

CHAPTER 2

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REASONABLE ARGUMENT BEFORE ARISTOTLE

The Roots of the Enthymeme

In an ideal world, where all men would be fully rationalist philosophers and scientific, absolute knowledge about reality obtainable, there would be no need for debate on the basis of reasonableness, and therefore, also from an Aristotelian point of view, no need for rhetoric. This is the — intended — bewildering conclusion of the following paradoxical argument by the Stoic philosopher Zeno, directed against the age-old rule that the two sides in a controversy should be heard before giving a verdict:

“Against the person who said ‘don’t give your verdict until you have heard both sides,’ Zeno argues as follows: the second speaker is not to be heard whether the first speaker proved their case (for then the inquiry is at an end), or they did not prove it (for this is tantamount to their not having appeared when summoned, or to their having responded to the summons with mere prattle). But either they proved their case or they did not. Therefore the second speaker is not to be heard.” (Plutarch, *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*, 1034 e)¹

This argument would be valid if the first speaker would be able to present a conclusive proof of his case, which in turn would be only possible if this proof would be based on true premises. So either the first speaker would prove his case conclusively, or he would prove nothing at all.

But Aristotle realized full well that the world and the people inhabiting it do not all conform to this ideal. He did, of course, agree with Zeno on the possibility of presenting a scientifically valid argument, which he reserved for discussion between philosophers in the form of the *apodeixis* or demonstration. At the same time he also acknowledged the fact that in reality most people’s intellectual capabilities are not up to following such argument, and that their capacity for cognition is limited. Statements made by individuals about the state of affairs in reality are generally not hard and fast, but can also prove to be otherwise. This observable fact implies that there is room for debate, for the exchange of arguments which do have a certain claim to validity and therefore can be qualified as reasonable. This point is well formulated by Burnyeat in his crucial treatment of the enthymeme in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*:

“Aristotle’s doctrine of the enthymeme embodies the claim that the clash of opposing arguments in deliberative and forensic gatherings is a positive expression of human reasonableness in a world where issues are complex and deciding them is difficult, because there really is something to be said on either side. As such, Aristotle’s doctrine is one of his greatest and most original achievements.” (Burnyeat 1996, 91)

¹ I quote this passage as it is presented by Burnyeat (1996, 88-91) and I follow his interpretation.

In this paper I would like to look at the history of reasonable argument in Greek literature before Aristotle, and especially at the uses of the word *enthymēma* and its cognates. Since Aristotle clearly uses the word in his *Rhetoric* while assuming its general usage and meaning known to his students (his primary audience: the members of his rhetoric classes), he thus proceeds from common usage to presenting a technical denotation of the word: he introduces it at *Rh.* 1354 a 11-16 without any further explanation. It seems relevant, therefore, to undertake this exercise.

1. REASONABLE ARGUMENT IN PRE-RHETORICAL CONTEXT

The area of operation for a reasonable argument has the following constituents: first of all, there has to be an issue about which there are opposing claims, but the conclusive proof of either claim can not be given by both parties involved. Then, the matter in question allows of being otherwise and, thirdly, both parties, or at least one if this party challenges an already existing claim made by the other, intend to make their case as strong as possible by showing that it stands to reason. Finally, the rhetorical situation is in most cases some kind of dicanic or deliberative gathering, like a court room or an assembly, but other situations of a more private character can be imagined as well.

An informative example is to be found in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, in the so-called 'trial scene'. Orestes has killed his mother Clytaemnestra as an act of revenge for her murdering his father Agamemnon. He, however, is beset by the Furies, the goddesses of revenge euphemistically known as the "Eumenides" or "Gracious Goddesses," but in order to put a stop to the endless repetition of blood revenge, the goddess Athena has the case tried before the Court of the Areopagus at Athens. There the god Apollo speaks for Orestes as his advocate, and as part of his argument he claims that Zeus, the Father of the gods, takes Orestes' side. At this the Chorus leader, one of the Eumenides, replies:

"You argue that Zeus gives preference to a father's rights.
But Zeus imprisoned his own old father, Cronus.
Your argument is surely contradictory."
(Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 640-642, tr. Douglas Young)

This passage is a good, early instance of rhetorical argument, and of reasonable argument specifically. First, it is an argument and therefore brief and short, not elaborately embellished by poetical means. Second, it entails two constituents later subsumed by Aristotle under the enthymeme, example and likelihood. Aeschylus has the Chorus leader draw on mythology: the story of Zeus deposing his father Cronus as master of the Olympus and putting him in chains while doing so. This reference to Zeus' past behavior is then used to show that Apollo's argument lacks credibility: is it really to be expected that Zeus will take the side of the father? On the basis of his past conduct this seems unlikely, and therefore Apollo's argument is inconsistent. Literally line 642 reads: "how do you say this not in a contradictory way to that?" The rhetorical question in the original text emphasizes the point made and warrants the translator's insertion of the assent-implying particle 'surely': it is not reasonable to assume that Apollo's claim is valid.

