Introduction*

Jakob L. Fink

Concerning dialectic, Plato and Aristotle might be thought to stand on each side of a very wide gap. To Plato, dialectic is the best means available to philosophy for reaching truth, whereas Aristotle seems to grant dialectic little more than the function of testing propositions and thus denies a direct access to philosophical insight through dialectic. However, even if this were an adequate description of Platonic and Aristotelian dialectic (and it hardly is), one question would remain: what happened in between, or in other words, how did the concept of dialectic develop from Plato to Aristotle? The present volume aims at giving some answers to this question.

The last four decades of scholarship in ancient philosophy have produced numerous investigations of dialectic concerned with Plato or Aristotle separately, but there has been virtually nothing on the development of dialectic *from* Plato *to* Aristotle. This is not only true in the English-speaking world, but holds for the last forty years of French and German scholarship as well. The remarkable essays in G.E.L. Owen's *Aristotle on Dialectic – the Topics* (1968), W.A. de Pater's *Les Topiques d'Aristote et la dialectique platonicienne* (1965), and the investigations of J. Stenzel, *Studien zur Entwicklung der platonischen Dialektik von Sokrates zu Aristoteles* (1931), are the most recent works which may be said to be concerned with the development of dialectic from Plato to Aristotle.[1] But even these studies do not cover all the aspects of the issue (nor do they claim to do so); they operate, rather, within a somewhat narrow conception of dialectic that is clearly reflected in the topics dealt with. The focus is primarily on methodology (dialectic and definition) and ontology (dialectic as concerned with forms, ideas or principles). Quite generally, one might say that these previous investigations place their emphasis on

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[1] Hambruch 1904, Kapp 1942, Sichirollo 1966, and the relevant articles in Berti 2008 should also be mentioned. Narcy 2000 and Dixsaut 2004 are both firmly rooted within the horizon of Owen, De Pater and Stenzel.

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dialectic as a *theoretical* issue and tone down the fact that ancient dialectic is also intended for *use* in an actual debate with a real interlocutor.

There are probably two main reasons for this. First, these studies all flow from the vein of developmentalism, which focuses on theory or doctrine as a natural starting point. Second, this neglect of the practical aspect of dialectic might stem from a predominantly modern concept of epistemology as concerned 'monologically' with the relation between knower and object (and less with the epistemology of two opposed claims to knowledge and their proponents, confronted in argument). Be this as it may, the focus on method and ontology has also left its mark on some of the most influential studies of Platonic and Aristotelian dialectic of the last century. In his *Plato's Earlier Dialectic*, Robinson is well aware of the problems posed by reading Plato's dialogues as evidence for a *theory* of dialectic; but, nevertheless, this is what he does in the main part of this seminal work.[2] Likewise, Vlastos in 'The Socratic elenchus' (1983) treats the logic of the elenchus and its methodological status largely in abstraction from the dialectical setting of the elenchus. Among Aristotelian scholars, Owen's 'Τιθέναι τὰ φαινόμενα' (1961) started the still-unsettled debate about the epistemic status of the premises in dialectical argument (the so-called ἔνδοξα), which in time turned into a problem about the role of dialectic in establishing the foundations of knowledge or science.

The contributors to the present volume do not abandon this interest in dialectical method or ontology. In the present context, however, dialectic means primarily argumentation directed at an interlocutor, or in the words of Aristotle: dialectic is argumentation πρὸς ἕτερον (*Top.* 8.1.155b7). The practice of dialectical argumentation and its extension into the literary form of the dialogue makes up the core of the present volume. The main part of this introduction is devoted to an outline of dialectic conceived primarily as question-and-answer argument.

DIALECTIC

The contributions are not concerned with questions about origin. Whether there was dialectic before Socrates (as the Ancients themselves seem to have believed), what it was like and how it took shape and evolved must be addressed at some other occasion.[3] In the context of the present volume,

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[2] Robinson 1953: 62.

