The Medieval Reception of Aristotle’s *Topics*: A Pragmatic Account of Dialectical Argumentation?

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1 Background

At the beginning of his edition and French translation of Aristotle’s *Topics*, Jacques Brunschwig puts forth a number of discouraging remarks: this is not the text that consolidated Aristotle’s glory as a logician and as a philosopher; the text is too long and difficult to read; its composition is inorganic and tedious; and its content does not succeed to redeem its flaws. Nonetheless, Brunschwig goes on to explain the renewed interest in the text by the undeniable central role it plays in Aristotle’s logic and philosophy. In fact, there could not be a complete survey of Aristotle’s logic without an analysis of the *topoi*: the warrants of inferences and argumentations. Neither could there be a comprehensive survey of Aristotle’s philosophy without a study of the method for the discovery of scientific principles – the dialectic method that is analysed in the *Topics*. Furthermore, there could not be a complete account of the development of medieval logic without a study of the reception of the *Topics* in the medieval tradition. Notwithstanding, the medieval tradition of the *Topics* has been severely neglected in most of the recent studies on the history of medieval logic, to such an extent that our current picture of its development is drastically incomplete.

At present, the only comprehensive study on the medieval reception of the *Topics* is, to the best of our knowledge, Niels Joergen Green-Pedersen’s *The Tradition of the ‘Topics’ in the Middle Ages*. However, despite its great historical and philological value, Green-Pedersen’s study does not address the crossroads of philosophical questions involved in the medieval interpretation of the *Topics*. Moreover, the wide time frame that it covers – from the 5th to the 15th century – ineffectually results in a superficial analysis of the philosophical problems. Finally, it approaches the medieval tradition of the *Topics* from a different perspective than the one that we propose in our program, namely as a pragmatic analysis of dialectical argumentation whose immediate source is the Aristotelian treatise itself.

In his influential study on Aristotle’s syllogistics, Jan Lukasiewicz proposes Aristotle as the father of formal logic. This study, which considerably shaped a great number of modern readings of Aristotelian logic, proposes that Aristotle puts forth a formal system composed of logical variables, logical connectors and four primitive relations ranging over the domain of universal terms. In such a system, an argument’s validity depends on a set of inferential rules that allows the conclusion of a true proposition from true premises. The verification of the premises, in its turn, would depend on the signification of their universal terms. Nonetheless, this picture of Aristotelian logic faces a number of problems when it is confronted with the theory of *topoi* in the *Topics*, which has consequently been considered as a pre-analytical stage of Aristotle’s logic (a solution that, in passing, also presents a considerable number of problems).

This reading of Aristotle’s logic has not only influenced modern Aristotelian scholarship, but it has also considerably shaped our reading of its medieval reception. However, some recent studies have started to propose different approaches both to Aristotelian logic and to its medieval reception. With our study, we would like to join these efforts by proposing that there are medieval readings of the *Topics* putting forth a pragmatic analysis whose immediate source is the Aristotelian treatise itself.

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2 Research proposal

In very broad terms, in a pragmatic analysis argumentation is considered as a speech act whose informative value and internal structure are determined by the speaker’s intentions of communication and persuasion. The force of the argument is also grounded on the speaker’s choice of certain inferential warrants. This choice is determined by her intention of communication and of persuasion and not univocally by fixed logical rules. The choice of inferential warrants and of premises is admittedly constrained by a certain normativity, but it certainly depends on factors that go both beyond the mere semantic decoding and formal analysis of the premises and that also depend on the cognitive intentions of the interlocutors and on the particular context of the act of argumentation.

If there are indeed a number of studies that have unveiled substantial elements of pragmatics in medieval linguistic theories,4 no exhaustive study has aimed to show their systematic occurrence in a crucial aspect of the medieval reception of Aristotle’s logic. Consequently, in our study we intend to present: a) a study of the reception of Aristotle’s *Topics* from c. 1270 to c. 1330 – the golden period of its medieval reception; b) a pragmatic analysis of argumentation as our theoretical framework; and c) Aristotle himself as the immediate source of the medieval analyses. Our more general aim is to show that the pragmatic elements in Aristotle’s *Topics* and its medieval reception are a fundamental and highly neglected factor of the development of medieval logic. We also intend to show that this pragmatic reading generally does more justice to Aristotle’s logic than the traditional formal readings.

