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The Services of Dialectic: Dialectic as an Instrument for Metaphysics in Alexander of Aphrodisias¹

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It is commonplace to think that ancient commentators aimed to systematize Aristotle. In order to “complete” and “unify”² Aristotelian doctrine, the commentators would thus have forced the corpus into consistency by introducing claims or arguments taken from a branch of the corpus in the exegesis of a passage found in another branch. The intended application of the *Analytics*’ epistemological rules to the sciences—and especially to first philosophy—allegedly exemplifies the issue.³ In so doing, the commentators would have ignored all that was exploratory, problematic, zetetic and inchoate in Aristotelian thought.⁴ Alexander of Aphrodisias’ attempt to make metaphysics into a demonstrative science would be a prime example of such tendency.⁵ More generally, his exegetical method is held to rest on a “systematic presupposition” and to aim for a “unified” or even “dogmatic Aristotelianism”.⁶

To put it plainly—I think this is painting too unilateral and simple a picture, and I would like to contribute, here, following others,⁷ to enrich and detail it. To do so, I will look into Alexander’s usage of dialectical method in metaphysics, with particular interest for his exegesis of book *Beta* of the *Metaphysics* and his

¹ Thanks are due to Melina Mouzala for inviting me to contribute to this volume, allowing me to return to some issues I had already explored—namely during a 2017 seminar in Lille, organized by the Universities of Lille, Liège and Bruxelles, whose participants deserve warm thanks, notably Thomas Bénatouïl, Sylvain Delcomminette and Marc-Antoine Gavray. I hope time will have allowed me to clarify my thoughts and to give them a more intelligible form. I thank Jeanne Allard once more for her patient translation labor.

² Aubenque (1926b), p. 5.

³ Aubenque (1961), p. 3.

⁴ An English account can be found in Aubenque (1962a). See also Donini (1994).

⁵ Bonelli (2001).

⁶ Donini (1994), pp. 5035 and 5042. See also, for instance, Moraux (2001), p. 252, Cerami (2016), p. 164 (“The ultimate goal of this agenda is to establish an all-embracing philosophical system capable of responding in the best possible way to the philosophical issues debated by his contemporaries”), and Frede (2017) (“In general, Alexander goes on the assumption that Aristotelian philosophy is a unified whole, providing systematically connected answers to virtually all the questions of philosophy recognized in his own time”).

⁷ In particular Kupreeva (2017), with whom I am in complete agreement.

use of the aporetic method. Alexander’s aporetic method in the *Quaestiones*⁸ as well as the one he puts to use in his commentary on *Metaphysics Beta* has led to the same diagnosis. In both cases, no “honest perplexity”⁹ is displayed, and the *Beta* aporiae are not treated like *genuine puzzles* but rather as simple exposition devices.¹⁰ In contrast to this view, I would like to show two things: first, that aporia retains an authentically exploratory function for Alexander; and, second, that Alexander’s use of aporia in metaphysics does not originate in systematization, but rather in the fulfillment of dialectic’s status as an *organon* within Aristotelian tradition. Inna Kupreeva has already given strong arguments in favor of the first part of this claim. She has shown that some aporiae in *Beta* are not read by Alexander in a circular way—i.e., that Alexander’s exegesis of these aporiae does not already presuppose the Aristotelian solutions—and how, on the contrary, some aporiae remain truly open.¹¹ One could well join in on her efforts, and show that some aporiae become much more problematic for Alexander, due precisely to his exegesis of Aristotle, than they were for Aristotle himself.¹² But I would like to pursue another path in this paper and examine the role of dialectic in metaphysics. I will claim that dialectic allows Alexander to retain the exploratory aspect of aporiae within a scientific investigation. If we show that the heuristic role proper to dialectic is an integral part of science, we will be better able to support the idea that Alexander retains the exploratory aspect of aporiae.

1. Dialectic in *Metaphysics Beta*

I will start by showing that, for Alexander, *Metaphysics B* uses dialectic—without being a *dialectical book*. Of course, when Alexander writes his commentary on *Beta*, he does so with the entire *Metaphysics* at his disposition. The issue is then not to know whether he has the solutions brought (or not) to the aporiae in the rest of the treatise in mind—because he doubtlessly has. And indeed, in his outline of the *Metaphysics*, Alexander explicitly introduces Γ as the book where the solutions to the aporiae of *B* start:

... and further, as it is useful and necessary for the discovery of the objects proposed to wisdom, he raised certain aporiae concerning being, the principles, and related matters. After the aporiae he begins the present book *Gamma*, in which he finally tells and establishes his own positions and solves the points of aporia (*In Met.* 237.13–238.3, trans. Madigan, modified).¹³

⁸ Fazzo (2002), pp. 17–18. For a more nuanced view, see Rashed (2007), pp. 3–4.

⁹ Cf. Madigan in Madigan and Dooley (1992), p. 79.

¹⁰ The expression is in Aubenque (1961).

¹¹ Kupreeva (2017), especially pp. 241–247, which study the case of the eighth aporia, and show that Alexander’s interpretation is not circular and that his references to Aristotelian hylomorphism do not hinder the dialectical exploration of the difficulty.

¹² On this pursuit, see Lavaud and Guyomarc’h (2021), pp. 111ff.

¹³ ...Καὶ ἐπὶ τούτοις ὡς χρήσιμον καὶ ἀναγκαῖον πρὸς τὴν εὐρεσιν τῶν τῆ σοφία προκειμένων ἀπορήσας τινὰς ἀπορίας περὶ τε τοῦ ὄντος καὶ τῶν ἀρχῶν καὶ τῶν τούτοις παρακειμένων, μετὰ τὰς ἀπορίας ἄρχεται τοῦ προκειμένου τοῦ Γ βιβλίου, λοιπὸν ἐν τούτῳ λέγων τε καὶ κατασκευάζων τὰ αὐτῷ δοκοῦντα καὶ λύων τὰ ἠπορημένα.

This is not an isolated claim. The rest of the commentary on book Γ mentions the aporiae from B reprised in Γ, that is, the first, second, third and fourth aporiae.¹⁴ In going from B to Γ, we thus proceed from the presentation of problems to their solutions.¹⁵ Alexander is, however, peculiar in the fact that he reads *Beta* as the true beginning of the *Metaphysics*, taking *Alpha* and *Alpha elatton* to be “preambles”, following Aristotle’s own remark (995b4):

For Aristotle this is the starting point of the proposed treatise; for here he begins to speak of matters which have a necessary bearing on the issues proposed. The matters discussed in *Alpha* would be preliminary to this treatise and contribute to putting it on the right footing. This is why some have thought that the present book is the first book of the treatise *Metaphysics* (172, 18–22, trans. Madigan).

How can a book relying on “dialectic” and putting forward a number of “logical” arguments (as Alexander himself admits)¹⁶ be both the start of the treatise and the beginning of the science discussed in it? Could it be because *Beta* is merely a summary? One could think so, based on the passage from the proemium to the commentary on *Gamma* cited above. But throughout his commentary, Alexander refrains from mentioning the solutions to the aporiae found in the rest of the treatise¹⁷—with one exception when he announces book Λ.¹⁸ This amounts to say that the alleged summary does not perform its function. In addition, when he says that solving the aporiae is “the chief task (κεφάλαιον) of the proposed science” (180.32–33), Alexander could suggest that this is not the *sole* task of such science. Incidentally, this is shown in the commentary on book *Gamma*—a book which (despite being explicitly depicted by Alexander at 238.2–3 as containing solutions to the aporiae) does not deal exclusively with these aporiae. Finally, we must make note (although this is merely an *a silentio* argument) that Alexander never draws on the expressions Aristotle uses which point to the comprehensive aim of book *Beta*. Indeed, Aristotle uses such expressions at least four times in B 1: “all the difficulties, “all the contending arguments”, etc.¹⁹ None of them receives a specific commentary from Alexander.

If the *Metaphysics* begins in *Beta*, it is first because of the book’s subject matter. For Alexander, the two previous books are in an ambiguous position, being halfway between physics and metaphysics. This is the case in *Alpha* because the theory of the four causes has already been discussed in the *Physics* (it must only obtain “confirmation”²⁰ in A) and involves a discussion of the claims of ancient physicists.²¹ It is the case

¹⁴ Aporia 1: is there one science for all causes? Aporia 2: is it the same science which studies the principles of substance and the principles of demonstration? Aporia 3: is there one science of all substances? Aporia 4: is it the same science which studies substance and its essential properties? Cf. Aristotle, *Met.* Γ 2, 1004a32 and 34 (but the first occurrence is problematic in the manuscripts). In Alexander: *In Met.* 246.13–24; 250.3–5; 251.7–9; 257.12–16; 264.23–27; 264.31–34.

¹⁵ On Alexander’s outline of the first five books of the *Metaphysics*, see Guyomarc’h (2015), pp. 85–93. Concerning *Beta* specifically, see Lavaud and Guyomarc’h (2021), pp. 113–119.

¹⁶ For instance, at *In Met.* 206.12–13 or 218.17, but especially at 173.21–174.4.

¹⁷ As Arthur Madigan himself notes; see Madigan (1992), p. 79.

¹⁸ *In Met.* 178.19–21.

¹⁹ See especially 995a25 and 34; 995b4.

²⁰ *In Met.* 23.2–3: “τὴν τῶν αἰτίων τῶν εἰρημένων βεβαίωσιν”.