[3] For the Eleatic Zeno as inventor (or discoverer) of dialectic, see Aristotle's *Sophist* (Fr. 65 R[3] = DL 8.57). For the rival candidate Protagoras, see DL 9.53. Wilpert 1956/57 has tried to sort out Aristotle's account
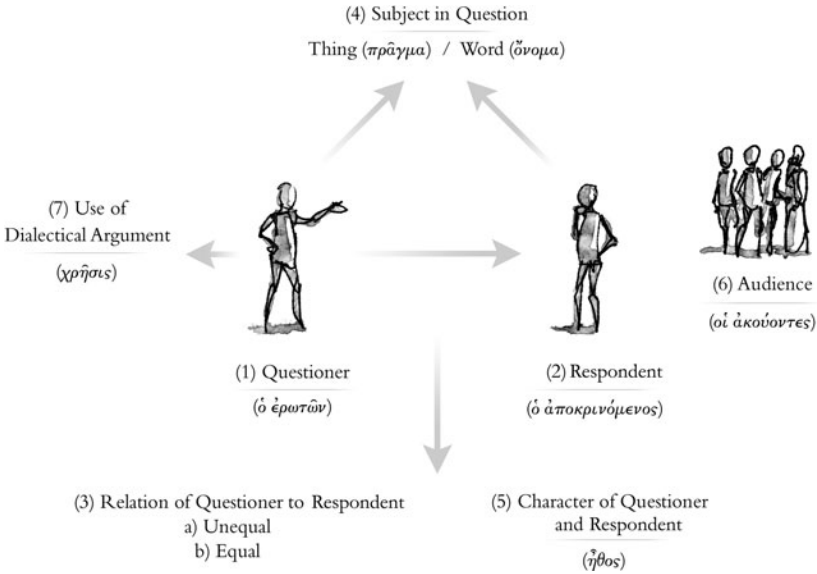
'dialectic' is a form of argument closely associated with the enigmatic figure of Socrates as depicted by Plato. The *Apology* contains the following outline of Socrates' manner of arguing (20c–23c): acting as questioner, Socrates enters into dialogue (διαλεγόμενος) for the sake of examining (ἐξέτασις) claims to knowledge elicited from a respondent, whom he scrutinizes in the elenchus (ἐλέγχειν). However, to Socrates, question-and-answer dialectic is as much a certain form of conducting one's life as it is a certain form of conducting an argument (*Ap.* 28e); and, according to the man himself, it is this dialectical 'business' that has brought him before the court to defend his life (*Ap.* 20c–d). The activity here described came to be designated διαλέγεσθαι (conducting a dialectical argument); and it is precisely this Socratic way of having an argument that might be said to bridge the apparent gap between the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of dialectic, since this 'business' of question and answer provides one basic, common feature in the dialectic of both. To Plato, as to Aristotle, the fundamental meaning of conducting a dialectical debate is captured by the Socratic notion of giving an account or taking one up for examination in question-and-answer form, i.e. λόγον δοῦναι / λαβεῖν (*Prt.* 336c–d, *Rep.* 7.531d–e; *Top.* 1.1.100a18–20, *SE* 1.165a24–8). It is as the heirs of Socratic dialectic that the Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of dialectic become comparable.

The illustration overleaf represents a general model of Socratic dialectic (πρὸς ἕτερον-argumentation). It is intended as a framework suitable to describe the development of dialectic from Plato to Aristotle; thus, it represents the common ground shared by both. The main characters are the questioner and the respondent (1–2). Every other element in the illustration (3–7) refers back to these in some way.

Each of the seven elements in this illustration appears in some form in Plato's depiction of dialectical argument (references will be given as we proceed). But the description of each element is primarily taken from Aristotle's *Topics* and *Sophistical Refutations*. In these writings, Aristotle seems to describe and refine a method of argumentation which he found, at least partly, in Plato's depiction of dialectic. The dialectical discussions in the Academy must, of course, also have been a source of inspiration to Aristotle; but presently we shall concentrate attention on the relation to Plato's dialogues. Obviously, the use of Aristotle's terminology to describe a *common* basis of dialectic involves the risk of misrepresenting Plato's dialectic or distorting the picture of development by viewing dialectic from the point of

of the origin and development of dialectic. Roughly speaking, the picture is this: Zeno of Elea 'invents' dialectic; Socrates, Plato and the Academy bring it forward; and Aristotle completes it. For reservations as to Zeno's role, see Dorion 2002: 200–8.

