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Commentary on Christina Pontoppidan's "Where Do You Place Your Argument? The Toulmin Model Revisited and Revised from a Rhetorical Topical Perspective"

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1. Introduction

Christina Pontoppidan's paper has two different parts, a destructive one and a constructive one. In the first part she aims to demonstrate that Stephen Toulmin's model of argument, so heartily embraced (and employed) by many rhetoricians, is in fact still a much more logical than rhetorical model. In the second part she develops instead what she regards as a truly rhetorical model of the process of creating a persuasive argument. Although this model is much less a revision than a replacement of Toulmin's model, both have more in common than it would seem.

2. Toulmin and the topics

Pontoppidan is certainly right in observing that Toulmin's structural model, in spite of the book's title promising to investigate the *uses* of argument, still works rather as a tool for evaluating the soundness of given arguments than as practical instruction on how to build arguments, and has hence not really essentially detached itself from the classical background of formal logic. She rightly points to the basically logical vocabulary Toulmin uses.

Toulmin himself, however, was convinced that he had rediscovered "the topics of Aristotle's *Topics*." It is probably no coincidence that in the same period also other scholars (such as most prominently Chaïm Perelman & Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958; see Warnick, 2000) began to turn the dialectical Aristotle of the *Topics* against the syllogistic Aristotle of the *Analytics*. Yet Pontoppidan insists that Toulmin actually missed the real rhetorical and inventive potential of Aristotle's *Topics*. Based on work by Christopher Tindale (2007), she differentiates between the dialectical use of topics in the *Topics* (which was the one that mainly appealed to Toulmin) and their rhetorical employment in the context of the *Rhetoric*.

However, it is not quite so easy to discern between a dialectical and a rhetorical concept of topics in Aristotle. In fact, Aristotle already sets his *Topics* a double task: It is meant to be useful *both* as an instruction on how to find and construct good and efficient arguments *and* as a means for testing other people's arguments for soundness (ch. 2, 101a25-b4). Moreover, it never gets entirely clear if Aristotle regarded a *topos* as a precast argument scheme or rather as a particular premise of some kind. The latter seems to be implied when we learn that what a debater needs to do in a dialectical exchange is first define the conclusion to be reached (as a rule the contradictory of the opponent's claim) and then work logically backwards to find appropriate premises from which the intended result can be successfully deduced. But since these premises

need to secure approval from the opponent, they must be *éndoxa* (opinions that have the approval of a majority of people or of the best experts or of a majority thereof). In other words, they must represent some common ground between the arguers.

Notoriously, Aristotle never defines his notion of *topos* in the *Topics*. The closest he ever comes to a definition is in the *Rhetoric*, Book II chapter 26: “a *topos* is a heading under which many enthymemes fall.” (*Rhet.* 1403a18-19, Trans. Kennedy, 1991, p. 214). This, however, sounds more like the definition of an argument scheme than a place where to go to find arguments (even less so an advice where to place an argument, as Pontoppidan, p. 6, seems to insinuate). It is only Cicero who is more explicit on *loci* being “places from which arguments can be retrieved,” and not only in the passage from *De oratore* cited by Pontoppidan (p. 5, the precise reference is *De or.* II, 41, 174), but also in his own *Topica* (*sedes, e quibus argumenta promuntur, Topica* 7; cf. Leff, 1983), where he attributes this view also to Aristotle; whether rightly so, we cannot tell.

Hence, Pontoppidan may be right in accusing Toulmin of having missed the creative or heuristic potential of the topics as a method to *find* and *build* persuasive arguments. But this he could probably only have found in Cicero (or, for that matter, Quintilian), yet not really in Aristotle, not even in the *Rhetoric*. For the list of topical enthymemes that Aristotle presents in *Rhetoric* II 23 is again an inventory of formal argument schemes (or inference warrants in Toulminian parlance; see Braet, 2005). And it may be misleading to cite Aristotle’s famous definition of rhetoric as the art of “*discovering* the available means of persuasion” (1355b); this may easily be a (very popular) mistranslation, since the Greek verb in question is *theōrēsai*, which might better be translated as “contemplating theoretically” than “discovering.” It may refer to the stipulated epistemological rank of rhetoric as a theorizable art rather than to an inventive process.

Toulmin may therefore after all not have misrepresented his topical Aristotle all that much.

3. The ‘rhetorical’ model

All this, of course, does not in the least tell against the merits of Pontoppidan’s own alternative model of rhetorical invention expounded in the second part. Differently from Toulmin’s, it works exclusively with clearly rhetorical concepts such as ‘standpoint’, ‘common ground’ and ‘proof’. It defines persuasion as the ultimate aim of rhetorical argument, and audience orientation as its essential feature (for which Tindale’s most relevant book of 2015 could have been cited along with his 2007 paper). In that context it may be noted that the omission of a premise is by no means “a defining feature” of Aristotle’s concept of the enthymeme (p. 6); it is just a possibility recommended in the interest of not boring one’s audience. Moreover, Wenzel’s observation (1987) that a rhetorical perspective would regard arguing as a persuasive process (as opposed to a product or procedure) is interpreted as also applying to the process of building an argument, which may be an extension of what Wenzel originally had in mind.

