CHAPTER 1

DIALECTIC AND THE STRUCTURE OF ARGUMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

1. There is a passage early in the *Gorgias* in which Socrates points out one of the differences between rhetoric and dialectic. Polus has been scoffing at an unpopular view which Socrates holds, and Socrates says to him:

...you are trying to refute me orator-fashion like those who fancy they are refuting in the law courts. For there one group imagines it is refuting the other when it produces many reputable witnesses to support its statements whereas the opposing party produces but one or none. But this method of proof is worthless toward discovering the truth, for at times a man may be the victim of a false witness on the part of many people of repute. And now practically all men, Athenians and strangers alike, will support your statements, if you wish to produce them as witnesses that my view is false. Yet I, who am but one, do not agree with you, for you cannot compel me to: you are merely producing many false witnesses against me in your endeavor to drive me out of my property, the truth. But if I cannot produce *in you yourself* a single witness in agreement with my views, I consider that I have accomplished nothing worth speaking of in the matter under debate; and the same, I think, is true for you also, if I, one solitary witness, do not testify for you and if you do not leave all these others out of account.¹

When one practices dialectic, one seeks to persuade—indeed to compel—just one other person to become a witness in agreement with one’s views. And in doing so, one must leave “all these others”—Jowett’s translation has “the rest of the world”—out of account.

What I want to read out of this passage is that in the Platonic view, dialectic—or dialectical interchange—is strictly an affair between two parties, that the views of any third party are quite beside the point. In fact, I want to take this passage further than I have any right to do, and to suppose that Socrates is saying that the persuasion which transpires in dialectical interchange recognizes no rule or standard that is not acknowledged by the parties to the interchange themselves.

2. A set of propositions constitutes a set of premisses for a conclusion $p$ if and only if someone puts them forward as premisses for $p$ in the course of arguing for $p$. And a person argues for $p$ if and only if that person puts forward one or more propositions as premisses for $p$. You can’t make much sense of the notions of premiss and conclusion unless you’ve got the notion of arguing; and you can’t make much sense of the notion of arguing unless you got the notions of premiss and conclusion.

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Now I submit that to make sense of the notion of arguing for a conclusion, you’ve also got to have the notion of a point at issue between two persons—a point at issue being simply any proposition that is affirmed by one of them but not by the other. Arguing occurs in a context in which there are points at issue and addresses itself to one or more of those points. Typically an arguer is attempting either to argue for a proposition which he affirms but someone else does not, or against a proposition which someone else affirms and he does not. Typically, as well, an arguer’s argument meets with challenge or counter-argument or both. And such challenge or counter-argument is often responded to with challenge or further argument or counter-counter-argument, and so on.

When two parties interact over a point at issue in the extended way I’ve just described, they are engaging in what I call a dialectical interchange. When an argument occurs in the context of a dialectical interchange, understanding it and appraising it will almost always require understanding its place and function within that dialectical interchange. The consideration of the individual argument will go hand in hand with the consideration of the dialectical interchange in which it occurs.

Not every argument occurs within or gives rise to a dialectical interchange. But any argument can give rise to a dialectical interchange—and it will if the person to whom it is addressed disputes or counters it. It might just turn out to be the case, therefore, that the intelligent consideration of any argument whatsoever requires consideration either of an actual dialectical interchange in which it occurs or of one or more potential dialectical interchanges in which it might occur. I can’t give you a strong reason for thinking that’s so, but confess to a strong suspicion that it is so.

3. What I want to offer you in this paper are two suggestions—admittedly tentative ones—about how best to approach the understanding and appraisal of an argument which is being considered in the context of an actual or potential dialectical interchange.

My suggestions are:

1) the most promising organizing notions for treating arguments in the context of dialectical interchange are the correlative notions of presumption and burden of proof;

2) that one ought to hold out, as best and as long as one can, against the idea that there are “objective” standards or ground rules against which it is appropriate to measure and appraise arguments occurring in the context of a dialectical interchange.

2. PRESUMPTION AND BURDEN OF PROOF.

4. The parties to a dialectical interchange assume the roles of arguer and respondent. Moreover, they typically switch roles, the original arguer becoming respondent to the other’s argument, then becoming arguer again, and so on. When an arguer presents a set of propositions as premisses addressed to some point at issue, respondent must either concede or refuse to concede the members of that set. If respondent refuses to concede a premiss, it becomes (of course) a point at issue. If