(4) Subject in Question

Thing (πρᾶγμα) / Word (ὄνομα)

(7) Use of
Dialectical Argument

(χρῆσις)

(6) Audience

(οἱ ἀκούοντες)

(1) Questioner

(ὁ ἐρωτῶν)

(2) Respondent

(ὁ ἀποκρινόμενος)

(3) Relation of Questioner to Respondent
a) Unequal
b) Equal

(5) Character of Questioner
and Respondent

(ἦθος)

Graphics by Martin Emborg

view of its final stage rather than from its beginning. Aristotle's categorizations of dialectical argument do indeed often seem to make explicit what is only implicit in Plato's depiction of dialectic; but even so, we shall try to steer clear of misrepresenting Plato by using Aristotle's categorizations mainly as a heuristic tool. The strength of the present procedure is that it provides the present investigation with a set of precise points of comparison. It cannot be completely neutral, but, as will become clear, Aristotle's terminology is surprisingly well suited to describe even the points on which Plato and Aristotle dissent considerably.

It might seem objectionable to draw on the *Sophistical Refutations* in a description of Socratic dialectic. Is dialectical argument not fair play, as opposed to the foul play of the sophists? Maybe so, but in the practice of question-and-answer argument, some interlocutors will inevitably use foul play. Thus, Plato tacitly and Aristotle openly insist that it belongs to the dialectician to know and be able to counter sophistical arguments (*Euthydemus, Sophist, SE* 11.172b5–8, *Rhet.* 1.1.1355b15–17).[4]

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[4] What follows is largely inspired by the accounts given by Brunschwig 1967: XXIX–XLV, Moraux 1968: 277–90, Slomkowski 1997: 9–42, Rapp & Wagner 2004: 11–18. The idea that Aristotle's dialectic is a useful guide to Plato's dialectic has been elaborated among others by Frede 1992 and, in particular, Bolton 1993.

(1) Questioner

The questioner must extract a thesis from the respondent and test or refute it by asking questions that will lead the respondent to grant premises from which the questioner may infer a contradiction of the thesis (see *Prt.* 349a7–d1). This argumentative activity of the questioner is called 'testing or refuting' (ἐλέγχειν), 'examining' (ἐξετάζειν), 'attacking' (ἐπιχειρεῖν), 'destroying' (ἀνασκευάζειν) the thesis of the respondent, or 'constructing' (κατασκευάζειν) a claim in case the respondent defends a negative thesis. All this corresponds to the Socratic notion of taking up an argument for examination, i.e. λόγον λαβεῖν (*Men.* 75d1–2). It is unclear how Plato would describe the logic of the arguments at the disposal of the questioner. He rarely mentions 'deductive argument' (συλλογισμός, *Tht.* 186d, *Ti.* 87c) and never uses 'induction' (ἐπαγωγή) in a logical sense.[5] In Aristotle's terminology, the questioner has these two types of argument at his disposal (*Top.* 1.12.105a10–12), and some of the forms of dialectical argument found in Plato; division (διαίρεσις) and the Socratic inference by analogy count, according to Aristotle, as special instances of συλλογισμός and ἐπαγωγή respectively (*An.Pr.* 1.31.46a32–3, *Rhet.* 2.20.1393a22–b8). Aristotle's broad definition of 'συλλογισμός' suggests that he thought of this as any valid argument (*Top.* 1.1.100a25–7). The logic of the dialectical συλλογισμός (*Top.* 1.1.100a29–30) and the epistemic achievement of the elenchus have been major matters of controversy for many years and there is still no general agreement among scholars as to how these problems should be solved.[6]

The question is the prevalent mode of speech in dialectic. It is the engine that drives the debate forward, with the answers acting like fuel, as it were.[7] There is, however, disagreement between Plato and Aristotle as to what sorts of question should count as genuine or legitimate dialectical questions. According to Aristotle, the question, 'What is X?' (which is typical of Socrates, as depicted in some of Plato's dialogues) is illegitimate in dialectic. One should not ask, 'What is virtue?', but rather offer a proposition, which may be answered by a yes or a no (*Top.* 8.2.158a14–22); for example, 'Can virtue be taught?' This dissent obviously indicates a change in the concept of

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[5] The absence of words does not mean that these dialectical manoeuvres were unfamiliar to Plato. For inductive arguments in particular, see Robinson 1953: 45–6.

[6] The logic of the dialectical συλλογισμός is interpreted (in connection with the interpretation of the τόπος) either as a *modus ponendo ponens* or *tollendo tollens*, Brunschwig 1967: XLI, i.e. as a hypothetical syllogism, or as a categorical syllogism, Schramm 2004: 133. For various positions on the Socratic elenchus, see the articles in Scott 2002.