Pontoppidan’s model starts from a persuader’s “standpoint”, i.e., the view the persuader firmly commits himself to. This is quite like what Kenneth Burke may have meant by “truth” (1931, p. 212), or what Joachim Knape, in deliberate orthographical distortion of a Latin term, has called the orator’s “zertum” (2000, p. 76). Without a standpoint, no “rhetorical situation” (Bitzer, 1968) or “rhetorical case” (Knape, 2000, p. 76) will come about in the first place. It may be disputable, though, if ancient stasis theory is the best guidance for finding one’s standpoint,

since it was essentially devised for courtroom speeches and is not always easily applicable to other kinds of oratory. Yet standpoints may be of various kinds, depending on (as Toulmin might have said) “fields of argument”.

Next, from audience orientation it follows that the persuader must search for common ground shared between audience and persuader in order to be persuasive. Modern cognitive theory has spoken of the requirement that speaker and audience must share “cognitive environments” in order to enable persuasive communication (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). This is a modern adaptation of Aristotle’s concept on *éndoxa* in the *Topics*. Basing their arguments on *éndoxa* is a point the dialectician and the rhetorician have in common over against the scientist.

Pontoppidan’s graphic model obviously allows for a plurality of common grounds, depending on a plurality of different audiences. That means that a good persuader will adapt his or her argument to the best common ground available in any given situation in the face of any given audience. This is perhaps the moment where *topoi* may help most. Yet the lists of *topoi* Pontoppidan mentions in that context are heterogeneous. On the one hand (p. 8), she cites Aristotle’s *télē* or “ends” specific to each genre of speech and the ultimate “ends” of all argumentation that we find in the *Rhetoric to Alexander* (which is not really addressed to Alexander the Great, but is just called so because in manuscripts it is preceded by a fake dedicatory letter to Alexander) in ch. 1.4, 1421b. But the *topoi* she mentions on p. 8 (economy, environment, ethics, health culture, legislation, aesthetics, religion) are of a very different kind: they refer to different subject matters, quite in the sense of Toulmin’s “fields”. Actually, the *Rhetoric to Alexander* offers a quite similar list of subject matters (ch. 2.2, 1423a).

From established common ground the persuader will finally search for proofs, which, together with common ground, will justify the standpoint. Here again, the persuader will look for topical tools. But these will now be related to forms or types of proofs (examples, analogies, enthymemes, inductions, expert opinions, research results etc.) rather than to contents. Does this not bring us back to argument schemes again? Of course, Pontoppidan insists that from a rhetorical point of view it is not the logical form of the argument that is important, but its heuristic function. Yet in the end, one can’t help feeling that on each of these three steps of the rhetorical model, topics means something slightly different.

Appealing as Pontoppidan’s model may be to rhetoricians, one may still play devil’s advocate and ask if the same heuristic process might not be described by Toulmin’s model as well. For, in Toulmin’s vocabulary, any arguer (or persuader) will first need to determine his or her claim (standpoint). Next, he or she will try to find a convenient warrant that can reasonably be expected to be shared by the individual persuadee (common ground). And finally, he or she will search for data (proofs) that, together with the warrant, will justify the claim.

To use one of Toulmin’s standard examples, if it is my firm standpoint that Harry is a British subject, and it is my aim to persuade some other person of this conviction, what I will first look for is some general rule that I can reasonably assume to be shared by my audience or opponent, for instance that people born in Bermuda are British subjects (which can be backed by the argument that Bermuda is a British Overseas Territory and people born in such Territories are British subjects). If this is granted, all I need to do is produce evidence (data) for the fact that Harry was born in Bermuda, such as his birth certificate or his own allegation or even a friend’s testimony.

4. Conclusion

In sum, Pontoppidan's observation that Toulmin's alleged rediscovery of the topics of the *Topics* still retains a distinctive dialectical and logical ring that both dismissive logicians and enthusiastic rhetoricians have failed to notice is perfectly correct. The heuristic topical model of argument invention and construction that she proposes instead is in itself a very appropriate and useful tool for describing the process of building an argument from topical grounds in a rhetorical context. It uses rhetorical vocabulary where Toulmin uses logical terms. Yet the process of argument building and the process of persuasion are still two different processes. And the Toulmin model can perhaps be adapted to both. It just depends how one reads it. If one reads it top down (or left to right), it becomes a logical model for argument evaluation. But if one reads it bottom up (or right to left), it may equally well describe the heuristic process of argument building. Aristotle, in his *Topics*, too, goes both ways.

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