This argument became well known and was widely used in later Greek literature, so much so that Aristophanes could make fun of it in his comedy *Clouds*, where in the famous debate between the personified Just Discourse and Unjust Discourse it is used by Unjust Discourse. At this Just Discourse reacts with disgust and says: "Bah! This is enough to turn my stomach! A bucket, quick!"² The essential quality of this type of argument is that it provides the audience with a consideration, something to think about. In the process of deciding an issue one way or the other, this consideration constitutes a good, but not conclusive, reason to give preference to one of the opposed viewpoints.

Another informative example of reasonableness in argument is provided by Sophocles in his *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus has suspicions about Creon's loyalty to him and thinks that Creon wants to betray him and become king in his place. Again, the situation is typical: the issue can not be proven conclusively, and both sides have strong reasons to believe their viewpoint is the correct one. In responding to Oedipus' claim, Creon invites Oedipus to look into the matter rationally and give an account of it (*logon didonai*: the phraseology to become famous as Socrates' ideal of the scrutiny of values and notions held by an individual). His argument consists of a number of reasons why he would not want to become king: in his present position he enjoys all the benefits of equal high rank and power, but without the kingship's oppressive and disagreeable duties. All men have to pay their respects to him first in order to get a hearing by the king, he enjoys undisturbed sleep, freedom from onerous duties, and profitable honours. This enumeration he ends as follows:

"Why should I lose all this to become king?
A prudent mind is never traitorous."
(Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 659-600, tr. Thomas Gould)

The consideration given by Creon to Oedipus to think about is this: it is unlikely that a prudent man, someone who is "thinking well" (*kalôs phronôn*), would choose to jeopardize what he perceives to be his true good: it would be unreasonable for him to do so. Again, the rhetorical question emphasizes the point made (the original has an assent-suggesting particle to reinforce the effectiveness of the rhetorical device), and in this case even more so, because it is directed to Oedipus, who values prudence himself so strongly (see 550-552, 569-570, 626).

From a rhetorical text-genetic point of view one can see how the general consideration reached in the conclusion in this part of Creon's speech (583-602) functions as the basis for the enumeration of reasons which are given. All of them separately are an instance of the consideration applied to a specific state of affairs. Each of them exemplify a reasonable thought and can thus in the end lead to the conclusion — at least from the perspective of Creon — that Oedipus' assumption about his treachery is unlikely to be true.

Many more examples of this type of reasonable argument in pre-Aristotelian literature could be given, but for the present purposes this must suffice. The next step is to look at some examples of texts of a more specifically rhetorical character,

² Aristophanes, *Clouds* 904-907; for other instances of the Zeus/Cronus-argument see, e.g., Plato, *Euthyphro* 5 c; *Republic* 378 b; *Symposium* 295 c.

where we find the first instances of the word *enthymêma* referring in a technical, albeit pre-reflective, sense to reasonable argument. It is this category of texts which provide the direct precursors of Aristotle's enthymeme.

2. ENTHYMÊMATA AS 'CONSIDERATIONS'

During the first 50 years of the 4th century BC one can observe a lively polemic in Athens about the principles and aims of new ways of education, which were to replace the traditional ways and means of aristocratic education.³ Many intellectuals who styled themselves after the sophists as "masters of wisdom" took part in a highly competitive debate, each setting forth their ideas, often by presenting specimens of their kind of thinking in the form of speeches or other forms of discourse. The production of theoretical handbooks was not yet undertaken, but their exemplary works regularly contain passages of a theoretical nature, in which explanation of and reflection on principles and method is presented.⁴

An important representative of a group of teachers who claimed rhetoric as the ideal basis for education was Isocrates of Athens. He differed from most of the rhetoric-teachers primarily because his aim was to train pupils to become responsible members of civil society, well equipped to take an active part in the management of public affairs as politicians or in public life in general as literary men. This entailed a prolonged education, which aimed at the moral formation of the pupil and of training his capacities of thought and speech. In a model speech dedicated to the defense of Helen of Troy Isocrates formulates his programme as follows, urging teachers

