Dialectical Method in the Aristotelian
Athenaion Politeia

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Both content and form of the *Athenaion Politeia*, as scholars have long observed, are in agreement with what Aristotle¹ says elsewhere, and are indeed what one might well expect an Aristotelian treatment of the Athenian democracy to contain.² The work consists of a history of the mechanisms of state, showing how one organ after another became in turn the most important,³ followed by a synchronic account of the state machinery in the late fourth century.⁴ The account of Solon as the μέσος πολίτης and consequently the consummate Athenian politician (*Ath.Pol.* 5.3, 11.2) squares with Aristotle’s philosophy in general⁵ and with his political theory in particular.⁶ The *Ath.Pol.*’s insistence on this point, and others as well, suits the exemplary and didactic purpose Aristotle assigns to the collection and study of constitutions (*Eth.Nic.* 1181b6–9).

What is the historical methodology of the *Ath.Pol.?* I shall argue that certain aspects of the gathering, use, or neglect of source material in the historical part can be explained with reference to Aristotle’s theory of scientific and philosophical method. In particular I shall address the *Ath.Pol.*’s ‘contamination’ and ‘rationalizing correc-

¹ I use this name for the sake of convenience. It is immaterial to my argument whether the author of the *Ath.Pol.* was Aristotle himself or one of his pupils, a suggestion now revived by P. J. Rhodes, *A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaion Politeia* (Oxford 1981: hereafter ‘Rhodes’) 58–63.
⁵ E.g. *Eth.Nic.* 1096a25, 1105b26ff.
⁶ *Pol.* 1295b4–96a7 (ομολογείται το μέτριον ἀριστον καὶ το μέσον).
tion' of sources. Both these techniques can be explained by taking into account what Aristotle is likely to have thought about historical 'facts' and sources, and about history and politics as sciences. One cannot find absolute certainty in historical investigation, nor complete agreement among historical sources. Aristotle's epistemology will therefore not recognize history as a science stricto sensu. It is not the analytical, but the dialectical method that informs the Ath.Pol. We may consider first the problematic aspects of its method, then the dialectical method itself, and finally an instance of its application.

Within a given section of his historical narrative, Aristotle often follows one main source, but will add at will items drawn from another source. He does this even when the second source has a tendency contradictory to the main source. He also makes up his own narrative of some parts of Athenian history, drawing individual data from various sources at once. The most extensive treatment of these procedures is that of G. Mathieu, who spoke of a tendency to 'mix' or also to 'reconcile' various historical sources with one another. Thus, for example, in chapters 14–15 the narration of the rise of Peisistratus derives mainly from Herodotus; Aristotle juxtaposes this narrative with a (disagreeing) chronology drawn from an Atthis, and adds some other matter as well. Thucydides is a main source of the narrative in chapters 29–33 on the Four Hundred and the Five Thousand, but an apologetic source, which will have cited documents, is also used. On the other hand, the author himself put together the account of the Thirty and the Ten from several sources.

In a brief comparison of Aristotle’s methods in the Ath.Pol. and in his biological writings, M. Pokrowsky drew attention to evidence that even the supposedly strict, empirical naturalist commingled his own observations with the reports of others. On occasion Aristotle even corrected such second-hand reports not on the basis of any observed evidence to the contrary but merely in order to make the reports more plausible. Pokrowsky called such changes “rein rationalistische Verbesserungen.” For example, Aristotle (Hist.An. 502a13) repeats Herodotus’ description of the hippopotamus (2.71, οὐρήν ὁππόν καὶ φωνήν μέγαθος δοσον τε βοῖς ὃ μέγατος) but makes one change: it is not as large as an ox, but only the size of a donkey (μέγεθος δ’

1 G. Mathieu, Aristote, Constitution d’Athènes: Essai sur la méthode suivie par Aristote dans la discussion des textes (Brussels 1915) 11, 26f, 50f, 72, 115, 124; cf. Rhodes 27ff, 50, 55.