²¹ As shown in a transition passage in the commentary on A 8 (*In Met.* 70.12–71.4), Aristotle comes nearer to the matters appropriate for the current treatise (“ὡς οικειοτέρας τῆς προκειμένης πραγματείας”) only through the study of Pythagoreans and Plato.

in *Alpha elatton* because the book could also be used as an introduction to theoretical philosophy in general, or even to the *Physics* in particular.²² By contrast, in *Beta*, the ambiguity disappears, according to Alexander: “here he begins to speak of matters which have a necessary bearing²³ on the issues proposed” (172.18–19). This is because the objects of the aporiae cannot be studied by other sciences. For they are, foremost and generally, principles,²⁴ or, more precisely, for instance, the possibility of a “first cause” being “thoroughly immaterial”.²⁵ But it is also because the aporiae are opportunities for first philosophy to reflect on its own nature, on its unity and on the instruments it uses—i.e., on notions like the same and the other, the like and the unlike, etc., the study of which is, in a certain way, “appropriate for the first philosopher”.²⁶

But the other feature setting *Beta* apart from the previous books is its method—aporia. Such method is different from the inquiry (ἰστορία²⁷) used in the previous books. The task here is not to review previous doctrines and list their premises, nor to map their genealogy. The task is not even to refute these doctrines for their own sake. For, in *Beta*, names rather come up as branches in an aporia, and as tags for views determined by the requisites of a problem posed by Aristotle himself. History of philosophy now takes place within the framework of diaporias, i.e., the development of the two branches of an aporia. Many of these problems, of course, originate with Aristotle’s predecessors, and the difficulties that come forth are in fact “all the points on which some have held different views” (995a25–26). But, according to Alexander, it is for the sake of diaporias (“in order to explore these aporiae” (“ὥς δὲ καὶ περὶ τούτων διαπορήσων”, 172.8–9) that Aristotle reports these views and dedicates time to these issues.

Certainly, the goal pursued through *Beta*’s aporetic method remains the same as the one pursued through the first two books’ inquiry: to discover truth in matters relevant to the treatise.²⁸ Also certain is the fact that the terminology relative to aporia and even diaporias in Alexander is not limited to his commentary on book *Beta*. The main reason for this is that Aristotle himself uses διαπορέω as early as the first book of the *Metaphysics*.²⁹ Aporiae are also involved in Alexander’s strategy to defend the location of *Alpha elatton*: since the end of Chapter A 10 announces a return to the difficulties which could be raised about causes (“ἀπορήσειεν”, 993a25), Alexander—while acknowledging that the more obvious reference is *Beta*—justifies the location of *Alpha elatton* by pointing out that this book also carries out an inquiry and brings forth an aporia concerning causes.³⁰ Still—aporia is the name Alexander uses to summarize book

²² See the commentary to α 3, 995a17–19 at *In Met.* 169.20ff., but the hypothesis is announced as early as 137.15ff.

²³ On a similar usage of this verb, see, for instance, *In Met.* 170.3.

²⁴ See, for instance, the beginning of the development on the eighth aporia at *In Met.* 210.25–26.

²⁵ At *In Met.* 171.9–11 and 178.19–21 (with a reference to *Met.* Λ).

²⁶ Cf. *In Met.* 177.8–9. On this issue, see also Moraux (2001), pp. 467–468. On book *Beta* as the opportunity for metaphysics to reflect upon itself, see Guyomarc’h (2021), p. 117.

²⁷ See, for instance, the use of this term at *In Met.* 9.6 or 41.17.

²⁸ Compare, for instance, *In Met.* 78.2–4 and 174.1 or 180.31–33.

²⁹ At *Met.* A 2, 982b15 and A 9, 991a9.

³⁰ *In Met.* 136.15–17.

Beta when he refers to it in other places,³¹ and it even becomes much like the book's title (“ἐν τοῖς ἠπορημένοις”, 251.7).

2. *Aporia* and Problem

If *Beta* is indeed the true beginning of the *Metaphysics* and if the book uses dialectic, it means that Alexander considers the use of dialectic in *Beta* to be an integral part of first philosophy. This use of dialectic most markedly focuses on the aporetic method. *Aporia* has at least as many senses in Alexander as it does in Aristotle: Alexander reprises nearly all Aristotelian senses of the term³² (except for the economic sense) and adds an exegetical sense to the list (for instance, to refer to a difficulty encountered in understanding a passage of Aristotle). But its broad extension does not prevent the term from having a technical sense, in which it is a tool within a method:

These remarks about the need to begin with exploring *aporiae* would also show the usefulness of dialectic for philosophy and for the discovery of truth. For it is characteristic of dialectic to explore *aporiae*, *i.e.*, to argue on both sides [of a case]. So, what was said in the *Topics* (1.2), that dialectic is useful for philosophical inquiries, is true (*In Met.* 173.27–174.4, trans. Madigan, modified).³³

The relation with dialectic is indeed only instrumental (χρήσιμον), because book *Beta* is still not a logical book:³⁴

As Aristotle goes on he will show in what respect the inquiry into and the consideration of these things is also appropriate to the primary philosopher. For this treatise is not logical as some have thought due to the fact that many such things are objects of inquiry in it (177.8–10, trans. Madigan, modified).³⁵

This passage is found in the introduction of the 4th *aporia*. “These things” refer to the predicates which are often called “dialectical”: same, other, like, unlike, contrary, etc. The rest of the commentary will show that such study belongs within the science of being *qua* being because these predicates are species of the one and the many.³⁶ We do not know who are the “some” (τισιν) who have read the *Metaphysics* as a logical treatise—we might imagine they are other Peripatetics, or perhaps Stoics, like those who had taken

³¹ See especially *In Met.* 136.11–14; 138.4–6; 237.15–16; 246.14–15; 264.31. Aristotle had already paved the way for this title—see *Met.* Γ 2, 1004a34.

³² See Madigan (1992), p. 87, n. 3, Kupreeva (2017), p. 229, and Guyomarc’h (2021), p. 125. For its senses in Aristotle, see Motte and Rutten (2001), particularly pp. 152 and 367.

³³ Διὰ δὲ τῶν προειρημένων περὶ τοῦ δεῖν διαπορεῖν πρῶτον εἶη ἂν αὐτῷ δεικνύμενον ἅμα καὶ τὸ χρήσιμον τῆς διαλεκτικῆς πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν καὶ τὴν τῆς ἀληθείας εὔρεσιν· τῆς γὰρ διαλεκτικῆς τὸ διαπορεῖν καὶ ἐπιχειρεῖν εἰς ἑκάτερα. ἀληθὲς ἄρα τὸ ἐν τοῖς Τοπικοῖς εἰρημένον τὸ χρήσιμον εἶναι τὴν διαλεκτικὴν πρὸς τὰς κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ζητήσεις

³⁴ Alexander often uses λογικῶς or λογική and διαλεκτικῶς or διαλεχτική interchangeably. See, for instance, *In An. Pr.* 1.3ff.; 3.7, etc.; *In Top.* 4.5 and 30.12–13 (which accounts for the synonymy), etc.; see also Bonelli (2001), p. 147, n. 40, Guyomarc’h (2014), p. 89, n. 14, and Kupreeva (2017) pp. 239–240. For examples of the synonymy in *Beta*, see, among other cases, *In Met.* 218.17.

³⁵ Προελθὼν δὲ αὐτὸς δείξει κατὰ τί καὶ ἡ περὶ τούτων ζήτησίς τε καὶ θεωρία οἰκεία τῷ πρώτῳ φιλοσόφῳ. Οὐ γὰρ λογική ἢ πραγματεία, ὡς τισιν ἔδοξε διὰ τὸ πολλὰ τοιαῦτα ζητεῖσθαι ἐν αὐτῇ.

³⁶ *In Met.* 247.2–8.

the *Categories* to be a bad treatise on grammar and rhetoric.³⁷ Whatever the case may be, the reference shows that, due to such a reading, Alexander needs to distinguish metaphysics from logic in general and from dialectic in particular. One cannot examine the aporiae in *Beta* without using logical and endoxic arguments,³⁸ but the annexation of metaphysics to logic does not follow from it.

This could explain why Alexander so carefully avoids the πρόβλημα terminology when commenting *Beta*—in contrast with Syrianus, whose commentary on *Beta* nonetheless clearly depends on Alexander’s. In Syrianus, ἀπορία and πρόβλημα are correlated, and even interchangeable.³⁹ A reminder of the senses of both terms in Alexander will allow us, by contrast, to better understand why aporia, but not the notion of problem, can be used in *Beta*.

The term ἀπορία no doubt has a broader usage than “problem” does: there is no problem which is not a difficulty, but not every ἀπορία is a πρόβλημα.⁴⁰ But especially in the *Commentary on the Topics*, Alexander lays out several criteria to specify what is a dialectical problem and how they differ from scientific problems. Such specification is first informed by the kind of questions used: in the four interrogation types distinguished in *A.Po* II.1, a dialectical problem appears under the form ὅτι ἔστι or εἰ ἔστιν, but never as δι’ ὃ τι ἔστί or τί ἐστίν, which are questions belonging to science—a claim which Alexander says he takes from the lost treatise *Περὶ προβλημάτων*.⁴¹ However, this criterion does not seem to apply to *Beta* and does not allow us to say whether the aporiae in *Beta* are dialectical problems in a strict sense or not: a large part of the aporiae in *Beta* are in the form ὅτι ἔστι or εἰ ἔστιν.⁴² But the remark is interesting beyond this difference in formulation, since it assigns exclusively to science the inquiries on cause and essence—a point other texts confirm. For instance, in his commentary on *Topics* I.10, Alexander mentions that the question “Is it the case that form and matter are the elements of beings?”⁴³ cannot be dialectical. The case is significant since it echoes the terminology used in *Metaphysics* A and B.⁴⁴ The reason he offers refers to *Top.* I.1 and the distinction between the different kinds of syllogisms based on the nature of their premises: the question is about principles and thus requires ἄμεσοι καὶ πρῶται premises. In this sense, it is scientific rather than dialectical or eristical. The passage does concern premises—rather than problems—but I.10 covers both premises and problems (as was already the case in I.4), and it is not always easy to distinguish between them.⁴⁵ In his commentary to I.4, Alexander distinguishes them using their answers: a premise is a “request for an answer” (ἀποκρίσεως αἴτησις),

³⁷ Simplicius, *In Cat.* 18.28–19.7. Cf. Moraux (1984), pp. 587–591.