Consequently, we propose as a research hypothesis that central medieval interpretations of the *Topics* put forth analyses of the dialectical argumentation as a speech act where the inferential warrants and the syllogistic structure are chosen in accordance with the interlocutors’ intentions of communication and persuasion, as well as in accordance with the particular context of the argumentation. Moreover, we propose that crucial elements of Aristotle’s dialectical work justify this medieval approach.

It is natural to find elements of pragmatics in Aristotle’s *Topics*, since the main aim of his endeavor is the analysis of a public speech act – the dialectical exchange. Although the dialectical exchange is not entirely at the centre of the medieval commentaries on the *Topics*, we find many indications of pragmatic analyses of the text in central figures from the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries. We submit then that Radulphus Brito († 1320/21) and the fourteenth-century authors Walter Burley († 1344/5) and John Buridan († c.1360), put forth pragmatic analyses of the *Topics*, which to a great extent do justice to the Aristotelian treatise.

We have chosen three medieval commentaries on the *Topics* to be the leading thread of our research: the question commentaries by Radulphus Brito and by Walter Burley, as well as an anonymous commentary that was wrongly attributed to Robert Kilwardby († 1279). Brito is an evident choice, because: i) we already have good indications of his pragmatic analysis of Aristotle’s dialectics;5 ii) his extensive philosophical corpus is severely understudied, despite of his being a link of the utmost importance between thirteenth-century and fourteenth-century philosophical ideas; and iii) his logical work exerted a strong influence on the development of logic and philosophy of language in the early fourteenth-century. Walter Burley is also an evident choice: he is a central early fourteenth-century figure whose famous quarrels with William of Ockham put him at the centre of the emergence of fourteenth-century nominalism. Finally, the anonymous commentary, most likely produced in the first half of the thirteenth century, is fundamental for a proper understanding of the thirteenth-century commentary tradition before Brito and Burley.

Since these are highly unknown texts, we must first lay the basis of this research by: a) producing critical editions of these three commentaries; and b) determining the network of influences, forthwards and backwards, in the logical traditions of the thirteenth and the early fourteenth centuries. Thus, we shall determine the extent of the influence that the anonymous author exerted on Albert the Great, Boethius of Dacia and Radulphus Brito, as well as the extent of the one that Brito exerted on Walter Burley and on John Buridan. The exhaustive analyses of the dialectical argumentation in the commentaries by all these

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5See items 1, 9 and 23 in the list of publications
authors will thus reveal the larger picture of pragmatic approaches to dialectical argumentation in the medieval tradition of the *Topics*.

3  Methodology

Besides the palaeographical work of text edition, we aim to reconstruct the pragmatic analyses of dialectical argumentation that can be gathered from the aforementioned ancient and medieval treatises. This reconstruction will lead us to link notions which are not explicitly linked by the medieval authors and to ask them questions that they did not necessarily raise. However, when answering these questions, we will be careful to engage them with ancient and medieval theoretical tools. Since the ancient and medieval endeavors are inscribed in an oral context, we shall ask how a pragmatic analysis emerges in such contexts or, rather, we shall show that it is entirely natural that a pragmatic analysis emerges in them. Accordingly, we shall be mindful of the historical context to which these ancient and medieval treatises belong and we shall analyse the ancient and medieval accounts in terms that are compatible with their scholarly traditions. Our intention is to make accessible to contemporary readers these ancient and medieval linguistic accounts, underscoring at the same time the philosophical interest and relevance that they have in their own right.

4  Research Axes

The program is structured in three different, but simultaneous axes.

4.1  Philological Axe

As already mentioned, as fundamental as our analysis of the late medieval tradition of the *Topics*, is the production of critical editions of Radulphus Brito’s and of Walter Burley’s commentaries, and also of the anonymous commentary that was wrongly attributed to Robert Kilwardby.

The anonymous commentary is extant in 1 manuscript:

MS Firenze, BNC Conv. Soppr. B.4. 1618, ff. 95a–151b.