2 See Rhodes 191–99; 29, 365–68; and 420ff.

Herodotus’ assertion that Ethiopians have black semen (3.101.2) is countered by Aristotle on the ground that Ethiopians do not have black teeth.10 Again, Aristotle repeats Herodotus’ note that the crocodile is blind in the water (2.68), but he expresses himself less categorically (Hist.An. 503a11, βλέπουσι δ’ ἐν μὲν τῷ ἕβατι φαύλωσ). Similarly, in the Ath.Pol. Aristotle several times corrects or contradicts his sources on grounds of likelihood. He asserts that the second of the three original property qualifications, the cavalry, was “more likely” to have been determined by a measure of produce en gros, as was the case with the pentakosiomedimnoi, than by one’s ability to keep a horse. The latter was the contention of some sources which adduced in evidence Anthemion’s dedication of a statue of a horse upon becoming a knight.11 Those who say that Solon’s laws were purposely vague, so that the courts would have more power, are contradicted by Aristotle on grounds of likelihood (9.2, οὐ μὴν εἰκός). Likewise, Aristotle places the disarming of the population at the beginning of Peisistratus’ third tyranny (15.4–5), in accordance with his general rules about the establishment of tyranny.12 Then he is forced to contradict Thucydides’ account of the disarming of the men in the Panathenaic procession by Hippias (Thuc. 6.56.2–3, Ath.Pol. 18.4).

How could Aristotle make so free with his sources as to mix them and play them off one against the other, accepting or rejecting data as he saw fit, without pausing to consider what doubt was thereby cast both on his sources and on his own account? The answer lies in Aristotle’s conception of the nature of his enterprise and its limitations.

In the Poetics Aristotle contends that history, because it tends to deal with the particular rather than the universal, is less philosophical than poetry:13

10 Gen.An. 736a10: Ἡροδότος γὰρ οὐκ ἀληθῆ λέγει φάσκων μέλαιναι εἶναι τῆς τῶν Ἀθηνῶν γυνῆς, ὥσπερ ἀναγκαίον ὅτι τῶν τῆς χρύσας μελάνων εἶναι πάντα μέλαινα, καὶ ταῦτ’ ὅρων καὶ τῶν ἀδύνατος αὐτῶν ἄντων ῥυτικοῦς. See also the immediately preceding a priori polemic against Ctesias of Cnidus (736a2ff).

11 Ath.Pol. 7.4: οὐ μὴν ἀλλ’ εὐλογότερον τοὺς μέτρους δημήτριο θαθάπερ τοὺς πεντακοσιομεδίμνους.

12 Pol. 1311a12–14. On the topographical and chronological improbability of Aristotle’s account see U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, Aristoteles und Athen I (Berlin 1893) 289–92; Mathieu (supra n.7) 40f. The theory that this disarmament is an Aristotelian inference is strengthened by the fact that Aristotle has Peisistratus say almost the same thing after the disarmament (Ath.Pol. 15.5, οὐ χρή θαυμάζειν οὐδὲ ἀθυμεῖν, ἀλλ’ ἀπελθόντας ἐπὶ τῶν ἰδίων εἶναι, τῶν δὲ κοινῶν αὐτὸς ἐπιμελήσεται πάνωτα) as Herodotus does after the battle at Pallene (1.63.2, θαρσεῖ τε κελεύοντες καὶ ἀπείναι ἐκάστοτε ἐπὶ τὰ ἐσωτερικά). See also Rhodes 213.

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This characterization of history means that, for Aristotle, history cannot be an investigation in which demonstration (ἀπόδειξις) and scientific understanding (ἐπιστήμη) figure (Metaph. 1039b27–40a7), for ἐπιστήμη is only of τὸ καθόλου. Moreover, in Aristotle’s view there is no demonstration of what is not eternal and unchanging, nor is there any knowledge of it in an unqualified sense (An. Post. 75b21–26):

If it is not a fit subject for strict scientific investigation, history will have to make do with premises that are less than certain and reach conclusions that are also only likely, not certain.

Besides dealing with particular occurrences, political history has other characteristics which make it an unfit subject for apodictic reasoning. It is about the doings and development of states, which are composed of parts which, in turn, are constituted by people. Wherever the actions of people are concerned, choice and deliberation figure among the explanatory factors. This is not true of an art or techne, which does not deliberate about its goals or methods (Ph. 199b28ff). Politics and the history of—or rather the explanation of—the development of—politics in any state fall under the science of ethics.

Aristotle has a particular methodology for dealing with subjects like ethics, where scientific accuracy and invariability are not to be ex-


14 Int. 19a7–8; Eth. Nic. 1112a18ff, 1104a5–10.
15 Cf. e.g. An. Post. 71b9–12: ἐπιστήμη δὲ ὀπόμεθ᾽ ἐκαστον ἀπλώς ... ὅταν τὴν τ᾽ αἰτίαν ὀφειλεῖν γνωσκεῖν δ᾽ ἥν τὸ πράγμα ἐστιν, ὅτι ἐκεῖνον αἰτία ἡστι, καὶ μὴ ἐνδέχεσθαι τοιαύτ᾽ ἄλλωσ ἐξειν, and Ph. 184a12ff.
16 Eth. Nic. 1180a32ff, 1181b14ff.
pected in the premises or the conclusions of arguments. The method is called dialectic, and Aristotle describes it in detail in the Topics. This work, perhaps an instruction manual for the Academy’s course on debating, gives a set of rules for solving ‘dialectical problems’, problems that result when the many and the wise disagree with one another or among themselves (Top. 100b21–23).

