we see that the struggle (and the opposition) is between justified and unjustified opinions, not between the persons (or groups of people) who expressed these opinions. The power of justified beliefs, because they have an epistemic esteem, is valid regardless of who uses them. This is the meaning behind out above-mentioned statement that intellectual power is not personal. Other premises of intellectual life, namely its being conditional and definite, also refer to the conditions of the dialectical method: intellectual power returns as *endoxa*, which is an opinion that, according to the rules of dialectic disputes, is always open to verification. Now, as a thought experiment, you can project these terms into our society. What do you see?

Conclusion

PvE is a confrontation with a certain tradition. The basic relationship of this confrontation can be characterized as opposition. Based on the analysis of the dialectical argument presented by Aristotle in his *Topics*, we have demonstrated that this is an opposition between justified and unjustified opinions. In Aristotle’s dialectical method, this opposition is presented in two formats. Let us name of a small and a big format. The first one we see in the definition of the premises of dialectical arguments – *endoxa*. In the criteria for the determining which opinions are *endoxa*, majority opinion and

opinion of experts are given as opposite poles which compensate each other. If there is not enough public support for an opinion to be accepted as *endoxa*, it can be substituted by an expert opinion. That is, in terms of quality, the power is given to the expert opinion. We can observe the second and largest format of the PvE opposition on several dimensions. One of them appears in the classification of argument types – deductions. In the explanation of this classification, the premises of scientific arguments are superior to the premises of dialectic argument (as well as the eristic argument) in terms of epistemic esteem. In addition, we can identify the PvE opposition in the fact that dialectic disputes are intended for verbal conversations. Based on this identification, dialectic (Aristotle's dialectic method) is put in opposition to philosophy. For philosophy is written while dialectic is verbal. The PvE opposition can be seen in the large format in the ranking of the three benefits of the dialectical method, where philosophy and philosophical sciences are clearly distinguished from other spheres.

Finally, by analyzing Aristotle's notion of *sophia* in his work *Metaphysics*, we can see that philosophy is different from other scientific fields because of its elitism. This elitism, in turn, is determined by the degree of epistemic esteem. Thus, the attitude of the opposition between philosophy and majority opinion in the PvE can also be determined by the degree of epistemic esteem. In other words, the PvE opposition is, in fact, an opposition between justified and unjustified opinions.

References

[i] We will explain later the reason behind our use of the word "opposition."

[ii] For more information, see: <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/az/azerbaijani-platonun-prot-aqor-dialogu-elenxos-metodu-haqqinda/>)

[\[iii\]](#) Aristotle, *Topics*, 100b 22-24

[\[iv\]](#) Deductions in the Aristotelian logic are not the same as the concept of deduction in the contemporary logic. For more information, see: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/#DiaArgArtDia> (3.2 Aristotelian Deductions and Modern Valid Arguments)

[\[v\]](#) Here we are talking about conditional sentences, that is, premises, which are part of syllogism. Thus, since it is a logical term, we will use the word “premise” throughout the text.

[\[vi\]](#) “A deduction is speech (logos) in which, certain things having been supposed, something different from those supposed results of necessity because of their being so.” (Prior Analytics I.2, 24b18–20)

[\[vii\]](#) We will not discuss the issue of exoticism and problematicity of the Aristotelian concept of scientific deduction for contemporary epistemology and logic. We mainly need this concept of scientific deduction in order to understand the specificity of the concept of dialectical deduction.

[\[viii\]](#) Aristotle, *Topics*, 100b 24-26

[\[ix\]](#) Ibid, 100b-101b 26-27

[\[x\]](#) The scientific deduction in Aristotle’s logic and his theory of science is a rather different concept from complex and contemporary logic and the theory of science. Therefore, in this article, we only enumerate “scientific deductions” in the classification of deductions without explaining it. For the purpose of this article, it suffices to know that the scientific deduction is more valuable than dialectical deductions.

[\[xi\]](#) Aristotle, *Topics*, 101a 25-37

[\[xii\]](#) Aubenque, P. (1970): "La Dialectique chez Aristote," *L'attualità della problematica aristotelica*, Padova, 6-8 April 1967, Padova (Studia aristotelica 3), 9-31,

[\[xiii\]](#) Primavesi, O. *Die Aristotelische Topik*, München, Beck 1996, p. 22

[\[xiv\]](#) For more information, see: Jaakko Hintikka, *Socratic Epistemology. Explorations of Knowledge-Seeking by Questioning*. Cambridge University Press, 2007

[\[xv\]](#) Urbinati, N. *Democracy Disfigured*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014

[\[xvi\]](#) Primavesi, O. *Die Aristotelische Topik*, München, Beck 1996, p. 22

[\[xvii\]](#) Ibid, p. 23

[\[xviii\]](#) Alexander Aphrodisias in Primavesi, O. *Die Aristotelische Topik*, München, Beck 1996, p. 23

Bibliography

Aristotle, *Topics* (Robin Smith), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2003

Aristoteles, *Metaphysik*, Rowohlt, 2007

Alexander Aphrodisias. *In Aristotelis Topicorum libros octo commentaria*. Reimer, 1891

Aubenque, P. (1970): „La Dialectique chez Aristote“, *L'attualità della problematica aristotelica*, Padova, 6-8 April 1967, Padova (Studia aristotelica 3)

Brunschwig, J. *Aristotle on Arguments without Winners or Losers*. In: Wissenschaftskolleg Jahrbuch. 1984/85

Grimaldi, W. M.A. *The Aristotelian Topics*. In: *Traditio* 14, 1-6

Hintikka, J. *Socratic Epistemology. Explorations of Knowledge-Seeking by Questioning*. Cambridge University Press, 2007

Hintikka, J. *Analyses of Aristotle*. Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004

Owen, G.E.L. (ed.) *Aristotle on Dialectic. The Topics*, Oxford University Press, 1968

Primavesi, O. *Die Aristotelische Topik*, München, Beck, 1996

Reeve, Ch.D.C. *Dialectic and Philosophy an Aristotle*. Oxford 1998

Rehn R. *Sprache und Dialektik in der Aristotelischen Philosophie*. B. R. Grüner, 2000

Schramm, M. *Die Prinzipien der Aristotelischen Logik*, K. G. Saur, 2004

Sintonen, M. (ed.) *Knowledge and Inquiry*. Rodopi, 1997

Urbinati, N. *Democracy Disfigured*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/#DiaArgArtDia>