³⁸ See, for instance, *In Met.* 236.28: “μὴ λογικαῖς ἐπιχειρήσεσι χρῆσασθαι” and, on this passage, Kupreeva (2017), p. 240.

³⁹ Luna (2004), p. 54.

⁴⁰ *In Top.* 68.19–21, stressing the διὸ οὐδέ.

⁴¹ *In Top.* 63.9–19. Cf. (Castelli 2013), pp. 78–79.

⁴² The 13th aporia (not in B1, but in B6, and commented at *In Met.* 233.1–235.6) appears to be an exception. But we could say that its formulation is only a more complex (and perhaps a second-order) version of an εἰ ἔστιν question.

⁴³ *In Top.* 70.5–6: ἄρα γε στοιχεῖα τῶν ὄντων εἶδος καὶ ὕλη;

⁴⁴ For instance, 986a2; 987b19; 992b19; 998b9.

⁴⁵ Brunschwig (1967), pp. 120–121, n. 6.

while a problem is a “request for proving one part of the contradictory pair” (δείξωσ τοῦ ἑτέρου μορίου τῆς ἀντιφάσεως αἴτησις).⁴⁶

The kind of δειξις is precisely what is involved in the difference between scientific problem and dialectical problem, as the commentary on I.11 shows. At the end of the chapter, Aristotle excludes some problems from those to be covered in dialectic: first come the problems which do not cause any real perplexity—for, according to the above-mentioned criterion, a true problem must be difficult. But the problems “whose demonstration is near at hand, [and] those whose demonstration is too remote”⁴⁷ are also excluded. Alexander illustrates the former, *i.e.*, problems “easy and well known” (ῥάδια καὶ εὐγνωστα, 84.15), with a reference to the Stoic inquiry into καθηκόντα, for instance: “Whether when listening to a philosopher we should have our legs crossed”. Turning to the latter possibility, *i.e.*, when the demonstration would be too elaborate, Alexander introduces a distinction (not found in Aristotle’s text) between dialectical problems and scientific problems:

For this reason, all those problems in mathematics and the sciences which admit of more general argumentation⁴⁸ may be regarded as dialectical problems, but all those which differ from these because they involve more theoretical study than is in keeping with a training, would be excluded from the (class of) dialectical problems. Thus “Whether or not in every triangle the three internal angles are equal to two right angles” is not a dialectical problem: a more powerful and more accurate method is needed for establishing problems of this kind; it is the part of the geometrician to prove how it is with this. For the same reason all of the following problems in philosophy are not dialectical either, as *e.g.*, “Whether or not there is one matter for all things”, “Whether or not matter is one”, “Whether or not atoms are the principles of all there is”, “Whether or not everything that moves another thing does this because it is itself moved”, “Whether or not motion is eternal”: questions like these require fuller and more accurate attention (*In Top.* 85.7–19, trans. Van Ophuijsen, modified).⁴⁹

The possibility of finding some scientific problems among dialectical problems originates in Aristotle’s claim at the beginning of the chapter: dialectical problems concern “either choice and avoidance or truth and knowledge” (πρὸς αἴρεσιν καὶ φυγὴν ἢ πρὸς ἀλήθειαν καὶ γνῶσιν, 104b2). Dialectical problems are general because dialectic can discuss any question, which should mean that it can also discuss scientific questions. The claim in this passage echoes the way in which Alexander commented the universal ambitions of dialectic evoked in the first sentence of the treatise, which is cited just before our passage

⁴⁶ *In Top.* 40.28–29.

⁴⁷ *Top.* I.11, 105a7–8, “οὐδὲ δὴ ὧν σύνεγγυς ἢ ἀπόδειξις, οὐδ’ ὧν λίαν πόρρω” (trans. Van Ophuijsen).

⁴⁸ Unlike Johannes M. Van Ophuijsen, I think that ἐπιχειρήσις no longer means “argumentative attack” in Alexander—as it did in Aristotle, and as Jacques Brunschwig also translates it. Alexander frequently uses ἐπιχειρήσις and its cognate verb ἐπιχειρεῖν to speak of properly dialectical argumentation. In the commentary to *Beta*, see for instance *In Met.* 174.2, 176.35, 236.26, etc.

⁴⁹ Διὸ ὅσα μὲν τῶν κατὰ τὰς ἐπιστήμας τε καὶ τὰ μαθήματα κοινοτέρας ἐπιχειρήσεις δέχεται, διαλεκτικὰ ἂν εἴη προβλήματα· ὅσα δὲ μὴ τοιαῦτα τῷ πλείω θεωρίαν ἔχειν ἢ <κατὰ γυμναστικὴν> ἐκπίπτει ἂν τῶν διαλεκτικῶν προβλημάτων. Οὐ γὰρ διαλεκτικὸν τὸ ἴπτερον πᾶν τρίγωνον τὰς ἐντὸς τρεῖς γωνίας δυσὶν ὀρθαῖς ἴσας ἔχει ἢ οὐ;· κρείττονος γὰρ καὶ ἀκριβεστέρας μεθόδου δεῖ πρὸς τὴν τῶν τοιούτων κατασκευὴν προβλημάτων· τοῦ γὰρ γεωμέτρου τὸ δεῖξαι τοῦτο ὅπως ἔχει. Διὸ οὐδὲ τῶν κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ἐστὶ πάντα τὰ τοιαῦτα διαλεκτικὰ προβλήματα, οἷον ἴπτερον μία ὕλη πάντων ἢ οὐ, καὶ ἴπτερον ἢ ὕλη ἡνωται ἢ οὐ, καὶ ἴπτερον αἱ ἄτομοι ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὄντων ἢ οὐ, καὶ ἴπτερον πᾶν τὸ κινοῦν κινούμενον κινεῖ ἢ οὐ, καὶ ἴπτερον ἀίδιός ἐστιν ἢ κίνησις ἢ οὐ· πλείονος γὰρ καὶ ἀκριβεστέρας τὰ τοιαῦτα ἐπιστάσεως δεῖται.

at 85.6–7. The treatise provides a method to make syllogisms on any topics or problems: *περὶ παντὸς τοῦ προτεθέντος [προβλήματος]*.⁵⁰ The first sentence of our passage thus has a concessive structure: some problems may be general and may require an argumentation general in scope—but dialectic’s ability to discuss any kind of problem does not make such problems dialectical. Some problems encountered in the sciences can be covered by dialectic—but this does not mean that all dialectical problems are scientific, and conversely. Here, Alexander is being perfectly consistent with his commentary of the first sentence of the treatise, at 6.21–7.2: according to him, when Aristotle says that dialectic is “about everything” (*περὶ παντός*), we should not read “everything” “without qualification” (*οὐχ ἀπλῶς*, 6.25). And he already refers to I.11 during his commentary on I.1, which shows clearly enough that he intends to distinguish dialectic and science.

Examples of these scientific problems requiring more elaborate study are often from mathematics and physics. The question whether matter is unified or not reminds the *De mixtione*, for instance, as the question concerning movers could refer to the *Refutation of Galen*. Also to be noted is the difference between “mathematics” and “philosophy” in accordance with other passages of the Alexandrian corpus.⁵¹ But mathematics and philosophy are both subject to a “precision” requirement that demands longer demonstrations. Conversely, as Alexander already established in his commentary, reasonings established “through what is approved are divorced from scientific precision of speech” (*κεχώρισται τῆς ἐπιστημονικῆς ἀκριβολογίας*, 26.12–13).

In both his commentary on *Metaphysics* B and his commentary on the *Topics*, Alexander’s intention seems to be to establish the scientific *use* of dialectic while maintaining (or even consolidating) the boundary between science and dialectic. For nothing in Aristotle’s *Top.* I.1 calls for a commentary aiming to restrict dialectic’s scope—on the contrary. Universality is also named as a common trait of dialectic and philosophy in *Metaphysics* Γ 2, 1004b19–20 (since dialecticians, like philosophers, discuss all things)—and Alexander cannot not know about this passage. But the insistence to separate science and dialectic makes sense considering the annexation of metaphysics by dialectics performed by “some”. It explains why Alexander is so careful never to speak of “problems” in his commentary on *Metaphysics* B. The expression can be interpreted specifically as “scientific problems”—but it still has a dialectical ring to it, and thus could be confusing. As we have seen, however, Alexander admits that *Beta* uses dialectic. For him, the issue at stake is then to establish such use, and to do so in a controlled manner, i.e., so as to guard metaphysics against a possible invasion.

3. The Importation of the Dialectical Method

The claim that Aristotle uses dialectic in scientific discussions would today be seen as quite on the nose—but Alexander may precisely be the one responsible for its being commonplace. Against a looser usage of “dialectical” to refer to a number of passages from the Aristotelian corpus, and following some

⁵⁰ The word is omitted at 5.20 but appears at 7.1. Cf. Brunschwig (1967), p. 114, n. 4.

⁵¹ For instance, *In A.Pr.* 3.20–24. Alexander’s commentary on *Metaphysics* Γ never places mathematics among theoretical sciences.

contemporary interpreters,⁵² I must remind that dialectic in fact consists in a codified procedure. It is not obvious that dialectic could be used in a non-dialogical context, outside “dialectical meetings”,⁵³ and such claim calls for justification. What I would like to show now is that it is precisely the conditions of such non-dialogical use of dialectic that Alexander tries to identify. Further, I would like to show that, for him, such use is the main purpose of dialectic. In other words: what was in Aristotle a collateral benefit of dialectic (at least in part due to its opposition to Platonic doctrine) becomes, in Alexander, its central purpose.