One such dialectical problem was that of ἀκρασία or weakness of the will. In his discussion of the conflicting opinions about akrasia (Eth.Nic. 1145f), Aristotle gives his clearest example of the dialectical method. He begins by explaining his method (b2–7):

Next he lists seven beliefs about weakness held by many people (ἐνδοξα), concluding with the words τὰ μὲν οὖν λεγόμενα ταῦτ’ ἐστίν. Then various problems arising from these beliefs in combination with one another or with other beliefs are set out (ἀπορία). Finally, he gives a solution (λύσις) of these problems, i.e. a theory of weakness which ‘saves’ as many of the common beliefs as possible. It is important to save as many of the ἐνδοξα as possible, because the opinions of the wise and the many are not likely to be wholly without truth. Indeed, whatever all agree upon is true.

It is not only in studies such as ethics that dialectic is useful. Aristotle says that dialectic is the method to be used in clarifying the ‘starting points’ (ἀρχαι) of every science, since no science can examine its own ἀρχαι (Top. 101a34–b4). These starting points include axioms and also general concepts, such as place (Ph. 208a27ff) and the eternity of the universe (Cael. 270b4ff). They will be examined on the basis of the opinions of the wise and of the many (ἐνδοξα). These include, for example, philosophical theories, concepts implied in our ordinary language, and the products of observation, both in our daily lives and in the pursuit of science (φαινόμενα κατ’ αἰσθήσιν, e.g. Cael. 306a16–17); all these data can be referred to as φαινόμενα or ἐνδοξα, and they will be different, as the subjects to be in-

17 Eth.Nic. 1094b11ff: because of the πλάνη and διαφορά in political matters, one ought not to look for τάκραβις, but rather describe matters τύπως. Cf. 1104a1–5.
19 Cf. Metaph. 993a30–b5, τὰς ἐν θύρας ἀμάρτον;
vestigated will differ.\textsuperscript{21} We shall see that in history, too, various kinds of \textit{ἐνδοξά} present themselves to the researcher for consideration.

Insofar as any inquiry is about the starting points of science or begins from observations which are not invariable and which may conflict, that inquiry will be dialectical. Characteristics of the observations and authorities themselves will determine, when there is a conflict, whether any particular ‘phenomenon’ is ‘saved’ or not. Does the observation cohere with what we already know? Is the authority trustworthy? These are the questions that one must ask. Thus, in many cases the beliefs of the wise will clearly take precedence over the beliefs of others,\textsuperscript{22} and of these the beliefs of the wisest will count for most.\textsuperscript{23} Some of our beliefs are so secure that any datum or theory which contradicts them must be dismissed.\textsuperscript{24}

Political history is a dialectical inquiry in this sense. Its sources, especially for the earlier periods, were unreliable—οἱ μυθολογοῦντες, Aristotle calls them at one point\textsuperscript{25}—and often contradictory. Unreliable stories could at times be supported or contradicted by \textit{σημεῖα},\textsuperscript{26} such as survivals of ancient practices in contemporary language or custom. Thus, the fact that the eponymous archon was the last of the three major offices to be instituted is shown by the circumstance that


\textsuperscript{22} \textit{E.g.} Eth.Eud. 1214b28–15a4: πάσας μὲν οὖν τὰς δόξας ἐπισκοπεῖν . . . περίεργον . . . τὰς δὲ τῶν σοφῶν ἐπισκεπτεῖν μόνας· ἀτοπον γὰρ προσφέρειν λόγοιν τοὺς λόγου ληθέν δεομένως, ἄλλα πάθοις.

\textsuperscript{23} Top. 100b22f: τοῖς σοφοῖς, καὶ τούτοις ἡ πάσαν ἡ τοῖς πλείστοις ἡ τοῖς μᾶλλον γνωρίσοι καὶ ἐνδόξοις.