[7] This metaphor is taken from a Danish commentary on Plato's *Smp.* See Olsen 2003: 10.

dialectic, but it does nothing to impede or challenge the common basis of dialectic in Plato and Aristotle.

The questioner has a set of different options at hand in posing his questions. Aristotle offers the following list: a questioner may introduce distinctions between the different meanings of the same term (*Top.* 8.2.157b2–7, *Prt.* 329c–d, *Men.* 74c); he may ask the respondent to provide a counterexample to a universal claim, which the respondent refuses to grant (*Top.* 8.2.157a34–5); he may censure the respondent if he does not abide by the rules of the debate, or he may even break off the argument (*Top.* 8.2.158a25–30, *Prt.* 335a–d, *Grg.* 461e–462a); finally, he may obtain premises which go beyond what is necessary for a deduction of the contradictory of the respondent's thesis (*Top.* 8.1.155b20–4). Such premises might serve to support one of the questioner's necessary premises by ensuring an induction of the universal, which might make the respondent accept the necessary premises more easily (*Men.* 72d–73c); or they might serve to prolong the argument in order to either confuse the respondent (e.g. by introducing irrelevant premises) or to conceal the conclusion the questioner is aiming at. Finally, these 'extra' premises may simply aim to make the argument clearer, e.g. by referring to examples, poetry, or analogies (*Prt.* 330a–b, *Lys.* 215c–d, *Rep.* 1.334a–b). It seems quite fair to think that a majority of these Aristotelian manoeuvres reflect the practice of dialectic as depicted in Plato's dialogues.

The premises offered by the questioner must be what Aristotle calls 'endoxic' premises (ἔνδοξα), which means that they must express claims that are acceptable either to all men, or to the majority, or to the wise (the majority of them or the most renowned) (*Top.* 1.1.100b21–3). This assertion might seem to conflict with the Platonic Socrates and his dismissal of 'what other people say' as irrelevant to dialectical argument (*Chrm.* 161b–c). On consideration, however, the arguments in the *Charmides* or *Laches* – as in most Platonic dialogues – are actually based on common assumptions about temperance or courage. Socrates' demand that his interlocutor should say what he means, then, might do no more than express the general point that a dialectical premise should be acceptable to the respondent. In fact, Aristotle's different types of ἔνδοξα probably correspond to different types of respondents. The dialectical problem, 'Is the earth made up of squares or triangles?', would not yield an endoxic thesis if offered to an ordinary man, since neither answer would be acceptable to either all or the majority of men (I presume). If posed, however, to a member of the Academy armed with the *Timaeus*, this problem might actually yield an endoxic thesis, at least insofar as members of the Academy might want to affirm that 'the world is made up of triangles'; i.e. this claim would be acceptable to a renowned group of philosophers. The

point of demanding endoxic premises as a constitutive element in a dialectical debate seems to be, then, that such a debate must take place on some shared ground of rationality. Dialectic will not debate claims that are in no need of argumentative support, or claims which no-one would find credible in some sense. The problem, 'Is arithmetic ambition or distraction?', only makes sense in the somewhat private rationality of Wonderland. Dialectic, however, is based on a common rationality in the world of men (see *Top.* 1.11.105a3–9). Even if it is confined to the realm of opinions, appearances, and controversy, dialectic is still based on minimum norms of rationality, such as a shared language and men's willingness to accept inferences or apparent inferences.