"to search for the truth and to educate their associates (i.e. pupils) in connection with the activities regarding the government of the city and to train them in relation to the experience of these things, keeping in mind that it is much better to have reasonable opinions (*epieikôs doxazein*) about useful matters than precise knowledge (*akribôs epistasthai*) about matters of no use and to have a slight advantage in important matters rather than to excel greatly in matters of no importance and of no value to life." (Isocrates, *Helen*, 5, tr. A. Nehamas)

What interests us here is the opposition "reasonable opinion" vs. "precise knowledge," which for Isocrates epitomizes the struggle between, as he sees it, useless abstract philosophy and useful pragmatic rhetorical education. According to him the ideal of absolute knowledge (*epistêmê*) of useful matters, i.e. those that pertain to making choices in one's personal life or as member of a community, is unattainable. Therefore it is better to have the right opinions (*doxa*) about them than scientific knowledge of what is in this sense considered useless. As the adverb "reasonably" (*epieikôs*) here indicates — qualifying the verb "to form an opinion (*doxazein*)" —, these opinions are based upon what is probable (*eikos*). What is meant by this can be illustrated from another passage, where Isocrates explains his position further:

³ For the traditional education in Athens see Marrou (1948, 69-81).

⁴ See for this debate and its principal representatives Nehamas (1999); for a survey of pre-Aristotelian occurrences of *enthymêma* and its cognates see Grimaldi (1972, 69-82); Kraus (1994, Sp. 1201-2).

"For since it is not in the nature of man to attain a knowledge (*epistēmē*) by the possession of which we can know positively (*eidenai*) what we should do or what we should say, henceforth I hold that man to be wise (*sophos*) who is able by his opinions (*doxais*) to arrive in most cases (*hōs epi to polu*) at the best course, and I hold that man to be a philosopher (*philosophos*) who occupies himself with the studies from which he will most quickly gain that kind of insight (*phronēsis*)." (Isocrates, *Antidosis* 271, tr. G. Norlin, adapted)

Practical insight provides the correct guidance in life, and it is the result of the study of Isocratean education, which is based on rhetoric. The instrument of insight is opinion rather than knowledge and by this instrument one can manage effectively the particular situations and circumstances of practical life. It is the experience of these and a pragmatic analysis of them which provides one with an empirical "stock of knowledge"⁵ which informs one's opinion and which enables one to respond effectively to the requirements of any given situation. These responses or *kairoi* have features both temporally and spatially: they are governed by the notion of timeliness and a sense of measure. Both knowing when to respond and how, in a quantitative sense of knowing to find the right measure between too little and too much, are constituents of Isocrates' concept of *kairos*.⁶ However, also the *kairoi* are subject to epistemological restriction:

"...it is impossible to include them (i.e. *kairoi*) into knowing (*eidenai*), because in all occasions they elude our knowledge (*epistēmē*); but those who apply their intellect and are able to observe (*theōrein*) what is consequent in most cases (*to sumbainon hōs epi to polu*) will find them most often." (Isocrates, *Antidosis* 184, tr. G. Norlin, adapted)

Thus by observing what regularly happens as a consequence of something else one can gain insight in the laws of cause and effect, and this in turn provides one with a kind of prognostic capability by which one can react effectively in future occasions. The phraseology used, *to sumbainon hōs epi to polu*, indicates that what Isocrates is thinking of is the tackling of pragmatic problems with reasoning on the basis of probability. The acquired "stock of knowledge" is the source of arguments which can generate a reasonable consideration to decide on one's actions in any given circumstance. A typical example of this kind of "topical" (see below) reasoning can be found at the beginning (chs. 4-8) of Isocrates' speech *Areopagiticus*, where he urges the Athenians to be on their guard for future political problems and dangers, speaking at a time when Athens enjoys peace and prosperity. His claim may seem uncalled for in the present circumstances, but he substantiates his call for alertness by referring to history. One can observe, he says, that cities which think they are in the best circumstances adopt bad policies and that those that feel secure are in fact in danger. The reason for this is, that no good or evil visits mankind unmixed (a piece of traditional Greek wisdom) and that change of one's fortunes (*metabolē*) is always to be expected:

⁵ For the term "stock of knowledge," borrowed here from the sociology of knowledge, see Berger-Luckmann (1991, 56-60).

⁶ On Isocrates' concept of *kairos* see Bons (1996, 65-109).

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