\textsuperscript{24} The most fundamental of all beliefs is the principle of non-contradiction (\textit{Metaph.} 1005b19–34). One interpretation of Parmenides’ theory of the One is dismissed (\textit{Ph.} 185b19ff) on the grounds that it conflicts with this most basic axiom. \textit{Cf.} Nussbaum \textit{(supra} n.21) 283–89.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Pol.} 1312a3 on Sardanapalus: εἰ ἀληθῆ ταῦτα οἱ μυθολογοῦντες λέγοντων, εἰ δὲ μὴ ἐπ’ ἐκείνου, ἀλλ’ ἐπ’ ἄλλου γε ἐν γένειοι τοῦτο ἀληθές. Compare Hecataeus \textit{FGH} H 1f1: οἱ γὰρ ἕλληνων λόγοι πολλοὶ τε καὶ γελοῖοι.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Cf.} Mathieu \textit{(supra} n.7) 26; Rhodes (59) points out that this form of argument was not only Aristotelian.
he, unlike the basileus and polemarch, does not administer any of the πάτρια (Ath. Pol. 3.3, σημείου). The present-day venue of the marriage of the basileus’ wife and Dionysus is used as a σημείου of the location of the basileus’ original seat (3.5). That Peisistratus’ party, the diakrioi, included those of impure descent is proved to Aristotle by the revision of the citizen’s roll after the fall of the tyranny (13.5, σημείου).

The less reliable the ἐνδοξὰ from which the investigation begins, the less basic are the philosophical beliefs or theses which will be allowed to contradict or alter them. The opinion of an illustrious predecessor will only be altered if it conflicts with something of which the researcher is quite certain. The opinion of someone not well respected may be altered on less than compelling grounds. These alterations of ἐνδοξὰ will include the “rein rationalistische Verbesserungen” of Pokrowsky.

If, therefore, the accounts which the historian is trying to ‘save’ produce ἀπορία because they conflict with one another or with beliefs to which the historian is more attached, then the accounts must be altered in order to be saved. Sometimes a story could be shown to be inconsistent with uncontested fact, as the report that Solon and Peisistratus had been lovers was inconsistent with the dates of those two politicians (Ath. Pol. 17.2).27 Sometimes a piece of evidence may be used silently to correct a datum. Thus, it is possible that the amount of Peisistratus’ tax on produce is changed from five percent (Thuc. 6.54.5, εἰκοστὴν μόνον) to ten percent (Ath. Pol. 16.4) on the basis of the story about the ‘tax-free farm’, in which a tithe was mentioned (16.6, τὴν δεκάτην).28 In other cases a generalization serves as evidence that a specific claim should be rejected. So the charge that Solon allowed some of his friends to enrich themselves, and may even have enriched himself, using advance information about the seisachtheia (6.2) must yield to the ‘democratic’ account, which is πιθανώτερος, because a man as moderate in all things as Solon is not likely to have sullied himself in such small and unworthy matters.29 Here Aristotle’s strongly-held general characterization of Solon resolves the ἀπορία presented by two opposing accounts.

27 Rhodes 26 gives a complete list of places where Aristotle says why he prefers one account to another.
28 Day/Chambers (supra n.2) 95. Rhodes 215 accepts the suggestion of K. J. Dover in Gomme, et al., Historical Commentary on Thucydides IV (Oxford 1970) 329, that δεκάτην be interpreted as a generic term, which could include the more specific εἰκοστὴν.
29 Ath. Pol. 6.3: οὐ γὰρ εἰκὸς ἐν μὲν τοῖς ἄλλοις οὕτω μέτρου γενέσθαι καὶ κοινὸν . . . ἐν οὕτω δὲ μικρός καὶ ἀναξίως καταρρυθναίνει εὐαντόν.
In the light of these examples, it is possible to argue that all the changes made by Aristotle in Thucydides’ account of the assassination of Hipparcenus were introduced in order to bring the incident into line with a single Aristotelian thesis about stasis. Aristotle believes, namely, that revolutions happen from trifles, but about great issues. Political imbalances form the background for the political conspiracies which seize upon erotic happenstances and other incidents, using them as occasions for revolution.

Aristotle states that Hippias and Hipparcenus controlled Athens after the death of Peisistratus, makes Hipparcenus out to be a poorly-behaved fellow, lacking in seriousness, and then ascribes the insult against Harmodius’ sister to the outrageous brother Thettalus (Ath. Pol. 18.1–2). Peisistratus had been a very moderate tyrant, and Hippias was well qualified to continue his father’s long and peaceful rule (φιλοτικὸς καὶ ἐμφραν), but the presence of the other two brothers, with their dubious characters, is bound to lead to trouble for the tyranny. For Aristotle is insistent on the fact that a long-lived tyranny is very much a result of the tyrant’s moderate character and avoidance of scandal. Aristotle’s assignment of the actual insult to Thettalus, when Hipparcenus was the victim of the ensuing conspiracy, shows that the conspiracy was, in his opinion, not designed primarily as revenge for the insult, but rather aimed at all three tyrants and the end of their reign. Harmodius and Aristogeiton are made into the leaders of a political plot, in accordance with Aristotle’s general theory about revolts.