The shift operated by Alexander can be seen when he comments on the services which dialectic can provide, while discussing the well-known Chapter I.2 from the *Topics*. As a reminder, the chapter lists three services which can be expected from the current “πραγματεία”. Here, πραγματεία arguably refers both to the treatise itself and to dialectic as a discipline, since, right after, Aristotle mentions that we have a method⁵⁴—either way, Alexander himself must take the word in this sense, since it is in accordance with his own usage.⁵⁵ The three services are the following: intellectual training or intellectual gymnastics; meetings or contacts with others; and what concerns the philosophical sciences.⁵⁶ Alexander ponders a possible fourth service (which I will not cover here, since it would lead us elsewhere): the one concerning the “first things” or principles in each science (τὰ πρῶτα τῶν περὶ ἐκάστην ἐπιστήμην, 101a36–37)—but, in the end, he judges it to be an extension of the third service.⁵⁷

The first service—concerning intellectual training—refers directly to dialectical discussions. For Aristotle, the very first advantage of dialectic as a method is thus to be of use in the dispute which is also called dialectical, and the *Topics* are first useful for training in the subject of dialectic itself. In fact, it is as if Aristotle was listing the three services in increasing order of externality. Dialectic thus has some interest for science—as Aristotle points out next—since it teaches us to διαπορεῖν (101a35). But this is a supplemental benefit, not its primary purpose. That is, to claim that dialectic is useful to science does not mean that dialectic is *solely* an instrument in the service of science. Yet Alexander precisely seems to reduce dialectic to its instrumental purpose. For this is how he comments on the first service:

By training he either (i) means that which occurs in discussions with others—as a form of training they try, receiving certain problems from their interlocutors, to defend these problems by producing argumentations through what is approved—or (ii) he means by it argumentation on either side of a question. This kind of speech was customary among the older philosophers, who set up most of their classes in this way—not on the basis of books as it is now done (since at the time there were not yet any *books of this kind*), but, after a thesis had been posited, they trained their aptitude at finding argumentations by producing arguments about this thesis, establishing and refuting the position through what is approved. There are *books of this kind*

⁵² Cf. the fascinating remarks of Rapp (2017), p. 116 (the issue of “dialectical method in non-dialogical contexts” has been developed further in an early and unfortunately unpublished draft of this paper); see also Primavesi (1996), pp. 52ff.

⁵³ See the ἐν δὲ ταῖς διαλεκτικαῖς συνόδοις phrase at *Top.* VIII 5, 159a32.

⁵⁴ Cf. Rapp (Unpublished version), n. 5.

⁵⁵ Guyomarc’h (2015), pp. 62–63.

⁵⁶ Cf. *Top.* I.2, 101a28–29: πρὸς γυμνασίαν, πρὸς τὰς ἐντεύξεις, πρὸς τὰς κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ἐπιστήμας.

⁵⁷ *In Top.* 29.19–20 and 30.9–12: “And so this fourth use of dialectic can be subsumed under its usefulness for philosophy, as an explicit addition that dialectic is in this respect useful for other sciences in the same way that it is for philosophy” (trans. Van Ophuijsen).

written by Aristotle and Theophrastus, containing argumentations on both sides of a question through what is approved (*In Top.* 27.8–18, trans. Van Ophuijsen, modified).⁵⁸

Alexander gives two interpretations of the reference to γυμνασία, and it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart. In the first interpretation (i) the oral disputes are less codified than in the second interpretation (ii), which further specifies the nature of the discussion, *i.e.*, an argumentation comprising both contradictory positions (εἰς ἑκάτερον μέρος ἐπιχείρησιν). The translation of “τούτοις παρίστασθαι” is problematic in this sentence. It may mean “to help the interlocutors”, which is what Van Ophuijsen opts for (τούτοις refers to τῶν προσδιαλεγομένων and Van Ophuijsen thus translates “to assist these”). The sentence then discusses the assistance provided to an interlocutor: when being helped in the examination of their position, they are trained in solving problems. This could refer to the Socratic practice still in use at the Academy.⁵⁹ But the verb may also mean “to defend”, *i.e.*, to provide reasons supporting a claim. There is good evidence, in Alexander, for this use of παρίστασθαι in the middle voice with its object in the dative—whether it concerns the defense of an opinion, a claim⁶⁰ or, precisely, a “problem”.⁶¹ To defend a problem then means, via synecdoche, to defend one of the claims constituting the problem: at *In Top.* 149.22–25, for instance, the phrase ὁ τῷ προβλήματι παριστάμενος, “the defender of the problem”, is used to explicate the mention of an *opponent* in the Aristotelian text.⁶² Not only is this meaning better attested—it also seems to me more direct and more consistent with the context, since it averts the need for a third party to intervene in the dialectical dispute to assist one of the two disputers. Consequently—put more clearly—option (i) differs from option (ii) in that one of the interlocutors must defend only one position, while option (ii) refers to the exercise in which one argues on either side of a question (εἰς ἑκάτερον μέρος).⁶³

The second option, as we have said, thus refers to a more specific exercise, *i.e.*, a codified dialectical meeting and, perhaps more specifically still, to a Socratic practice: passages in Xenophon and Plato mention Socrates’ discussions (συνουσίαι).⁶⁴ In the second part of our passage, the thorny issue is the opposition between the Ancients (ἀρχαίους) and now (νῦν) due to the two mentions of “books of this kind” (τοιαῦτα βιβλία), at l. 14 and 17. At first sight, the text seems to say that there were no such books

⁵⁸ Λέγει δὲ γυμνασίαν ἦτοι τὴν γινομένην ἐν τῷ διαλέγεσθαι πρὸς τινὰς· δεχόμενοι γὰρ τινὰ προβλήματα παρὰ τῶν προσδιαλεγομένων γυμναζόμενοι πειρῶνται τούτοις παρίστασθαι, δι’ ἐνδόξων τὰς ἐπιχειρήσεις ποιούμενοι· ἢ γυμνασίαν λέγει ἂν τὴν εἰς ἑκάτερον μέρος ἐπιχείρησιν. ἦν δὲ σύνηθες τὸ τοιοῦτον εἶδος τῶν λόγων τοῖς ἀρχαίοις, καὶ τὰς συνουσίας τὰς πλείστας τοῦτον ἐποιοῦντο τὸν τρόπον, οὐκ ἐπὶ βιβλίων ὡσπερ νῦν (οὐ γὰρ ἦν πω τότε τοιαῦτα βιβλία), ἀλλὰ θέσεώς τινος τεθείσης εἰς ταύτην γυμνάζοντες αὐτῶν τὸ πρὸς τὰς ἐπιχειρήσεις εὐρετικὸν ἐπεχειροῦν, κατασκευάζοντές τε καὶ ἀνασκευάζοντες δι’ ἐνδόξων τὸ κείμενον. Καὶ ἔστι δὲ βιβλία τοιαῦτα Ἀριστοτέλους τε καὶ Θεοφράστου γεγραμμένα ἔχοντα τὴν εἰς τὰ ἀντικείμενα δι’ ἐνδόξων ἐπιχείρησιν.

⁵⁹ Van Ophuijsen (2001), p. 150, n. 265; see also Fortenbaugh (2005), p. 186.

⁶⁰ Cf. for instance *De fato* 177.6 and 204.4, *Quaestiones* 25.21, and *In Top.* 18.33.

⁶¹ *In Top.* 149.23, 548.1 and 15, etc.

⁶² Compare *Top.* II.3, 110a26–27 (ἐὰν γὰρ μὴ λανθάνῃ πολλαχῶς λεγόμενον, ἐνστήσεται ὅτι...) and *In Top.* 149.22–23 (ἂν γὰρ μὴ λανθάνῃ, προχείρως ἐνστήσεται ὁ τῷ προβλήματι παριστάμενος, ὅτι...). I detail these specifications because Van Ophuijsen had knowingly rejected this translation, cf. Van Ophuijsen (2001), pp. 150–151, n. 265. The possibility of the evocation of Socratic discussions in what follows does not seem sufficient to reject the more direct translation I propose here.

⁶³ This is also how Moraux (1968), p. 301, reads it.

⁶⁴ For instance, Xenophon *Mem.* 1.2.60; Plato, *Prot.* 318a3...

among the Ancients, but that Aristotle and Theophrastus have written some. There is mostly no doubt that Aristotle and Theophrastus have indeed written “books of this kind”, as a consultation of Diogenes Laertius’ bibliographical lists will confirm.⁶⁵ But, as other readers of this passage have noted, it is rather unlikely that Alexander would take himself to be contemporaneous with Aristotle and Theophrastus.⁶⁶ Alexander does often discuss past philosophical views using the present tense, but it has no temporal value. Furthermore, the subject of “ἀλλὰ θέσεώς τινος τεθείσης εἰς ταύτην γυμνάζοντες” are the Ancients. Yet the account Alexander offers does apply the practice of dialectic as Aristotle describes it in the *Topics*. It would thus be surprising for this kind of dialectical discussion not to refer to some practice of Aristotle’s.

