Agricola's Theory
of Dialectical Disputation

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Abstract

This paper provides an account of Rudolf Agricola's disputation theory in *De inventione dialectica*. Five Agricola's key remarks will be illustrated. a) Disputation is an intellectual instrument: its pedantic and eristic abuse versus its heuristic and critical use depends solely upon teachers and scholars. The adversarial nature of disputation is the most powerful antidote to eristics. b) Disputing properly is an epistemic duty of the scholarly community because disputing both sides of a question is the most effective method to find new, priority, decisive research questions. c) Disputation investigates the truth shining in contradiction. The disputant's duty is to force the opponent to contradict himself. So, it is preferable that in disputation: argumentation is as complete as possible; it is developed as *reductio ad absurdum*; refutation is addressed to the substance of the arguments and carried out through distinctions; exposition is designed to clarify and describe the state of affairs appropriately. 4) Prerequisite for taking part in disputations is mastering the *inventio* method, i.e., possessing the capability to find the middle term *spontaneously*. 5) The method of disputing becomes a second nature to students/scholars.

Keyword: Agricola, disputation, dialectics, heuristic, topics.

This paper provides an account of Rudolf Agricola's disputation theory. The importance of the notion of disputation in Rudolph Agricola's thought for the humanistic teaching of dialectics and topics in the Renaissance period and the early modern age has been asserted but the subject has never been analyzed in detail[1]. Even Vasoli

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1. See O. Weijers, *In Search of the Truth. A History of Disputation Techniques*

and Mack's broad and illuminating accounts do not directly address this issue[2]. By contrast, we believe that analyzing in detail the notion of disputation in Agricola allows both to better clarify the historical role that the practice of disputation plays within the humanistic teaching of dialectics and to read the purpose of Agricola's work from a new perspective. This paper is divided into five parts and concerns the relation between the theory and certain fundamental topics of the second and third books of his *De inventione dialectica*[3]: 1. foundations of dialectic art; 2. *quaestio* theory; 3. *oratio* types; 4. precepts of *inventio* and *dispositio*; 5. disputation practice as a way to build a second nature of the mind. Our account excludes themes from the first book that do not address disputation as *praxis*. We do so because, while the first book of *De inventione dialectica* explains in detail the peculiarities and articulation of *loci* and their theoretical description, the second and third books are devoted to the «*locorum usu*», both in content and stylistic aspects: they treat the way to develop the mental disposition necessary to apply *loci*, and the way all human minds can take advantage of topics to favor substantive disputations.

1. Proper uses and abuses of disputation as a didactic and epistemic tool

Agricola distinguishes between the proper uses and abuses of disputation. Disputation is a tool of dialectic art that can be used for both didactic and epistemic purposes. Teachers and students

from Antiquity to Early Modern Times, Turnhout: Brepols, 2013, p. 188; E. Rigotti, *Relevance of Context-bound* loci *to Topical Potential in the Argumentation Stage*, «Argumentation», 20 (2006), pp. 519-540.

2. C. Vasoli, *La dialettica e la retorica dell'umanesimo. "Invenzione" e "metodo" nella cultura del XV e XVI secolo*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1968, pp. 261-273; P. Mack, *Renaissance Argument. Valla and Agricola in the Traditions of Rhetoric and Dialectic*, Leiden-New York-Köln: Brill, 1993.

3. R. Agricola, *De inventione dialectica libri tres* (ed. L. Mundt), Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1992, (henceforth: DID). The references to Agricola's text are structured as follows: the roman numeral indicates the book; the two following numbers, divided by the colon, indicate the chapter and the line in Mundt's edition respectively.

abuse disputation on the didactic level when they use it *pedantically only* to teach and learn inference rules disconnected completely from the ordinary use of language. Scholars abuse disputation on the epistemic level when they use it eristically for the sole purpose of defeating and deceiving the adversary, regardless of their arguments' validity. Agricola emphasizes strongly that these abuses are not internal to the disputation instrument, to the «*lex disputandi*»[4], but rather they depend exclusively on the *improbitas* of masters and scholars.

Conversely, teachers and students use disputation properly at the didactic level when they use it to learn not only the inference rules, but, above all, a method to find arguments. Further, scholars use disputation properly at the heuristic and epistemic levels when they use it to devise arguments and investigate their truth within the scope of probable knowledge. Disputation is the most reliable epistemic tool and critical method that increases experts' capacity to discern and judge which argument, amidst contradictory ones, enjoys the greater epistemic trust.

One point appears crucial to us. Agricola emphasizes the intrinsic and distinctive feature of disputation that makes it the most suitable tool, under certain necessary conditions, to increase epistemic trust: adversariality. It is precisely the adversariality mechanism that ensures the most effective search for truth because it increases the clash of contrastive reasons to the highest possible level. However, this is true only if at least two necessary conditions inherent to those taking part in the disputation are met: intellectual honesty and the disputants' expertise in the disputed question.