There are four other differences over matters of fact between Thucydides and Aristotle in regard to the murder of Hipparcenus. These also make most sense in the context of a politically motivated conspiracy. First is the statement that Harmodius’ sister was in-
sulted at the Panathenaia (18.2), when Thucydides says that this occurred “in some procession” (6.55.1). Since the murder of Hippar­
chus took place at the Greater Panathenaia (Ath.Pol. 18.3 τοὺς Παν­
αθηναίους, Thuc. 6.56.2 Παναθήναια τὰ μεγάλα), Aristotle’s version
makes the time elapsed between the insult and the murder four years
(if both were at a different Greater Panathenaia) or one year (if the
insult was at a Lesser Panathenaia, the murder at the Greater) or a
few days (if both events occurred during the same festival). That the
interval was relatively long is suggested by the second disagreement
with Thucydides: Aristotle says that there were many co-conspirators
with Harmodius and Aristogeiton (18.2), while Thucydides says there
were not many, for security’s sake (6.56.3). The third conflict pits
Aristotle’s statement that the Panathenaic parade was not, in those
days, conducted in arms (18.4) against Thucydides (6.56.2–3, 58.2).
Fourth, Thucydides states that Aristogeiton at first escaped but was
later caught and roughly treated, while the other conspirators were
discovered by Hippias’ ploy of disarming the citizens and then search­
ing for those who retained their daggers (6.58.1–2). Aristotle dis­
agrees explicitly, saying that the λεγόμενος λόγος is untrue, but
that Hippias was at first unable to discover the co-conspirators and
was led to torture Aristogeiton for their names (18.4–6).

All these positions taken by Aristotle work well in the context of a
political conspiracy. In that context it is reasonable to believe that the
insult took place one or even four years before the murder, providing
the impetus for Harmodius and Aristogeiton to found their con­
sspiracy and allowing time for them to mobilize those dissatisfied with
the tyranny and gather their many helpers. About Thucydides’ ac­
count, certain questions arise, which may have been seen by Aris­
totle. If the sole reason for the plot were the insult to Harmodius’
sister, why would anyone not personally connected with Harmodius
join in the plot? Yet Thucydides’ statement allows not only that there
were other conspirators, but that there would have been more, had
security not dictated otherwise (6.56.3, ἦσαν δ’ οὐ πολλοὶ οἱ εὐνομω­
μοκότες ἀσφαλείας ἐνεκα). Furthermore, if life was so pleasant un­
der the tyrants, why should the men in the procession, if they were
armed, have supported the conspirators against the tyrants’ body-

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guards (6.56.2)? Thucydides’ account of the murder, as is clear from the overall similarity and coincidences in vocabulary, was the basis of the \textit{Ath.Pol.} narration. It seems likely that Aristotle saw the problems in Thucydides’ version and decided that the murder of Hipparchus was not just an \(\varepsilon\lambda\lambda\iota\gamma\iota\sigma\tau\sigma\varepsilon\tau\omicron\alpha\) \(\tau\omicron\lambda\omicron\alpha\) \(\epsilon\kappa\varepsilon\tau\omicron\alpha\chi\rho\omicron\omicron\alpha\mu\alpha\pi\omicron\rho\delta\iota\varepsilon\omicron\upsilon\varsigma\), but had been part of a comprehensive, politically-inspired conspiracy. This theory also was consistent with Aristotle’s view that erotic happen­stances give rise to, but are not really the issue in, revolutions.

As a result of these two types of \(\delta\pi\omicron\rho\\iota\alpha\), internal inconsistency and disagreement with a basic Aristotelian theory, Aristotle ‘saved the phenomena’ (i.e. the bulk of the report he inherited from Thucydides) by altering certain details of Thucydides’ report, and thereby altering its tenor. According to the basic theory of dialectic, the method here employed, all one has to go on in history are one’s own general principles and reports which may well be faulty. That the reports and the principles, when combined, may contradict one another and have to be altered or partially dropped cannot be allowed to cast the resulting synthesis in an unfavorable light. The opinions of the wise and the many are unlikely to miss the truth completely, and we often have nothing better to offer.\textsuperscript{36}

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\textit{August, 1984}
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\textsuperscript{36} My early work on this topic benefited from the advice of Professors R. S. Brumbaugh, H. von Staden, and D. Kagan; it is a pleasure to thank them for their help.