Brito’s commentary is extant in 6 manuscripts:

MS Bruxelles, BR 3540-47, ff. 196ra–277rb;
MS Erfurt, WAB Ampl. 4. 276, ff. 100ra–131rb;
MS Leipzig, UB 1363, ff. 120r–144r;
MS Paris, BNF lat. 11132, ff. 11ra–52ra; 11133, ff. 1ra–6rb;
MS Salamanca, BU 2350, ff. 198r–243r;
MS Wien, NB VPL 2319, ff. 55ra–72ra.\(^6\)

Burley’s commentary is extant in 5 manuscripts:

MS Cesena, B. Malatestiana S.X.2., ff. 118ra–248va;
MS London, Lambeth Palace 70, ff. 170ra–268 va;
MS Oxford, Merton College 295, ff. 1r–92r;

\(^6\)We have at our disposition partial transcriptions of B and P thanks to the generosity of N.J. Green-Pedersen.
MS Vatican, vat. lat. 2146, ff. 113ra–204va;

MS Wroclaw, BU IV. Q. 3, ff. 124r–174v.7

4.2 Doctrinal Axe 1. The Medieval Reception of the Topics

In the thirteenth-century logical tradition, the dialectical argumentation is grounded on dialectical topoi – inferential warrants of the transition from a set of premises to a conclusion. The dialectical topoi are further defined as general relations between things, e.g. of the genus to its species or of the species to its accidents or to its individuals. The discovery of these relations and their application to the terms of a premise allow the inference from the premises to the conclusion. Moreover, the choice of a dialectical topos demands cognitive approaches to the object of argumentation that go beyond the consideration of whatever that object is in itself. For instance, man is in itself a rational animal, but its considerations as species, individual, bearer of accidents, and so on, are different from and additional to the consideration of its essential features. In other words, the choice of a topos depends on certain considerations that go beyond the literal sense of a premise of which ‘man’ is a part. Furthermore, since the object of an argument is often susceptible of different cognitive approaches, we submit that the choice of one approach instead of another is determined by the intentions of communication and of persuasion of the interlocutors, as well as by their consideration of the context of argumentation.

Our study of the medieval reception of the Topics (c.1270–c.1330) will allow us to spell out the details of the medieval analyses and their different presentations by the aforementioned authors.

4.3 Doctrinal Axe 2. Aristotle as the Direct Source: Comparative Study with Aristotle’s Topics

We also submit that the medieval pragmatic analysis of dialectical argumentation can be sufficiently explained by a similar analysis in Aristotle. Hence, we aim to show that Aristotle’s Topics put forth a pragmatic analysis of the dialectical exchange that is the immediate source of the medieval one.

At least three reasons lead us to believe that Aristotle puts forth such analysis: a) for him the dialectical exchange is an act of linguistic communication (cf. Topics I.2); b) Aristotle takes into account intentional states in his analysis of the dialectical exchange, notably the intention of communication and of persuasion by means of arguments (cf. Topics I.2). Accordingly, the dialectical exchange is a speech act that has the following features. As regards the intention of communication:

* It is social – it is addressed to an interlocutor (cf. Topics I.2).

* It is public – Aristotle presupposes that the speaker’s intention of communication can be recognized by the interlocutor, even though some interlocutors may be better disposed to this task than others (cf. Topics I.12).

* It is consistent – it is not possible to intend to communicate p and non p at the same time (cf. Topics I.1).

As regards the intention of persuasion:

* It is the condition of satisfaction of the dialectical exchange.

* It is its cause.

* It is stable – it remains during the whole exchange.

* It determines the form of the argument – the disposition of the premises – and the choice of inferential warrants.

7We also have at our disposition a partial transcription of V provided by N.J. Green-Pedersen.
Finally, c) Aristotle is fully aware that terms have different uses in different situations and consequently provides the opponent with pragmatic ways of disambiguating the ambiguous uses of terms by the speaker (cf. *Topics* I.15 and I.18). This sketchy presentation of Aristotle’s pragmatic analysis shall be confirmed and exhaustively developed by the members of the program, alongside with their study of its medieval fortune.

5 Research Team

The work of text edition is substantially faster and better when it is a product of a collaborative work. Hence, three different scholars will be responsible for the production of the three aforementioned editions, but will collaborate constantly with each other, notably in the painstaking process of proofreading. The editorial work will take three years at most.

The scholars employed by the project will be expected to produce one doctrinal article per year during the edition stage and two articles per year during the last two years. As regards my own responsibilities, during the last two years I commit myself to the production of a substantial monograph about Aristotle’s account of dialectical argumentation and its late medieval fortune (c.1250–c.1330), from the angle of a pragmatic analysis of argumentation.

