Does Aristotle have a dialectical attitude in EE I 6? A negative answer

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Abstract: In this paper, I analyse EE I 6, where Aristotle presented a famous methodological digression. Many interpreters have taken this chapter as advocating a dialectical procedure of enquiry. My claim is that Aristotle does not keep a dialectical attitude towards endoxa or phainomena in this chapter. In order to accomplish my goal, I shall show that EE I 6 does not provide enough evidence for the dialectical construal of it, and that this construal, in turn, hangs on some assumptions brought out from other Aristotelian works (EN and Top.), which do not provide good evidence either. By the examination of these assumptions, I intend to show that Aristotle is not carrying out any sort of dialectic, especially dialectic conceived as conceptual analysis seeking to save phainomena or endoxa.

Keywords: Dialectic, Causality, Endoxa, Phainomena.
Introduction

In the last few decades, many scholars have proposed some sort of revival of Aristotle’s dialectic. This renewed interest in the Aristotelian dialectic placed the Topics as a work worth of close scrutiny, especially the first two chapters of book I, where Aristotle offers some details about the concept of endoxa and of dialectical syllogism. In Top. I 1, Aristotle makes very clear that endoxa are used as premises of any dialectical syllogism. In spite of this clear statement on the endoxicality of dialectical premises, Top. I 1 is still vague and many ways of construing Aristotle’s positions are possible. Some interpreters have understood that Top. I supplies Aristotelian philosophy a method of inquiry inasmuch as dialectic is an argumentative activity which proceeds from endoxa, and endoxa are presented along these lines: “Those [things] are acceptable [endoxa], on the other hand, which seem so to everyone, or to most people, or to the wise – to all of them, or to most, or to the most famous and esteemed.” (Top. I 1 100b21-23). Endoxa are presented under a criterion that establishes them as opinions which everyone or some representative group of people are prone to accept. Now, if all it takes for an argument to be dialectical is to have endoxa as premises, all arguments Aristotle deploys using his predecessor philosophers’ opinions or some reputable opinion widely shared are candidates to be dialectical arguments.

Considering this picture, some interpreters have been defending that dialectical arguments are spread all over Aristotle’s works and that they are an important aspect of his philosophical enquiry. Nonetheless, it is not in the Topics where they find how dialectical
enquiry is detailed. One very important text claimed to develop Aristotelian conception of dialectical enquiry is EE I 6 1216b26-35. In what follows, I shall present a dialectical construal of this text and then analyse the assumptions made by it. My claim is that a dialectical construal of this passage is not a viable one since it does not fit well in the context where it is located, and has no support of other important text held as elaborating on the dialectical enquiry in the clearest way, namely EN VII I 1045a2-75.

**A dialectical construal of EE I 6 1216b26-35**

After presenting the overall purpose of the treatise and some common conceptions of happiness, Aristotle opens EE I 6 by detailing a sort of method to be followed in his enquiry. The text runs like this:

T1: (i) We must try, by argument [διὰ τῶν λόγων], to reach a convincing conclusion on all these questions, (ii) using, as testimony and by way of example, what appears to be the case [φαινομένοις]. (iii) For it would be best if everyone should turn out to agree [πάντας ἀνθρώπους φαίνεσθαι συνομολογοῦντας] with what we are going to say; (iv) if not that, that they should all agree in a way and will agree after a change of mind [εἰ δὲ μὴ, τρόπον γέ τινα πάντας, ὅπερ μεταβιβαζόμενοι ποιήσουσιν·]; for [γάρ] each man has something of his own to contribute to the finding of the truth, and it is from such (starting-points) that we must demonstrate (δεικνύναι): (v) beginning with things that are correctly said, but not clearly, (ἐκ γὰρ τῶν αληθῶς men legomenōn ou saphōs de) as we proceed we shall come to express them clearly, with what is more perspicuous at each stage superseding what is