This requirement in regard to dialectical claims and premises gives rise to a delicate problem: must the questioner be committed to the claim he is striving to render victorious? And subsequent upon this, must the questioner have some positive knowledge to conduct the debate – and if so, what kind of knowledge? Whereas it seems clear in regard to Aristotle that both questioner and respondent might, depending on the type of dialectic pursued, dissociate themselves from the claims they are representing (*Top.* 8.5.159b27–35), it is disputed in regard to Plato whether the questioner (normally Socrates) must endorse the claims he brings to victory (if any) when subjecting a respondent to his elenchus.[8] The difficulties connected to this, obviously, have to do with the fact that Socrates persistently claims not to know anything or just small and trivial matters (for the inevitable exception, see e.g. *Smp.* 177d). Here is not the place to go any further into the much-debated topic of Socratic ignorance. Aristotle seems to allow for both a knowing and an ignorant questioner depending on the form of dialectic being conducted. In so-called peirastic dialectic, a questioner might be a non-specialist or even an ignorant (*SE* 11.172a21–7), and Aristotle may very well have Socrates in mind here (see *SE* 34.183a37-b8). But as a rule, the questioner in Aristotle's dialectic has quite a lot of knowledge, even if this is confined to the realm of δόξα (*Top.* 1.14.105b30–1). First of all, the dialectician knows *how* to argue, i.e. he knows a method (*Top.* 1.1.100a18–21); and he knows τόποι (see below), definitions, arguments (*Top.* 8.14.163b17–23), and ἔνδοξα (*Top.* 1.14.105a34–b18). Obviously, these problems greatly influence how one understands the epistemic status and achievement of not only dialectical arguments but also the proponents of dialectical arguments.

The idea that Aristotle describes a method which he found depicted in Plato's dialogues faces a problem in regard to a very central part of Aristotle's

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[8] Mann 2006: 116–17 with note 18 argues (summarily) against the claim that the 'say-what-you-mean' requirement is constitutive in Socrates' way of arguing. For the more traditional view, see Vlastos 1983: 38.

dialectic, the τόπος. It is unclear, and not terribly well researched, whether there is anything in Plato' depiction of Socrates that could count as argument by means of a τόπος.[9] The four predicables, which formally structure the classification of τόποι, might partly have been anticipated by the treatment of division (διαίρεσις) in Plato's dialogues; but the only other clear relation to Socrates seems to be that a τόπος is primarily useful for destroying or establishing definitions. Since, however, no-one has been able to show any clear line of development from Plato to Aristotle in regard to the τόπος, this will not be considered any further here.[10]

(2) Respondent

If the questioner must strive to deduce a contradiction of the respondent's thesis (or lead the respondent to hold a paradox or maintain a clearly false conclusion), the task of the respondent, on the other hand, is to solve (λύειν) the argument put forward by the questioner, or, if he cannot do so, at least hinder or block (κωλύειν) any conclusion so as to stand un-refuted (*Top.* 8.10.161a1–15). The most efficient way of solving or freeing oneself from a refutation is to point out why a premise of the argument is false or otherwise problematic (*Top.* 8.10.160b33–9, *Euthd.* 277e–278a). If refutation is inevitable, the respondent must show that the refutation resulted from the thesis itself, not from his way of handling it (*Top.* 8.4.159a18–22). This activity corresponds to the Socratic notion of giving an account by answering questions, i.e. λόγον δοῦναι (with slight terminological variation, *Grg.* 474b, *Prt.* 339a). Aristotle makes a noticeable observation about the respondent. He claims that there has been no former clarification of the dialectical manoeuvres with which the respondent may conduct his part of the argument (*Top.* 8.5.159a32–7). Subsequently, he lays down the rules for the respondent himself. The respondent's options are not confined to confirming or denying the premise offered by the questioner by simply answering yes or no (this was apparently the state of affairs among Aristotle's predecessors; see *SE* 17.175b7–10). A respondent may make distinctions so as to avoid ambiguity in the terms he concedes (*Top.* 8.7.160a22–34, *Euthd.* 295b–d, *Men.* 75d5–7), and he may simply say, 'I don't understand', if offered an ambiguous premise (*Top.* 8.7.160a17–22, *Tht.* 164d, *Sph.* 222d).

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[9] There are connections between the Socratic elenchus and the rules for definition operative in Aristotle's τόποι (De Pater 1965: 19–20) and instances of τόποι in Plato's dialogues (De Pater 1965: 67 and Hambruch 1904).

[10] It is very difficult even to state clearly what a τόπος is. For a short account with references, see Primavesi 1998.

These simple moves are in fact formidable defensive tools in the hand of the respondent, since one of the most effective and most widespread sources of elenchus is the ambiguity of words (*SE* 1.165a3–13). Failure to introduce a distinction when ambiguous terms appear in the premises is, therefore, to count as a grave fault on the part of the respondent (*SE* 17.175b28–33). It is interesting to note that these moves allowed to the respondent do in fact reflect how the dialecticians (not the sophists or the ordinary interlocutors) in Plato's dialogues argue – as did most of the moves allowed to the questioner.