This leads to two possible solutions. Johannes M. Van Ophuijsen has cleverly suggested to change the parenthetical text at line 14 into τσαῦτα βιβλία, “not so many books”.⁶⁷ The distinction between then and now thus refers to a quantitative difference. It is, however, possible to refrain from changing a reading attested in all manuscripts: we can take the “Ancients” to refer to philosophers older than Aristotle and Theophrastus. Such reference is common usage in Aristotle, and Alexander almost systematically reprises it:⁶⁸ to my knowledge, Alexander never speaks of Aristotle as an “Ancient”. We then need to think of the history of dialectic in three distinct moments. First, the Ancients—including Socrates—lead discussions (συνουσία) in a codified format (τὸ τοιοῦτον εἶδος τῶν λόγων). The general method used to lead these oral discussions has then been described by Aristotle in the *Topics*—as well as in other treatises on more specific subjects by him and Theophrastus.⁶⁹ The rest of the passage mentions a “method for finding arguments” (μέθοδον τινα εὐρετικὴν τῶν ἐπιχειρημάτων, 27.19–20). But—third moment—such discussions, held in an educational setting, are “now” led using books (ἐπὶ βιβλίῳ), meaning that books are the starting points of the discussion and support it. This brings to mind the description of the first part of Epictetus’ teachings⁷⁰ or the *lectio* method mentioned in Aulus Gellius.⁷¹ With these three stages distinguished, the historical transformation Alexander quickly narrates is more of an incremental change. He does not describe an abrupt transformation but rather a gradual change from a civilization of the spoken word to a culture of the written word.⁷²

We likely cannot infer from this text that the practice of dialectic as an oral discipline had entirely disappeared in Alexander’s time—but the emphasis still moves from discussion to book. Our text has indeed long been read along with two well-known passages from Strabo (on the Skepsis cave in *Geography*

⁶⁵ For Theophrastus, see the mention of the Προβλημάτων συναγωγῆς at DL 5.45.11, or of the Περὶ ψυχῆς θέσις μία at 5.46.12 (Van Ophuijsen 1994, p. 151, n. 173). For Aristotle, see Θέσεις ἐπιχειρηματικά, Θέσεις ἐρωτικά, Θέσεις φιλικαί, Θέσεις περὶ ψυχῆς at 5.24, cf. Van Ophuijsen (1994), p. 151 alongside the indications given in *Topics* VIII.

⁶⁶ Fortenbaugh (2005), p. 187; see also Sharples (2010), p. 38, n. 4.

⁶⁷ Van Ophuijsen (1994), p. 150, n. 64, and (2001), p. 151, n. 268.

⁶⁸ The only exception I located is in the *Commentary on the Prior Analytics* (262.28–32 et 263.26), where ἀρχαῖοι may be used to refer to philosophers more recent than Aristotle.

⁶⁹ See above, n. 65.

⁷⁰ *Diss.* 1.10.8–9; 1.26.1; 2.14.1...

⁷¹ See, e.g., *Attic Nights* 1.26.

⁷² See also the remarks of Hadot (1995), pp. 163–170 and 231–235.

XIII.1) and Cicero,⁷³ both of which seem to testify to the intense practice of dialectic in the Hellenistic Lyceum, a practice which would apparently have disappeared afterward. In addition, a passage of Chrysippus (*via* Plutarch) indicates that the successors of Plato and Aristotle were “serious about dialectic”, “up to Polemo and Strato”⁷⁴ and one sometimes take this to mean that the Peripatos lost interest in dialectic after Strato.⁷⁵ The passage in Alexander does not go this far since it assumes that there such discussions (συνουσίαι) still take place “today”, even if they are led “on the basis of books”. But, in what immediately follows this passage, rhetoric is mentioned as if it was the best example of such oral argumentation. This change in emphasis could mean the service of dialectical method has lost ground to dialectical practice itself.

Crucially, Alexander directly reintroduces scientific finality to conclude the development on the first service of dialectic:

And such a training in argumentations is useful for finding what is investigated and what is true, as Aristotle himself will say when he sets out its usefulness for philosophy as a preliminary mental preparation. For just as exercises of the body, performed according to the rules of the art, produce fitness for the body, so exercises of the mind in argumentations, performed according to method, produce the fitness which is peculiar to the mind; and the peculiar fitness of the rational soul is the capacity by which it becomes apt at finding and judging what is true (*In Top.* 27.24–31, trans. van Ophuijsen slightly modified).⁷⁶

This passage of the commentary is independent, having no equivalent in Aristotle. It clearly shows that Alexander interprets the first service of dialectic in light of the third service—while nothing in Aristotle suggests that the first service is a preparation for the other ones, or that it has less value than them. Contrastingly, Alexander establishes here a non-dialogical usage of dialectical method as the main purpose of dialectic. We can then better understand why Alexander’s updates in the *Topics* (*i.e.*, when he pauses his strict exegesis and gives examples from his own philosophical environment) feature debates with the Stoics and the Epicureans on “scientific” issues, especially in physics and ethics.⁷⁷ Likewise, when he comments I.11, Alexander says in passing that such an exercise (γυμναστικῆ)—*i.e.*, dialectical exercise—is a “preparation for philosophy” (προπαρασκευὴ πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν, 83.29–32). Other texts confirm this—for instance, the passage commenting the very beginning of I.2, in which Alexander claims

⁷³ At *Tusc.* 2.3.9, cf. Moraux (1968), pp. 301–303, Aubenque (1962b), p. 256, and Aubenque (1961; reprinted in 2009), pp. 51–52, n. 3.

⁷⁴ Strato, Fr. 19 Wehrli = 14 Sharples. Cf. Van Ophuijsen (1994), p. 132, n. 4, and on dialectic in the Hellenistic Peripatos more generally, Crivelli (2018).

⁷⁵ See the discussion of this issue in Van Ophuijsen (1994).

⁷⁶ Χρήσιμος δὲ ἡ τοιαύτη κατὰ τοὺς λόγους γυμνασία πρὸς εὐρεσιν τῶν ζητουμένων τε καὶ ἀληθῶν, ὡς καὶ αὐτὸς ἐρεῖ δι’ ὧν τὸ πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν αὐτῆς ἐκθήσεται χρήσιμον· προπαρασκευάζει γὰρ τὴν ψυχὴν. ὡς γὰρ τὰ τοῦ σώματος γυμνάσια γινόμενα κατὰ τέχνην εὐεξίαν περιποιεῖ τῷ σώματι, οὕτω καὶ τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς ἐν λόγοις γυμνάσια κατὰ μέθοδον γινόμενα τὴν οἰκείαν εὐεξίαν τῇ ψυχῇ περιποιεῖ· οἰκεία δὲ εὐεξία ψυχῆς λογικῆς ἢ δύναμις καθ’ ἣν εὐρετικὴ τε τοῦ ἀληθοῦς καὶ κριτικὴ γίνεται.

⁷⁷ Castelli (2015), p. 21.

that dialectic is useful for the discovery of truth and that, in *this* sense, it is not external to philosophy (οὐκ ἔξω φιλοσοφίας ἢ προκειμένη πραγματεία, 27.3–4).

Such a claim could surprise us, given what we have said above of Alexander’s effort to distinguish dialectic from the sciences in general and from metaphysics in particular. Yet such an effort is indeed found at the very beginning of the *Commentary on the Topics*, when Alexander distinguishes Aristotelian dialectic from its Stoic and Platonic rivals (in that order).⁷⁸ It is crucial for him to show that his rivals are mistaken in their wish to turn dialectic into a science, or at least into a capacity to draw inferences from true premises. For “dialectic does not have its being in syllogizing through what is true but through what is approved”.⁷⁹ Any other usage of the name ‘dialectic’ is “improper” (οὐκ οἰκείως, 3.23–24). In fact, the category of usage and the notion of instrument are precisely what allow us to reconcile the claim that dialectic is not external to philosophy with the claim that this same dialectic is not a science.

Alexander develops on the instrumental status of logic at the beginning of his *Commentary on the Prior Analytics*. At this point, such status is well established: it goes back to at least Andronicus of Rhodes,⁸⁰ and perhaps to others before him, as Diogenes Laertius reports,⁸¹ and is also found in Galen.⁸² However, it remains a minority view: beyond Aristotelian circles, the three-part structure of the *logos* (logic—physics—ethics) is dominant, especially the Stoic claim according to which logic is a part—and even the first daughter—of philosophy.⁸³ Alexander does not use *Organon* as the name referring to a set of treatises, but he does attempt to defend its meaning. The problem is posed at the beginning of the *Commentary on the Prior Analytics*: everyone agrees to admit logic as the product (ἔργον) of philosophy, but is it so as a part (μέρος) or as an instrument (ὄργανον)?⁸⁴ It would not serve my purpose in this paper to cover in detail the resulting extensive discussion of the issue by Alexander.⁸⁵ But I should at least point out the following: if the initial consensus makes logic the ἔργον of philosophy, then making logic an instrument does not mean it is external to philosophy. Logic is as much within the discipline of the philosopher as the hammer and anvil are within the blacksmith’s workshop: “A hammer and anvil are not precluded from being an instrument of the smith’s art by the fact that they are its product”.⁸⁶ Not only are the roles of product and instrument not contradictory—but the analogy further implies that, among the blacksmith’s productions, we will necessarily find second-order objects (like a hammer) which make possible the production of those artefacts which are the proper end of the blacksmith’s craft (like a sword).

⁷⁸ For an enlightening explanation of the non-chronological order, see Ierodiakonou (2018), pp. 116–117.

⁷⁹ *In Top.* 3.21–23: ὥστε οὐκ ἐν τῷ δι’ ἀληθῶν συλλογιζεσθαι ἢ διαλεκτικῇ τὸ εἶναι ἂν ἔχοι ἀλλ’ ἐν τῷ δι’ ἐνδόξων, (trans. Van Ophuijsen).

⁸⁰ See Moraux (1973), pp. 76–79, Barnes (1997b), pp. 33–37, Griffin (2015), pp. 31 and 33–34, and Hatzimichali (2016).

⁸¹ Cf. Griffin (2015), pp. 33–34.

⁸² Cf. Chiaradonna (2008).