In addressing the foundations of dialectics, Agricola analyzes its: (a) didactics and teaching, with a focus on invention; (b) definition as art to finding and judge arguments correctly, and scope and purpose, including teaching convincingly and in accordance with the subject matter; (c) characterization as a critical method that helps the expert discern and formulate a competent judgment, and (d) the relation between *ars dialectica* and the competitive disputation. We present these points concisely below.

4. Agricola, DID, II, 7: 114.

1. Agricola strived to *re-establish* dialectic teaching, discuss its purpose, enumerate its impediments, and propose teaching dialectic art as invention and learning by doing. After he criticized his contemporaries – not only disputants, but also all of the experts in dialectics («*doctores artium*»[5]) – for confusing the function of the invention as a «method for devising arguments» («*excogitandi argumenti viam*») with that of judgment as a «rule for exploring arguments» («*explorandi argumenti regulam*»), Agricola disputes the traditional concept of the teaching of dialectics as having an "ancillary" function with respect to the other sciences. The Dutch humanist's thesis is that the way dialectics is usually taught[6]) not only does not help in any way, but even hampers learning other arts. Therefore, the traditional method of teaching dialectics would be counterproductive, since far from facilitating learning, it would hinder it: disputing by observing the dialectics rules scrupulously condemns students to address zealously insignificant details, leaving the disputants speechless on substantive issues. What dialecticians teach in theory usually contradicts both the concrete practice of the arts and the ordinary use of language. Indeed, Agricola denies the validity of the position of those who, although conceding that the contents and the method taught in the dialectic do not offer any positive contribution to the learning of other arts and sciences, argue that the assiduous and frenetic practice of the dialectical disputations makes the mind more penetrating and able to adapt to different situations and, in this way, facilitates the ability to adapt to other disciplines. Quite the opposite, for Agricola, traditional dialectics teaching, except for the syllogism doctrine, appears insignificant and does not exhibit the basic learning method. The only reason why dialectics continues to be taught is fidelity to a centuries-old custom[7]. Thus, the lack of a didactically effective handbook of the invention method[8], combined with the low propensity of those who master it to

5. Agricola, DID, II, 1: 72.

6. Agricola, DID, II, 1: 78-79: «[…] miseram et cavillosam loquendi solicitudinem».

7. Agricola, DID, II, 1: 94-95: «quia quisque didiceri et quia doceant omnes».

8. Agricola believes that Ramon Llull's *ars inveniendi* teaching is counterpro-

disseminate it[9], is the main cause of the dialectic teaching pathologies. Therefore, what Agricola rejects is not the use of disputation as best practice in dialectic learning, or that the finding and arrangement of arguments matter, but its "pedantic abuse" as an instrument aimed at learning *only* the formal rules of inference.

2. As Agricola notes, dialectics is a useful art in life because it teaches the correct way to find and judge arguments, to escape quibbling, and to show the ways in which one can be deceived maliciously: mastery of dialectics actually strengthens the cognitive ability to detect attempts at deception. Essentially, though, it teaches a method to make what we are talking about credible, to speak convincingly about any object, to present the object of discourse in a way that arouses the greatest possible degree of trust in relation to the very nature of the thing or question, and in this way, to seduce the listener's mind because of the *dictio*. Hence, the definition of dialectics and the determination of its purpose (*finis dialectices*) is: «the art of speaking convincingly about any object insofar as the essence of the questioned object is able to instill trust»[10].

According to Agricola, what is credible in a speech is not only what is *actually* credible, i.e., everything that can be subsumed in the traditional Aristotelian definition of *endoxa*[11]. In addition, in relation to objects of discourse that are difficult to manage with *endoxa* only, the notion of what is credible in a speech also includes everything that is said adequately and coherently with respect to the object of discourse (*quod apte consentaneeque de re proposita dicetur*)[12]. This is the beginning point for a reflection on the degree

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ductive, as it damages the intellectual penetration skill of even the most acute minds (*ingenii aciem retundi*).

9. Because he tends to keep the rules of his creativity secret: «prophanum certe vulgus quam longissime a sacrario suo putat arcendum» (Agricola, DID, II, 1: 119-120).

