Aristotle on false reasoning: Language and the world in the Sophistical Refutations

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Scott Schreiber's *Aristotle on False Reasoning* is the first full-length English commentary on Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* in the last century. Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* is a text that has received relatively little attention in the last century of scholarship, despite a revival of interest in other aspects of Aristotle's work concerned with the nature of good argument and rhetoric. (The 1995 French translation and commentary by Louis-Andre Dorion is a notable exception.) Schreiber finds the primary reason for inattention to this text to lie in the tendency of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy to resolve problems in reasoning through linguistic clarification (p. xiv). Aristotle's claim that some errors are due to language while others lie outside the realm of linguistic error is not one to which contemporary analytic philosophy has been particularly sympathetic. The *Sophistical Refutations* has been neglected in light of contemporary logic. Schreiber's book attempts to return to Aristotle's project on his own philosophical terms, in order to better understand why Aristotle classified errors in reasoning as he did. His approach is to examine each of the twelve types of false reasoning that Aristotle lays out in the *Sophistical Refutations*, with particular attention to Aristotle's examples, in order to understand the principles behind Aristotle's overall system.

Schreiber argues that Aristotle had good reason for separating errors due to language from those outside of language: Aristotle's classification of error is tied to his notion of the resolution of false arguments. To understand how to resolve a sophistical argument, we must first understand how it could have been believed to be true. Since Aristotle's aim in the *Sophistical Refutations* is to show why certain sorts of arguments are deceptive to some who hear them, his method of explaining errors is less a pure examination of their logical errors than how such erroneous arguments can deceive. Aristotle is concerned with two types of problems with sophistical argument: first, why such an argument is false and second, why it might appear to be true. Schreiber shows that most commentators have not given sufficient attention to the second of these concerns in their attempts to understand Aristotle's taxonomy. As Schreiber puts it, "Examples of false reasoning are unified into groups and differentiated into subgroups not by the nature of the confusions that they engender but by the different ways that confusion is cleared up" (54). False reasoning is due to not only mistakes in logic, but also mistaken beliefs about language and reality. Careful examination of Aristotle's thinking allows us to see the importance of beliefs about the world in good and bad argument.

For the most part, Schreiber's examinations of Aristotle's examples are lucid and helpful in understanding both the particular example at hand as well as the general picture of Aristotle's classifications. Schreiber continually returns to the importance of Aristotle's own view of language and argument in contrast to the approaches of contemporary linguistics and logic. For example, while some twentieth century scholars have attempted to explain Aristotle's distinction between homonymy and amphiboly in terms of the contemporary distinction between semantics and syntax, Aristotle seems to distinguish the two according to whether a general predicate signifies many particulars regardless of...
context, or in a propositional context (p. 31). In the end, Schreiber does not think that the categories of homonymy and amphiboly can be completely distinct, even on Aristotle's own grounds, but still finds the categories useful. Schreiber is also careful to provide criticism of Aristotle's categories when warranted, both defending Aristotle against his contemporary critics when he thinks they have misunderstood him, and pointing out genuine weaknesses in Aristotle's arguments.

Schreiber's book is clearly intended as a response to the contemporary Anglo-American reading of Aristotle. Much of the book assumes at least some familiarity with the ways in which other, mostly English-speaking authors have criticized Aristotle, or at least a ready familiarity with contemporary logic's criticism of Aristotle. Those readers who come to this book with a background in rhetoric, metaphysics, or non-analytic philosophy might find Schreiber's assumptions about his audience surprising. For example, Schreiber at times makes remarks such as the following: "Our [contemporary] inclination is to distinguish the multiple references of general names and the multiple instances of general predication from cases of real linguistic ambiguity" (31). It is probably safe to say that many first-time readers of Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* have no such predisposition, particularly if their background is outside of contemporary analytic philosophy. The book is written in a precise and analytic manner, and this is both its virtue and its limitation. Those readers looking for a general introduction to the *Sophistical Refutations* will not find it in Schreiber's book. However, readers looking for an exacting treatment of refutations will not be disappointed.

Schreiber's book does little to contextualize the *Sophistical Refutations* within the larger corpus of Aristotle's thought. Readers of *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in particular might find the book wanting for its lack of attention to how the *Sophistical Refutations* relates to Aristotle's approach to the distinction between good and bad argument in works such as the *Rhetoric* (a work that does not seem to be fully compatible with the *Sophistical Refutations*). One notable and welcome exception is Schreiber's attention to the relationship between reasoning and puzzlement or wonder, in his treatment of the resolutions of false argument in chapter five. The book would benefit from a more frequent relation of Aristotle's work on false argument to the larger corpus of his thought, or even the history of distinguishing philosophical from sophistical argument. (Dorion's commentary does include this; for example, he examines the relation between the *Sophistical Refutations* and Plato's *Euthydemus* and their respective understandings of eristics.) However, this is not Schreiber's primary purpose. His book will be of greatest interest to those readers already engaged in the debate over the validity of Aristotle's thinking from the standpoint of modern logic or contemporary analytic philosophy, or those already familiar with Aristotle's logic. Schreiber provides us with careful, dense arguments about the precise nature of Aristotle's taxonomy of sophistical argumentation and his thinking about the nature of false belief and its causes. As such, it is a helpful book for anyone with an interest in a detailed examination of the *Sophistical Refutations*. 