⁸³ Cf. Ammonius, *In A.Pr.* 8.20–9.2 (SVF II.49) and, on this view, Barnes (1997a), p. 20.

⁸⁴ Alexandre, *In A.Pr.* 1.7–2.34.

⁸⁵ On this point, see Guyomarc’h (2017).

⁸⁶ *In A.Pr.* 2.20–22: “οὐδὲ γὰρ ἡ σφῦρα καὶ ὁ ἄκμων ὄργανον κωλύεται τῆς χαλκευτικῆς εἶναι, διότι αὐτῆς ἐστὶν ἔργα” trans. Barnes et al.

Expanding on the analogy, we may say that the metaphysician and the logician are one and the same person, but that they exercise two distinct activities. Likewise, the blacksmith is the best suited person to produce an anvil, but while making it, he is not—strictly speaking—exercising his craft, whose end is not to produce its own tools. This allows us to understand the passages where Alexander claims that it is the metaphysician’s task to develop a theory of demonstration—when he says, e.g., that “the general discussion of what demonstration is and how it is carried on” belongs to the metaphysician⁸⁷—or those passages where he claims that “the division of being into genera, which he carried out in the *Categories* belongs to first philosophy”⁸⁸ or where he maintains that it is the metaphysician’s task to study dialectical predicates.⁸⁹ As I have tried to show elsewhere,⁹⁰ the metaphysician and the dialectician both study some of the same objects—for instance, dialectical predicates—but they conduct such study from different perspectives: ἐπιστημονικῶς on the one hand and κατὰ τὸ ἔνδοξον on the other.⁹¹ This partial overlap in objects may be extended to all of logic—including categories or demonstrations. But the distinction between disciplines is established via distinctions in the modalities of discourses (scientific or not), and this very distinction ensures that dialectic can serve as an instrument for metaphysics.

The inclusion in philosophy of logic in general and of dialectic in particular, therefore, does not contradict the external role they have due to their instrumental status. It also explains why Alexander tends to reduce dialectic to its instrumental function and to exhaust it in its scientific purpose. His insistence on dialectic as a preparation for philosophy (προπαρασκευὴ πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν, 83.32) is not a commonplace statement but rather a proper claim on the nature of dialectic. We may even wonder if dialectic can be something beyond the preparation to scientific activity for Alexander: unless I am mistaken, all other references to dialectical meetings in the rest of the *Commentary on the Topics* directly and accurately echo Aristotle’s text.

Strictly speaking, the only non-scientific use of dialectic seems to be found in rhetoric—as shown in the commentary to dialectic’s second service, which I will cover quickly. In his comment, Alexander points out the need not to use true premises and demonstrations (ἀληθῶν τε καὶ ἀποδεικτικῶν, 28.4) to persuade the multitude, since “they are absolutely not even able to understand any of these things, and do not submit to being instructed about them either” (trans. Van Ophuijsen modified).⁹² Here, the service of dialectic is taken to fall under moral rhetoric and exhortative speeches—as one does in order to persuade the crowd that, for instance, pleasure is not the good. But—once again—we must understand the resort to “those things which are approved and are held to be so by these people themselves” (28.7–8) only insofar as they provide a starting point: “if one *starts* (ὀρμώμενος) from that which is common and approved, and so examines whether the interlocutor...”.⁹³ As our examples indicate, such starting point would ideally be dropped and eventually replaced as we move to a scientific view of moral issues—a view

⁸⁷ *In Met.* 266.24–25.

⁸⁸ *In Met.* 245.33–35.

⁸⁹ *In Met.* 177.8–10.

⁹⁰ I defended this claim in Guyomarc’h (2017).

⁹¹ *In Met.* 344.14–15.

⁹² *In Top.* 28.5–6: “οὐδὲ γὰρ τὴν ἀρχὴν συνιέναι τῶν τοιούτων δύνανται· ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ μανθάνειν ὑπομένουσι”.

⁹³ *In Top.* 28.16–17 (trans. Van Ophuijsen).

where, for instance, pleasure is technically defined as “a perceptible process toward a natural state” (γένεσιν εἰς φύσιν αἰσθητήν, 28.12).

4. The Usefulness of Dialectic: The Standpoint of Plausibility

The third service is the one which is of the greatest interest to us:

The third way that Aristotle sets out in which the study of dialectic is beneficial, is in its use for philosophy and scientific discernment, that is towards the finding and discerning of the truth. By ‘sciences which make up philosophy’ he means physics, ethics, logic and metaphysics.

(1) For those who can discern what is plausible as contributing to opposite conclusions, and can argue on either side of a question, will find out more easily on which side of the contradiction the truth lies, as if they had listened to both parties in a lawsuit. For just as the judge comes to know what is right through listening to both parties, so in philosophical inquiries at many points, it is not possible to find the truth easily without first having argued on both sides.

(2) What Plato says in the *Parmenides* accords with this: “Accustom and train yourself more, while you are young, in that art which is held to be useless and is called by the many ‘idle talking’—otherwise the truth will escape you”.⁹⁴

(3) Further, the person who knows the nature of what is plausible will not be led astray by it as if it were true, but will first distinguish what looks as if it were true from what is not true by comparing them to each other: for no one will be led astray by those who try to make the truth disappear if he is versed in the means by which they do so.

(4) In addition, the person who is apt at finding what looks just like the truth—*i.e.*, what is plausible—is the better prepared for finding out what is actually true.

(5) And further, if the person who speaks soundly and correctly about a subject is the one who argues in such a way that his arguments suffice also to solve the puzzles surrounding it, then it is clearly useful to be well-trained in the puzzles that may be raised with respect to it, for thus one could at once have a comprehensive view of the solutions to these puzzles (*In Top.* 28.23–29.16, trans. Van Ophuijsen, modified).⁹⁵

⁹⁴ *Parm.* 135d3–6: “ἔλκυσσον δὲ σαυτὸν καὶ γύμνασαι μᾶλλον διὰ τῆς δοκούσης ἀχρήστου εἶναι καὶ καλουμένης ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν ἀδολεσχίας, ἕως ἔτι νέος εἶ· εἰ δὲ μή, σὲ διαφεύζεται ἡ ἀλήθεια”.

⁹⁵ Τρίτον τῆς ὠφελείας αὐτῆς ἐκτίθεται τρόπον τὸν πρὸς φιλοσοφίαν καὶ τὴν κατ’ ἐπιστήμην γνῶσιν, τοῦτ’ ἔστι πρὸς τὴν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς εὕρεσιν τε καὶ γνῶσιν. <κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν> δὲ <ἐπιστήμας> εἶπε τὴν φυσικὴν, τὴν ἠθικὴν, τὴν λογικὴν, τὴν μετὰ τὰ φυσικά. **(1)** οἱ γὰρ δυνάμενοι τὰ πιθανὰ πρὸς τὰ ἀντικείμενα συντελοῦντα διορᾶν καὶ εἰς ἀμφοτέρα ἐπιχειρεῖν ῥῆσον ἂν εὕρισκοιεν ἐν ποτέρῳ αὐτῶν μέρει τῆς ἀντιφάσεως τὸ ἀληθές ἐστιν, ὥσπερ ἀντιδίκων ἀμφοτέρων τῶν μερῶν ἀκηκόετες. ὡς γὰρ ὁ δικαστὴς διὰ τοῦ ἀμφοτέρων ἀκοῦσαι τὸ δίκαιον γνωρίζει, οὕτως καὶ ἐν ταῖς κατὰ φιλοσοφίαν ζητήσεσιν ἐπὶ πολλῶν οὐχ οἷόν τε τὸ ἀληθές εὕρεῖν ῥαδίως μὴ πρότερον εἰς ἑκάτερον ἐπιχειρήσαντα. **(2)** συνάδει τούτῳ καὶ τὸ ὑπὸ Πλάτωνος εἰρημένον ἐν τῷ Παρμενίδῃ τὸ “ἔθισσον σαυτὸν καὶ γύμνασον μᾶλλον διὰ τῆς δοκούσης ἀχρήστου εἶναι καὶ καλουμένης ὑπὸ τῶν πολλῶν ἀδολεσχίας, ἕως ἔτι νέος εἶ· εἰ δὲ μή, διαφεύζεται σε ἡ ἀλήθεια”. **(3)** ἔτι ὁ εἰδὼς τὴν τοῦ πιθανοῦ φύσιν οὐκ ἂν ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ παραχθῆι ποτὲ ὡς ἀληθοῦς ὄντος, ἀλλὰ προκρίνοι ἂν τὰ φαινόμενα ἀληθῆ τῶν μὴ ἀληθῶν τῇ παραβολῇ αὐτῶν τῇ πρὸς ἄλληλα· δι’ ὧν γὰρ τὸ ἀληθές τινες ἀφανίζονται πειρῶνται, τούτοις τις ἐγγεγυμνασμένος οὐκ ἂν ὑπ’ αὐτῶν παράγοιτο. **(4)** πρὸς δὲ τούτοις ὁ τῶν ὁμοίως φαινομένων τῷ ἀληθεῖ εὕρετικός (τοιαῦτα δὲ τὰ πιθανὰ) καὶ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ ἀληθοῦς εὕρεσιν ἐτοιμότερος. **(5)** ἔτι δὲ εἰ δεῖ τὸν περὶ τινος ὑγιῶς τε καὶ ὀρθῶς λέγοντα τοιοῦτους τοὺς περὶ αὐτοῦ ποιεῖσθαι λόγους

On the one hand, this text deserves to be better known—since it is the only undeniable occurrence of “μετὰ τὰ φυσικά” referring to a science (rather than a treatise) in Alexander, and perhaps even in the whole of Antiquity.⁹⁶ On the other hand, the presence of logic among “sciences which make up philosophy” is certainly anomalous—but it can be accounted for via the distinction made at *Topics* I.14, 105b19–21 between three kinds of premises—ethical, physical and logical—in a passage well-known because it is sometimes considered to be one of the sources for the Hellenistic tripartition of philosophy.⁹⁷