10. Agricola, DID, II, 2: 96-97.

11. Agricola, DID, II, 2: 69-70.

12. According to Peter Mack's interpretation, "adequacy" derives from the use of loci, "coherence" from the form of reasoning: «both terms through which Agricola develops the idea of the *probabile* and associates it with the procedure of topical invention and with the structures of argument» (Mack, *Renaissance Argument*, cit., p. 171).

of credibility that different subjects of discourse (or questions, or theses) can achieve. The subject of the discussion can be actual things, possible things, and impossible things. Firstly, Agricola notes that in Latin (Apuleius) and Greek (Luciano) literature, it happens that "impossible" things have been talked about with credibility, pertinence, and semantic congruity. Secondly, he also mentions "insoluble" dilemmas, the sides of which are disputed credibly. Thirdly, not only have people been found to be able to speak credibly about "contradictory" philosophical positions, such as, according to Agricola, the Heraclitean identity of opposites or academic skepticism, but even great authorities have believed in them. Therefore, disputation is associated closely with the scope of probable knowledge.

In this respect, Agricola distinguishes the notion of *subiectum* from that of *materia*. *Subiectum* of the dialectic is *argumentatio* or credible speaking (*dictio probabilis*). *Materia* of the dialectic is everything that is credible in a discourse, insofar as the subject of the discourse allows it: it is everything that can be spoken of in an orderly and suitable way to arouse epistemic trust. As no one would choose as the subject of teaching a completely evident state of affairs, but on the contrary, only that on which one can dispute (*contendere*) and can have contrasting views, the teaching matter, that in which one is striving to arouse epistemic trust, must belong to the scope of doubt and uncertainty. Further, because what is disputed and doubtful is the *quaestio*, it will also be the *materia* of the dialectic, as we will see more clearly later. According to Agricola, nearly anything can be a disputation matter, because virtually all of the arts and sciences make only credible claims about the *materia* they have assumed. This is because of the small number of theoretical objects that can be considered "necessary and undoubted" and because of the fact that everything pertaining to practical matters can be controversial and disputed and so must be made credible.

3. Following Aristotle, Agricola attributes two tasks to dialectician: grounding the first principles of the arts (*primi artium principia*) and disputing every uncertain statement from both sides. The dialectician's distinctive duty is to employ the method and process with which to infer and arouse epistemic trust (*via et ratio colligendi parandaeque fidei*). The dialectic, and particularly the invention

method, make it easier for the expert to achieve a certain degree of trust, because it shows the points (definitions, causes, events, and all other *loci*) to be explored and pondered carefully. Further, as a reliable tool and a critical method (*instrumentum discerendi*), disputation helps experts in every art undertake the task of discerning what is more credible from what is less credible in relation to the questions they investigate, and provides them the awareness to express competent and weighted judgments[13].

4. Agricola addresses the topic of the relation between dialectics and competitive disputation (*certamen disputationis*). Recalling once again the Aristotelian treatment of the usefulness of dialectics in the first book of the *Topics*, Agricola affirms that both the investigation of the arts principles (*artium decreta*) and the competitive disputation (*contentiosa disputatio*) share dialectics as a method and process of *inventio* and the *iudicium*, because both of them find their arguments in the same *loci* and apply the same procedure to weigh their degree of trust. In fact, both the masters and the disputants wish to prove what they have assumed. However, unlike the masters, who act in good faith and address an audience who desires to learn, the disputant (*certator*), if unable to do otherwise, settles for offering only the appearance of proof, because he intends to achieve victory, even at the cost of deviating from the principles of intellectual honesty and loyalty in the disputation.

Nonetheless, Agricola shows the way the eristic and sophistic outcome *is not inherent* in the «*lex disputandi*». According to him, the submission of trivial, incredible, or only apparently credible, evidence depends more on the disputed question itself than on the disputants' perverse will. In any case, it does not depend upon the nature of disputation (*disputandi ratio*): on the contrary, this is its most powerful antidote. Indeed, no actual disputant is so indolent that he prefers to become involved in weak or specious arguments if he is able to defend his thesis with those that are well-founded and convincing. Generally, the disputant deals with an insoluble and dilemmatic question, in which it appears that nothing can be said that is more credible than anything else. The disputant is also

13. Agricola, DID, II, 7: 25-26.

motivated by adversariality, by the desire to win the disputation. This places the disputant in a state of necessity: he seeks support for his thesis from every argument that appears to work. However, *only* in the case in which he does not find suitable arguments, he may abuse the unawareness of his opponent to deceive him.

In summary, the most powerful antidote against the eristic degeneration is precisely a high level of rational clash and adversariality of the disputation, and the presence of a skilled opponent who can identify and deter the use of subterfuges that divert from the thing itself. Moreover, the appreciation of the *inventio* method absolutely does not involve the depreciation of specific knowledge. On the contrary, while the invention helps find the arguments, the arguments can be found only by knowledge that individual sciences teach about the disputed question: no invention process can be undertaken without mastering the subject matter of the disputation. Agricola notes: «imagine Aristotle and Aristippus in a disputation over the highest good. Imagine a disputation between Chrysippus and Carneades on cataleptic representation, or on the question of the possibility of knowing anything. Imagine all the other philosophers in all areas arguing with each other over their theses: they will draw the main point of their disputations from how they framed – each according to his understanding – the arts developed for these things»[14].