This work will undoubtedly be the first of its kind and hence groundbreaking with regard to the current state of research in the field both in subject-matter and in perspective.

Finally, the positions for young scholars – who ideally will have both philological and philosophical training – will be advertised nationally and internationally and will be attributed only on the basis of academic excellence. Ideally, one 4 years PhD position and two 2 years postdoc positions will be advertised. The creation of these positions is perfectly feasible, given that the Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science (FLoV) has agreed to cover all expenses of my own salary.

The research team will also benefit from the regular strategic advise and informed guidance of an advisory board that tentatively comprises five outstanding scholars who have produced groundbreaking research in the relevant fields:

- Iacopo Costa (Associate Researcher at CNRS (Paris/Poitiers); medieval philology and philosophy);
- Michel Crubellier (Em. Prof. at University of Lille; ancient philosophy);
- Catarina Dutilh Novaes (Associate Prof. at University of Groningen; medieval and contemporary logic and philosophy of language);
- Christophe Grellard (Prof. at Ecole Pratique d’Hautes Etudes (Paris); medieval epistemology);
- Costantino Marmo (Prof. at University of Bologna; medieval linguistics).

A meeting with the advisory board every one and a half year will be proposed, ideally overlapping with some of the scientific activities organized by the group. The scientific activities will involve two one-day workshops per year and two three-days symposia – one in the second year and one in the fourth year.

6 Research Environments

The research team will certainly benefit from the multidisciplinary environment of its hosting institution – the Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science (FLoV) at the University of Gothenburg, and most notably from a future collaboration with our colleagues doing research in logic and linguistics.

More importantly, the group will work in close collaboration with the international program *Representation and Reality*, of which I am at present a member, and which comprises three towering figures of
medieval and ancient scholarship: Prof. Sten Ebbesen (University of Copenhagen), Prof. Katerina Ierodia-akonou (Athens/Geneva/Gothenburg) and Doc. Christina Thomsen Thoernqvist (University of Gothenburg; leader). It is worth adding that I have worked under the mentorship of Prof. Ebbesen during the last six years and that the continuation of our close collaboration will be one of the greatest assets of the Topics-program.

Finally, the following scholars – with whom I have a successful history of past or present collaboration – have already manifested their interest in our program, either by participating in its scientific activities or by providing its members with access to their international research environments:

Joel Biard (prof.; medieval philosophy) and Aurélien Robert (associate researcher; medieval philo-sophy) from the Centre d’Etudes Supérieures sur la Rennaissance (CNRS–University of Tours);  

Julie Brumberg-Chaumont (associate researcher; medieval philosophy and philology) from the Laboratoire d’Etudes sur les Monothéismes (CNRS–Paris);

Paolo Crivelli (prof.; ancient philosophy) and Annamaria Schiaparelli (lecturer; ancient philosophy) from the University of Geneva;

Claude Lafleur (prof.; medieval philosophy and philology) from the University of Québec;

Leone Gazziero (associate researcher; ancient and medieval philosophy) from Savoir, Textes, Langage (CNRS–University of Lille);  

Sara Uckelman (lecturer; contemporary and medieval philosophy of language and logic) from Durham University.

7 Envisioned Development

The successful outcome of this research program will naturally lead us to raise the question whether this pragmatic analysis can be extended to other aspects of Aristotle’s logic and its medieval reception, not only to the obvious cases of the Categories, the De interpretatione and the Sophistical Refutations – texts whose fundamentally dialectical nature has already been pointed out by outstanding Aristotelian scholars – but also to the more intricate cases of the Prior and Posterior Analytics. Furthermore, the same question can be raised with respect to other traditions, such as the stoic, the neo-platonic and the islamic. Thus, a natural continuation of our program will be to test the application of the pragmatic theoretical framework to the most representative traditions of linguistic ideas from the ancient and medieval (Arabic, Greek and Latin) worlds.

Accordingly, in the long term I envision a larger research centre – exceptional in its multicultural and multidisciplinary character as well as in its theoretical approach – which will lead groundbreaking research in pragmatic approaches to ancient and medieval linguistic ideas. Such a centre will undoubtedly consolidate the already remarkable place of the University of Gothenburg among the international academic institutions for the study of ancient and medieval philosophy.

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8I was invited to participate in their 2014–2015 seminar on medieval psychology.
9I am currently involved in a project submitted by L. Gazziero about the history of accounts of signification.