But the most striking and novel aspect of this passage is the introduction of an element absent from Aristotle’s text, i.e., τὸ πιθανόν, what is “plausible” or “persuasive”. Alexander uses the concept to build a bridge in Aristotle’s text between “πρὸς ἀμφοτέρω διαπορῆσαι” (to develop an aporia by arguing on both sides) and “ἐν ἐκάστοις κατοψόμεθα ἀληθές τε καὶ τὸ ψεῦδος” (to discern, in each subject matter, the true and the false). Put concisely, Alexander asks the following question: how does diaporia allow us to discern the true and the false better? His answer: in exercising our capacity to discern the plausible, diaporia starts us on the path to truth. The premise for such an answer is a definition of the plausible as what resembles the true. The claim will appear stronger (and less banal) if we recall that Galen has precisely restricted metaphysical claims to πιθανά claims, theoretical philosophy being unable to test its claims and thus to reach truth.⁹⁸ This underlines how πιθανόν is already, at the time, an epistemological norm which can be used to characterize a discourse and situate it in the domain of knowledge. Alexander’s determination to make πιθανόν discourse a tool to serve in the search for truth is far from insignificant: on the contrary, it is an iconic feature of what has been called an “epistemocentric interpretation of [Aristotelian] logic”.⁹⁹

To justify the scientific use of dialectic, Alexander offers five arguments. The analogy with the judge (1) comes from *Metaphysics* B 1, 995b2–4. Drawing on this reference first shows how book *Beta* provides a prime example of such scientific use of dialectic. But it especially shows that, in his view, the non-dialogical use of dialectic is a part of the *Topics* from the outset, confirming that this is indeed his main interest in the matter. The analogy illustrates the comparative effect of diaporia: considering both sides of a question allows one to ascertain which position is strongest. Truth—like Justice—appears once the act of judging and deciding has taken place. Thus, the standpoint of plausibility is adopted during what might be called a trial, i.e., a moment dedicated to the evaluation of the respective plausibility of both positions.

The second argument contains a reference to Plato—a fact so uncommon in Alexandrian commentaries that it deserves our attention. Such references are indeed rare enough, but are not isolated phenomena either: for instance, on the subject of matter, Alexander cites the ‘bastard reasoning’ from *Timaeus* 52b

ὡς δύνασθαι δι' αὐτῶν λύεσθαι καὶ τὰ ἀπορούμενα περὶ αὐτοῦ, δῆλον ὡς χρήσιμον τὸ γεγυμνάσθαι ἐν τοῖς πρὸς αὐτὸ ἀπορεῖσθαι δυναμένοις· οὕτω γὰρ συνορᾶν δύναται' ἂν καὶ τὰς λύσεις τῶν ἀπορουμένων.

⁹⁶ Cf. Brisson (1999) and Narcy (2003). Concerning Alexander on this point, also see Guyomarc’h (2015), pp. 65–66.

⁹⁷ Cf. Hadot (1979), pp. 207–208, who shows convincingly that this text “ne peut faire allusion à une véritable division des parties de la philosophie”.

⁹⁸ Cf. Chiaradonna (2014).

⁹⁹ Cf. Brunschwig (1991), p. 425. For its application to Alexander, see Rashed (2000).

several times¹⁰⁰ and refers elsewhere to the *Parmenides*.¹⁰¹ The passage mentioned here is found at the end of the first part of the dialogue, after the reference to the young Aristotle at 135d (the one who was mixed up with Aristotle of Stagira in ancient interpretations). As we have said before, when Alexander introduces the rival accounts of dialectic at the beginning of his commentary, he starts with the Stoics (1.8–14), but he cannot be unaware of the chronological anteriority of the Platonists. Here, he restores the proper chronological order by placing Aristotelian dialectic under Platonic auspices. Holding the *Parmenides* to be the origin of Aristotle’s dialectical method is not an exclusively recent interpretation¹⁰²—it rather originates in Antiquity. In his *Commentary on the Parmenides*, Proclus points out that, for some exegetes, the “exercise” mentioned in the *Parmenides* passage refers to the method from the *Topics*:

However, since some commentators, relying on the word exercise would have it that this exercise is the dialectical method of the Peripatetics (for Aristotle, in stating its usefulness says that it contributes to exercise), although I have said a good deal in refutation of these in the Preface, yet now I would like to say something again briefly... (Proclus, *In Parm.* 981.1–9, trans. Morrow and Dillon).¹⁰³

Reading this, one may be tempted to infer that Alexander and Proclus simply draw from the same sources. For the “commentators” Proclus objects to, the connection between the two passages comes from the γύμνασαι at *Parmenides* 135d4 and the γυμνασία at *Top.* I.2, 101a27ff. Therefore, they are connecting the *Parmenides* passage with the first service of dialectic in *Top.* I.2, rather than with the third service—as Alexander does. Proclus reminds the reader, with some weariness, that he has already spent time refuting this attempt at reconciling Plato and Aristotle. In the proemium, the main reason he brings forward is precisely that Aristotelian dialectic does not allow us to see the true (κατίδοι τὸ ἀληθές, 653.1), by contrast with the dialectic Plato mentions in the *Parmenides* passage. The relation to truth is indeed exactly what is at stake, for the anonymous commentators as well as for Alexander and Proclus. Alexander and Proclus both maintain that Aristotelian dialectic does not depend on true premises, and thus does not in itself conduce to see truth. Yet, as Alexander points out at the very start of his commentary, dialectic as an instrument “contributes to finding the truth, which is the goal of philosophical study” (πρὸς τὴν εὔρεσιν τῆς ἀληθείας αὐτοῖς συντελοῦσα, ὃ τέλος ἐστὶ τῆς φιλοσόφου θεωρίας, 1.7–8, trans. Van Ophuijsen). Here, the commentary explicates the modalities of this “contribution”, i.e., it explains how dialectic keeps truth from “escaping” us.

This explication is the subject matter of the third and fourth arguments, focused on the πιθανόν. In other texts, Alexander also defines the πιθανόν based on its relation of resemblance or proximity with truth. The plausible is “what lies close to what is true” (τὸ παρακείμενον τᾷ ἀληθεῖ).¹⁰⁴ But “close” is a scalar predicate, i.e., it can vary in degree. It covers a range going from what appears to be true but is really false

¹⁰⁰ For instance, *In Met.* 164.20–21, *Quaestio* I 1, 4.10–11, and *In Phys. Scol.* 21 (Simplicius, *In Phys.* 542.19–22).

¹⁰¹ For instance, *In Met.* 52.6.

¹⁰² For instance, Berti (1980).

¹⁰³ ἐπειδὴ δέ τινες, τοῦ τῆς γυμνασίας ὀνόματος δραξάμενοι, τὴν παρὰ τοῖς Περιπατητικοῖς ἐπιχειρηματικὴν οἴονται μέθοδον ταύτην εἶναι τὴν γυμνασίαν (καὶ γὰρ ἐκείνης τὸ χρήσιμον λέγων ὁ Ἀριστοτέλης πρὸς τὴν γυμνασίαν αὐτὴν εἶναι φησι συντελοῦσαν), εἴρηται μὲν ἡμῖν ἐκ προομιῶν πολλὰ πρὸς τούτους· νυνὶ δὲ συντόμως τι πάλιν εἰπεῖν...

¹⁰⁴ *In A.Pr.* 8.25.

to what appears to be true and is really true. When Alexander speaks of the *πιθανόν*, he can also refer to what is simply false—for instance, to sophisticated claims which are “superficially plausible” (*ἐπιπόλαιον τὸ πιθανόν*)¹⁰⁵ or, using it in an evidently pejorative sense, to what is *only* likely.¹⁰⁶ This large scope of usages may be quite common at the time, as shown in a passage from Sextus Empiricus (drawing on Carneades, and which could in fact be Stoic in origin)¹⁰⁷ where three senses of *πιθανόν* are distinguished: what is true and appears true; what is false but appears true; what appears true and is common to both previous senses. In the rest of the Alexandrian corpus, the *πιθανόν* is also found, for instance, along with reasons and arguments, by contrast with the obviousness of facts,¹⁰⁸ or along with induction (an instrument of the dialectician) and contingency, by contrast with necessity.

In the *Commentary on the Topics*, *πιθανόν* is omnipresent to refer to the prime objective of the dialectician, which he must most aim at, and it is frequently associated with received ideas (*ἔνδοξα*).¹⁰⁹ It is quite unlikely that a term with such strong connotations as *πιθανόν* in Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic philosophy would be used innocently, *a fortiori* if it were used to comment Aristotelian texts where it is conspicuously absent.¹¹⁰ Some Aristotelian passages could authorize using it—for instance, when Aristotle defines the dialectical premise as what is neither universally rejected, nor obvious to everyone (I.10), he circumscribes an intermediary spot which plausibility could fill. But the reference remains distant. Alexander’s own use of *πιθανόν* thus testifies to a deliberate intervention and strategy on his part. In fact, if we search for the Aristotelian source of the term, we must turn to the *Rhetoric*. In *Rhet.* I.1, Aristotle announces that the task of rhetoric is to discern what is plausible (1355b10–11). But while *Rhet.* I.1 persistently draws dialectic and rhetoric closer together, the standpoint of plausibility is never explicitly attributed to dialectic. Yet, as we have seen already in his comment to the first service of dialectic, Alexander clearly reads the *Topics* with the *Rhetoric* in mind. Thus, he says at the beginning of the commentary:

Given the nature of dialectic, Aristotle reasonably calls it a counterpart to rhetoric, since it also deals with what is plausible, which is such because it is approved as well (*In Top.* 3.25–26, trans. Van Ophuijsen, heavily modified).¹¹¹

The alignment of dialectic with rhetoric takes place as early as the proemium of the *Commentary on the Topics*. In what is likely a quite standard wording, Alexander brings forward the notion that the range of rhetoric is less broad than the one of dialectic, insofar as the former is mostly political.¹¹² As Van Ophuijsen

¹⁰⁵ *In A.Pr.* 14.17.

