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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT:

*Refutation, Deduction and The Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry*

The first institutions of higher learning in the West emerged in 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greece, all of them offering educational programs called “philosophy”. Competition among these schools for prospective students was fierce, and the writings of Plato and Aristotle bear traces of their attempts both to distinguish themselves from their educational rivals and to demonstrate the value of their philosophical projects over these competing educational programs, which they regarded as dubious and unworthy of the name “philosophy”. My dissertation, entitled *Refutation, Deduction and the Demarcation of Philosophy from Sophistry*, considers the ways in which Plato and Aristotle delineated philosophy in the context of their polemics against a formidable, but under-appreciated group of contemporary rivals: the Eristic sophists. I argue that the most significant way in which both philosophers distinguished themselves from the Eristics was by refining their conceptions of genuine philosophical argumentation in ways that allowed them to diagnose Eristic arguments as fallacious. On the account I offer, it was in no small part through their efforts to distance themselves from these educational rivals that Plato laid the groundwork for, and Aristotle brought to completion, the first system of logic in Western philosophy.

The first chapter of my dissertation, entitled “Sophistical Refutations and the Educational Rivalries of 4<sup>th</sup> century Athens”, offers a new interpretation of the challenge the Eristics posed to philosophers like Plato and Aristotle. Sophistical refutations, as the Eristic sophists’ arguments were called, were short question-and-answer arguments in which a questioner deduced a conclusion based on an answerer’s commitments that contradicted one of the answerer’s central philosophical positions. On a standard view of Plato and Aristotle’s portrayal of Eristics, these figures were simply charlatans who cared only about winning arguments and reducing their opponents to contradiction. I argue instead that sophistical refutations were uniquely powerful tools for simultaneously challenging a philosophical opponent and advancing one’s own philosophical agenda. Sophistical refutations presented a significant challenge to Plato and Aristotle not only because the Eristics derived contradictions based on important Platonic and Aristotelian commitments, but also because the Eristics’ primary aim in offering these refutations was to establish their own controversial philosophical doctrines, which were immune to the contradictions they derived.

In the remaining three chapters of the dissertation, I argue that Plato originally developed his conception of a genuine contradiction in explicit contrast to the contradictions produced in sophistical refutations and that Aristotle developed his conception of a genuine deduction in direct opposition to the ways in which Eristics deduced contradictory conclusions in their refutations. Plato made it a necessary condition for a refutation that the contradiction it produces satisfy a set of conditions that clearly demarcate genuine contradictions from the merely apparent ones that the Eristics produced. Aristotle then accepted and strengthened Plato’s conception of true refutation by making it a necessary condition for a refutation that its conclusion is deduced in accordance with a set of requirements that clearly exclude Eristic ways of deducing from the class of genuine deductions. These logical resources provided both philosophers with the tools necessary to diagnose sophistical refutations as fallacies, and thereby to resist the unpalatable philosophical views the Eristics advanced through their arguments.

The second chapter, “Ambiguity, Fallacy and Pedagogy in Plato’s *Euthydemus*”, examines the way in which Plato, in the *Euthydemus*, exposes sophistical refutations that exploit various forms of linguistic ambiguity. This chapter in part responds to a common view according to which Plato lacks the technical resources necessary to expose sophistical refutations as

fallacies. I argue instead that Plato implicitly relies on a notion of genuine refutation according to which the derivation of a merely verbal contradiction is not sufficient for a refutation, and that this implicit conception of genuine refutation laid significant groundwork for Aristotle's explicit treatment of linguistic fallacies in the *Sophistici Elenchi*. I show that Plato has a more robust sensitivity to ambiguity and its pernicious effects on philosophical arguments than has been recognized, and that part of his aim in the *Euthydemus* is to suggest to his readers a conception of genuine refutation on which the sophistic refutations that exploit various forms of linguistic ambiguity do not count as real refutations. A version of this chapter is forthcoming in *Ancient Philosophy*.

In my third chapter, entitled "The Eristic Background to the Principle of Non-contradiction", I consider the use that Plato makes of the PNC in his engagements with sophistic refutations. This principle—according to which opposites cannot be true of the same subject, at the same time, in the same respect and in relation to the same thing—is of central importance to both Plato and Aristotle. I argue that Plato originally formulates the principle with all of these qualifications because this articulation of the principle restricts the class of genuine contradictions in such a way that reveals the contradictions produced through a notorious kind of sophistic refutation to be merely apparent. I show that, in his diagnoses of these sophistic refutations, Plato appeals to the qualifications on the PNC in order to mark a distinction between genuine contradictions and the merely apparent contradictions with which sophistic refutations characteristically concluded. Moreover, in these confrontations with Eristic argumentation, I show that Plato operates with an account of genuine refutation according to which the contradiction produced in a refutation must violate the PNC under all of the qualifications this principle specifies. With reference to this account, Plato is able to demonstrate that the Eristic arguments that generate these merely apparent contradictions are merely apparent refutations.

The final chapter of my dissertation, "Contradiction and Deduction in Aristotle's *Sophistici Elenchi*", offers a close reading of Aristotle's argument in *Sophistici Elenchi* 6 that sophistic refutations are fallacious because they fail to satisfy at least one of the criteria specified in the definition of a refutation. The criteria in this definition on the contradiction in a refutation are largely Platonic, as are Aristotle's diagnoses of the sophistic refutations that do not produce genuine contradictions. What is most novel and significant about this argument is the fact that Aristotle appeals to these same criteria for contradiction in his diagnosis of refutations that fail to deduce. This reveals that, for Aristotle, these same conditions are otherwise unattested criteria in the definition of deduction. This has significant implications for our understanding of Aristotle's logic: these criteria, I argue, detail the requisite form of the simple predicative statements of which Aristotelian deductions, contradictions and refutations are composed. Moreover, Aristotle's discussion of these criteria in the *Sophistici Elenchi* indicates that they are added to the definition of deduction precisely in order to prevent certain kinds of sophistic refutations from counting as real deductive arguments. This strongly suggests that it was in no small part by continuing and building upon Plato's project of demarcating genuine philosophical reasoning from its closely-related sophistic counterpart that Aristotle brought to completion what he himself regarded as his greatest philosophical achievement: the discovery of a general method of deductive reasoning that avoids fallacy and preserves truth.