In case the questioner forces the respondent to assert two incompatible claims, and the respondent can offer no solution (λύσις) to the argument, the respondent is reduced to an 'impasse' (ἀπορία). This receives different interpretations by Plato and Aristotle in regard to its meaning and place in dialectical argument, but the minimal basic sense of ἀπορία seems to be the intellectual loss resulting from having all one's argumentative means exhausted. It can either occur as a result of an elenchus (*Men.* 84a–b) or because the respondent is faced with opposed but equally powerful inferences (*Top.* 6.6.145b16–20). The philosophical purpose of ἀπορία will be touched upon below.

In Plato the respondent seems to be expected to endorse the claims he makes (but see note 8 above), whereas this is not necessarily the case according to Aristotle. The importance of this observation and its impact on the development of dialectic is an issue which needs to be further investigated. It is, in fact, generally the case that the role of the respondent in both Plato and Aristotle has received remarkably little direct scholarly attention.[11]

(3) Relation of questioner to respondent

The questioner and respondent might stand in an equal or an unequal epistemic relation to one another, since the interlocutors might both be dialecticians, both ordinary men, or one dialectician and one an ordinary man (*Top.* 1.12.105a16–19, *Top.* 8.2.157a18–20, *SE* 11.172a23–7). In Plato's writings we normally find an unequal relation between the questioner (old, experienced, superior) and the respondent (young, inexperienced, inferior). This is the case with Socrates in the role of the superior and experienced questioner, e.g. in *Lysis* (223a–b) and *Meno* (76a–c); whereas the tables are turned in *Parmenides*, with Parmenides as the old, experienced and superior questioner engaged in discussion (in the first part) with Socrates as the

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[11] The exceptions being Beversluis 2000 for Plato and Slomkowski 1997: 36–42 for Aristotle.

young, inexperienced respondent (*Prm.* 127b–c). Aristotle, on the other
hand, seems to envisage the relation between questioner and respondent in
more equal terms. An equal relation obtains when two fully trained and
fully experienced dialecticians enter into debate. Even though this situation
is never expressly mentioned in the *Topics*, it seems, nevertheless, to be the
situation for which the rules of the *Topics* were primarily designed; i.e. a
situation of arguing with or against other philosophical schools, i.e. mainly
the Academy.[12] Whereas a dialectical debate on the basis of an unequal
relation seems to imply the possibility of some sort of progress in knowl-
edge, the purpose of a debate among equals might be intellectual gymnas-
tics, testing the respondent if he makes a claim to knowledge or, more
ambitiously, to settle a philosophical dispute among competing schools.

(4) Subject in question

It is a danger in any debate that questioner and respondent do not direct
their argument at the same subject matter. In fact, as is clear from the
Euthydemus, it seems to be a sophistic strategy to 'go for the name' (τὸ πρὸς
τοὔνομα διαλέγεσθαι, *Top.* 1.18.108a35) instead of the thing in question,
i.e. to direct one's argument against a specific sense of some term knowing
well that the respondent takes it in some other sense. Socratic dialectic, on
the other hand, seems to be based on the demand that both interlocutors
agree on the meaning of the terms under debate. According to *Meno*, doing
so must count as 'more dialectical' (*Men.* 75d) than striving to refute mere
words; and in the *Topics*, Aristotle points out that a questioner acts ridic-
ulously if he questions with one specific meaning of a term in mind,
although the meaning of the term has been agreed by both interlocutors
to be something else (*Top.* 1.18.108a18–37). The real danger here is that of
dialectic turning into eristic or mere word play. The importance of the
distinction between arguing about a thing or arguing about a word lies in
pointing out that dialectic proper is a serious business and is philosophically
more ambitious than simple word-play (see e.g. *Euthd.* 285a, *Rep.* 5.454a, *SE*
5.167a23–5 and *SE* 10).

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[12] The *Topics* has a large number of τόποι to be used against 'those who posit the ideas' (e.g. 2.7.113a24–
32, 3.6.120b3–6, 4.2.122b25–35, 6.3.141a5–9, 6.6.143b23–4, 6.8.147a5–11) and at least one τόπος useful
for establishing ideas (5.7.137b8–13). See the comments ad loc. of Brunschwig 2007: 192 for the textual
difficulties of this passage. See *SE* 12.172b29–31 for a reference to debates with other 'schools'.