¹⁰⁶ For instance, *De anima* 100.1.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. LS 69D; Sextus, *AM* VIII.174–175. Cf. Allen (1994) and Chiaradonna (2014), p. 76.

¹⁰⁸ For instance, *De fato*, 196.21 and *Quaest.* 3.12, 101.18.

¹⁰⁹ Including at *In Top.* 3.18ff.; 5.5; 29.6; 62.16; 87.7, etc. The association of “ἔνδοξα” with “πιθανά” is found in the commentary to *Metaphysics* Γ, and concerns—aptly—the dialectician (238.26 and 260.26).

¹¹⁰ It is the case in *Metaphysics* B. It is less true in the *Topics* (see, for instance, I.11, 104b14 and VIII.11, 161b35) which could have been Alexander’s sources.

¹¹¹ Τοιαύτην δὲ οὖσαν αὐτὴν εἰκότως καὶ ἀντίστροφόν φησιν Ἀριστοτέλης εἶναι τῇ ῥητορικῇ, ἐπειδὴ κάκεινῃ περὶ τὰ πιθανά, ἃ τῷ ἔνδοξα εἶναι καὶ αὐτὰ ἐστὶ τοιαῦτα.

¹¹² *In Top.* 5.5ff. and 6.18ff.

has aptly seen, the alignment goes both ways:¹¹³ rhetoric is described in terms reminding one of dialectical activity,¹¹⁴ and, conversely, dialectic adopts the standpoint of plausibility as well. The difference between rhetoric and dialectic resides not only in the more or less broad range of their object, but also in their form: one is performed via questions and answers; the other is continuous, ἐν ἐρωτήσῃ τε καὶ ἀποκρίσει, διεξοδικός. As Van Ophuijsen notes, the difference is, incidentally, never made by Aristotle but was well established in Alexander’s time—we will find traces of it in Diogenes Laertius concerning the Stoics, even using similar terminology.¹¹⁵ Finally, it is likely quite banal, in Alexander’s time, to conceive of ἐνδοξα as plausible or probable opinions—in the sense of *veri simile*—since it is already the case in Cicero, whose interest for *disputatio in utramque partem* is known.¹¹⁶

Alexander’s interpretation is original, because of how it imports πιθανόν in the *Topics* to justify the instrumental function of dialectic as a discipline serving the discovery of truth. The fifth argument paraphrases Aristotle’s text quite closely: the exercise of *diaporia* makes one capable to “discern the true as well as the false in any subject” (ἐν ἐκάστοις κατοψόμεθα τάληθές τε καὶ τὸ ψεῦδος, *Top.* I.2, 101a35–36, trans. Robin Smith), which Alexander reprises as “thus one could at once have a comprehensive view of the solutions to these puzzles” (οὕτω γὰρ συνορᾶν δύναι’ ἂν καὶ τὰς λύσεις τῶν ἀπορουμένων). Dialectical training serves the search for truth because it leads to the development of a kind of intellectual intuition, a capacity to sort and distinguish arguments and positions. The meaning of the fifth argument becomes clearer, however, if we consider it in light of what we have previously said. Negatively, plausibility training serves as a safeguard against error and dissimulation (in sophists?); positively, as we have seen, it serves to develop our capacity to approach the truth, *i.e.*, more precisely, to solve difficulties posed by the chosen subject matter.

This is indeed the capacity at work in *Metaphysics* B, whose commentary Alexander concludes by saying:

Here are the *aporiae* presented in *Beta*,¹¹⁷ whose arguments are [drawn] from accepted opinions (ἐνδόξων) and [conducted] on the level of plausibility (κατὰ τὸ πιθανόν). And indeed, it is impossible for people to argue for opposed positions, except by using dialectical (λογικαῖς) arguments; nor, for that matter, could the *aporiae* be solved, if this were not the case (*In Met.* 236.26–29, trans. Madigan modified).¹¹⁸

According to Alexander, what Aristotle displays in book *Beta* is precisely this *diaporetic* work where all involved sides are contrasted and the degree of likelihood of their views are evaluated. In such work, plausibility takes on the role of norm and evaluation criterion. Perhaps this is the way in which Alexander reconnects with the ambition of comprehensiveness which Aristotle seems to direct at book *Beta*: *Beta* is

¹¹³ On all that follows, cf. Van Ophuijsen (1994), pp. 151–154.

¹¹⁴ *In Top.* 27.21–24.

¹¹⁵ DL VII.42. Cf. Van Ophuijsen (1994), pp. 153, n. 189 and 190.

¹¹⁶ Cf., for instance, *De inventione* I.46, Glucker (1995), and Spranzi (2011), pp. 45–46.

¹¹⁷ The best manuscripts, A¹ and O, mention the “second” book (δευτέρω), but given the unstable place of book *α* and the possible confusions between the letters as book names and as numbers, these variations can be explained (see also, for instance, *In Met.* 344.22–25).

¹¹⁸ Ταῦτα τὰ ἐν τῷ Β ἡπορημένα, ἐξ ἐνδόξων τὰς ἐπιχειρήσεις ἔχοντα καὶ κατὰ τὸ πιθανόν· καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲ οἷόν τε εἰς τὰ ἀντικείμενα ἐπιχειροῦντας μὴ λογικαῖς ἐπιχειρήσεσι χρῆσασθαι· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἂν λύεσθαι δύναιντο, εἰ μὴ εἴχεν οὕτως.

not comprehensive in the sense that one should lay out all aporiae once and for all, as if the catalogue were thereafter closed, but in the sense that, on a given issue, we must let all plausible opinions be voiced and then follow them to their last development. For such is, following the *Commentary on the Topics*, the task of the dialectician who must “omit nothing” of what is plausible when he examines a question—just like the doctor (and other practitioners of stochastic crafts) who must do all in his power to help his patient.¹¹⁹ This involves, Alexander says, some measure of luck (“ἀπὸ τύχης”, 33, 19), in such a way that the goal of stochastic crafts is in part found outside defined procedures. In non-stochastic crafts (for instance, house-building), the function of the craft extinguishes itself in the production of the goal pursued. In medicine and dialectic, the goal pursued is not to heal the patient (*sic*, 33.1–2), nor is it to necessarily lead the interlocutor to contradict himself, but rather to implement all things conducing to such end, whose realization depends on other, external factors.

Concerning the aporiae from *Beta* precisely, this aspect is found in Aristotle’s continued efforts to develop the arguments involved in a given issue as much as possible, thus testing their plausibility. This is what Alexander means when, over the course of his commentary, he calls some arguments simply “logical” or merely “dialectical”.¹²⁰ Bringing views to their most extant development is also how one might reveal that their consequences oppose facts or turn out to be counter-intuitive. We may thus identify some positions as absurd in as early a stage of an investigation as dialectical exploration.¹²¹

That diaporica may be used for authentic exploration does not mean it is neutral; quite the opposite, even, since it tests plausibility. In this sense, the alternative—in which book *Beta* is either an open-ended and purely preliminary exploration (with no positive claims involved), or a settled summary, an exposition segment leading to a foregone conclusion—is biased. Diaporetic exploration requires argumentation and evaluation, and therefore involvement and engagement by a philosopher in this dialectic activity.

In other words, on dialectic’s path to the discovery of truth, the plausibility of one argumentation will place it closer or further away from truth. Dialectical work is precisely to try and determine *where* we stand on this path. Therein resides the heuristic character of dialectic. Alexander can thus also recognize in *Beta* moments where, according to him, Aristotle initiates a solution. For him, Aristotle will indeed undertake to “solve” the aporiae, and propose “λύσεις” for them.¹²² And this resolution work starts as early as book *Beta* itself (see for instance 195.13–14). In *Beta*, Aristotle also starts to refute some positions. It is this engagement on Aristotle’s part that explains why book *Beta* can be considered the true starting point of the *Metaphysics*—but a starting point only, since the standpoint of plausibility calls for its own overtaking.

Is Alexander’s interpretation then as systematizing as it is said to be? In *Beta*, at least, Alexander has not gone as far as Nicolaus of Damascus—who, according to Averroes, had sprinkled the aporiae of *Beta* all

¹¹⁹ *In Top.* 32.18–26 and Kupreeva (2017), pp. 238–239.

¹²⁰ For instance, 206.12–13 and 218.17.

¹²¹ For instance, 184.7, 191.5, 193.12–16, etc.

¹²² See especially the very clear text of 136.8–11.

over the treatise,¹²³ since he cites, as we have seen, only book Λ, and since Γ begins the resolution of some aporiae while not restricting itself to this task. Assuredly, Alexander has retrieved in the *Topics* the materials necessary to nourish a profitable interpretation of *Metaphysics* B—and *vice versa*. But he develops this interpretation so that the heuristic character of the aporetic method and its exploratory function are preserved, reinforcing, to that purpose, the purely instrumental status of dialectic. Thus, it is inaccurate to think that he completes the Aristotelian system by binding together domains of object, like the Stoic system does it—if only because Aristotelian logic is not a science and does not have any genus for an object. In this at least, the Exegete par excellence pays more attention to the deep-rooted concern for research which is inchoate and inherent to Aristotelian philosophy than he is commonly said to be.

¹²³ Fazzo (2008), pp. 116–117.

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