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Commentary on Christopher W. Tindale: “Revisiting Aristotle’s *Topoi*”

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I could not represent the main thesis of Chris Tindale’s paper better than by quoting the quintessential parts of the sentences with which his paper end:

[K]nowing one’s audience involves [...] [knowing] what kinds of *topoi* they will recognize and be able to locate in their own mental space. There is value in remembering this, value carried through the metaphor of place essentially attached to the concept of a *topos*; a value threatened if we think only of *topoi* as argumentation schemes.

Tindale’s thesis results from a ‘philological’ discussion of a number of remarks on the nature of *topoi* taken from Aristotle’s *Topics* and *Rhetoric* and Cicero’s *Topics*. In my commentary on his paper I would like to discuss three issues:

- 1) The value of a philological discussion of the writings of classical authors on the nature of argumentative concepts such as *topos* for present-day argumentation theory;
- 2) the emphasis on the persuasive power of the nature of *topoi* that such a discussion yields in Tindale’s case;
- 3) the internalizing perspective that Tindale assumes when explaining how *topoi* operate.

Ad 1: The value of philology

There is no doubt that the classical writings, especially those of Aristotle, Cicero and others such as Boethius, and also the writings of humanist and renaissance thinkers such as Agricola and Ramus, can be, and should be, regarded as a source of inspiration for those who are concerned with what has nowadays become the subject matter of argumentation theory. This is not to say, however, that the philological interpretation of each and every concept that is potentially crucial to present-day argumentation theory will yield a fruitful result *per se*. The main reason for this is that, apart from the cultural differences between the times in which these concepts were developed and the present, there are crucial differences between the purposes that the concepts concerned were supposed to serve in classical and pre-modern times and the purposes for which they are used in modern argumentation theory. This applies in particular to the concept of *topos*. It will not be mere speculation to say that this concept was developed by the classics first and foremost with an interest in their heuristic and productive purposes, and only secondarily – if at all – with an interest to provide a tool for the analysis and evaluation with which contemporary argumentation theorists are concerned. For most, if not all, schools that can be discerned in modern argumentation theory – such as informal logic, pragma-dialectics, and formal or immanent dialectics – the primary concern is how

arguments can be critically analyzed and scrutinized, not how they can be efficiently produced. The latter can at most be seen as a derivative of the analytic and critical aims. This is, of course, not to depreciate the efforts of authors with a clear concern for argumentation theory like Braet and Rubinelli, as well as Tindale himself, whose aim is to give a sensible and potentially fruitful interpretation of classical concepts such as the *topoi*. Still, I would maintain that, for the afore-mentioned reasons, these authors should in this respect – and in this respect only – be considered as historians of dialectic and rhetoric rather than as argumentation theorists in the strict sense of the word.

Ad 2: Persuasive power

What immediately springs to the eye, to maintain Tindale's 'visual' terminology, is that, even being an argumentation theorist himself, Tindale is, at least in this paper, and in connection with his analysis of the concept of *topos*, not primarily – or perhaps not at all – interested in the critical function that the application of *topoi* can fulfill in the course of an argumentative exchange, nor in the critical function of the application of critical instruments, such as critical questions, that can be brought to bear to evaluate the use of a particular *topos*. His main interest lies in the *persuasive* – or *strategic* – *power* that *topoi* can have, and, more in particular, how this persuasive power can be explained. (This is probably the cause of why Tindale seems to misrepresent Braet when he says that Braet opposes the logical form of a *topos* to the persuasive scheme that it invokes, whereas Braet is in fact primarily concerned with the opposition between the logical form of a *topos* and the argument scheme it displays in the critical sense of the concept of argument scheme – but this is an aside.) The persuasive power of *topoi* lies, according to Tindale, not only in the fact that the arguer, on the basis of what he thinks his audience will accept, finds a "commonplace" that will warrant the transition from the premise he advances to the thesis at issue, but equally in the fact that the audience recognizes this "commonplace" as a "commonplace" and is thereby led to collaborate in completing the argument. With the availability of "commonplaces", to quote Tindale, "both arguers and audiences have recourse to packing and unpacking argumentative discourse."

If I am right, Tindale's interpretation of how *topoi* work persuasively seems to confuse the persuasive function of *topoi* with that of *enthymemes*. Tindale may be right in claiming that the audience that is confronted with a certain *topos* should "pick up" that *topos* as something it adheres to, but if the *topos* is made explicit in the argument – even if only to the slightest extent –, then there is nothing for the audience to unravel: everything is, in principle, already there. To this objection, Tindale might respond by saying that what he actually means is that 'halfway' the argument, once the *topos* has been invoked, the audience recognizes its "universal appeal" and will, on the basis of this recognition, 'actively' go along with the transition from the premise to the thesis. Still, the closeness of all this to the usual analysis of the workings of the *enthymeme* should be apparent.

Ad 3: Internalization

At this point, my comments will have to become a little more critical. In the last section of the paper, Tindale rejects the whole view of *topoi* as being abstract forms or schemes to be substantiated at the occasion in which the argument is made, and argues instead for an interpretation of *topoi* as rules or principles, as "routes to an end", as no more than "a way to proceed." My first point of criticism is that the latter view does not seem to differ so much from the one rejected – it is indeed not at all clear to me what the difference

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between a scheme and a principle (or rule) is; most that can be said here is that a scheme *will be based on* a principle (or rule), but this is not a principled difference, merely one of hierarchy. But the more important point of criticism arises when Tindale makes the shift from the idea that the principles that *topoi* invoke are social, interactional principles to the view that they are in the first place principles that are *mentally shared*: for a *topos* to work, it should be operative in the arguer's and audience's *cognitive environment*, a *shared mental space* in which the *topos* that is applied relates to other ideas – and one might suspect: a *mental network* of ideas. My criticism of this mental analysis is that such an analysis of the workings of *topoi* can at most function as a *psychological primitive*, a preliminary – or a *precondition*, as Tindale himself says, and I would say, admits – for the explanation of the workings of *topoi* in social, interactional terms. And the latter type of explanation is necessary if the analysis of *topoi* – or, for that matter: of argument schemes – is to serve more than mere psychological speculation, and be of use in the analysis and evaluation of real-life arguments. It is also for this reason that in the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, but not only in this theory, emphasis is put on the theoretical principles of externalization and socialization. The application of these principles forces the analyst to concentrate on the commitments that arguers undertake in their interaction with other arguers, and discourages him from speculating about – or worse: including in the analysis and evaluation – what the arguers may have had in mind when advancing and accepting or not accepting standpoints and arguments – even if their mind may be part of some or other 'cognitive environment' made up of a certain quantity of shared 'mental space.'

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