2. Finding questions to be disputed by disputing

Dealing with his question theory, which Mack considers original within the tradition of Renaissance rhetoric[15], Agricola clarifies what *quaestio* is by offering a new definition of it that contrasts with Boethius's and illustrates the ways in which questions can be classified. We will illustrate the importance that Agricola attributes to disputation on both sides and to dialectical adversariality as methods to identify new crucial questions.

Quaestio can be defined as a controversial statement converted into a closed-question form that carries within it two exclusionary alternatives. The more controversial the opening statement, the

14. Agricola, DID, II, 7, 131-137.
15. See Mack, *Renaissance Argument*, cit., p. 181.

more it allows doubts on both sides, and the more the question is suitable to be disputed *pro et contra*. Thus, Agricola focuses on the «idea of the *clash* of assertions»[16]. We make two remarks about the way Agricola's questions are classified.

First, he proposes an «*ordo quaestionum*»[17], a series of questions, or rather, a method of questioning, ordered according to a logical-rational criterion, in which the next question depends epistemologically on the one that precedes it. This succession is a method, a heuristic procedure to be followed systematically to carry out the dialectical investigation activity with respect to an object of study. Firstly, it is necessary to investigate the actual existence of the object. Second, its essence needs to be clarified by providing a definition. Third, it is possible to question whether a certain attribute belongs to the object to which it refers. Then, referring implicitly to the second book of Posterior Analytics, he notes: «Aristotle added a fourth, which he called 'for what reason' (*propter quid*)». The question of "why" within a disputation context, such as the one that the *quaestio* presupposes implicitly, orients the dialectician to the pragmatic approach to an explanation based upon the notion of "explanatory contrast"[18]. The pragmatic and contrastivist approach to explanation is favoured by the enhancement of analogical and comparative reasoning, which Agricola shares with other humanist dialecticians, as well as by the disputation's adversarial essence, which allows for the competitive comparison of the advantages and disadvantages of alternatives. The dialectical counterpart's presence in the disputation forces the disputant to argue the reasons for his case *in contrast with* those of his counterpart. Secondly, according to Agricola, all questions necessarily presuppose, implicitly or not, knowingly or not, one or more conditions and assumptions, and hence, all questions are, ultimately, hypothetical: «omnis controversia conditionalis quaestionis habet naturam»[19]. The questions' assumptions, *even if* false or unlikely, are admitted

16. *Ivi*, p. 182.
17. Agricola, DID, II, 8: 51.
18. See C. Van Fraassen, Bas, *The Scientific Image*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1980, cap. 5.
19. Agricola, DID, II, 10: 111-112.

for the sake of argument and disputation. Referring explicitly to the passage from the *Institutes of Oratory* in which Quintilian addresses the arguments that can be derived from hypotheses and assumptions, Agricola argues that circumstantial or hypothetical questions are also productive philosophically because they allow us to find new arguments and new hidden perspectives from which one can observe a given more general and philosophical question.

One of Agricola's concerns is the way to determine the main issues in a *quaestio*. He presents two quite formal methods. The first, based upon the notion of *status quaestionis*, presupposes a preliminary development of the discussion, and consists of a cross-examination designed to discover what lies hidden in it. The second, based upon the "decomposition" of the initial question, does not necessarily presuppose a preliminary development of the discussion. Instead, it draws, and evaluates, the relevance of questions contained immediately in the words of the initial question. Although fascinating and associated with the method of *inventio* and the *ordo questionum* notion, we will not address the decomposition method, because, unlike the *status quaestionis* method, it does not involve disputation.

Agricola begins with the consideration that it is any dialectician' priority duty to identify accurately «quod sit *quaestio*»[20], namely, what is the decisive, main point that the speaker must answer by finding and arranging arguments. This is not only because the clear focus of the topic of discussion allows our mind to be more perspicacious, and thus to reveal explicit aspects that would otherwise remain hidden. But, above all, this is because, contrary to the widespread custom, we attempt to keep faith with the epistemic commitment not to address, in one's speeches, anything other than what is strictly necessary and pertinent to the question considered to be the priority and decisive one. Identifying the main and decisive question of the subject matter to be treated precisely is both the speaker's priority epistemic duty to his audience, and the first step in the process of finding and arranging the arguments through the method of dialectical invention. Moreover, this first

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20. Agricola, DID, II, 8: 1.

step is fundamental from an epistemic and heuristic perspective, as it is assumed that in order to know and discover, it is necessary to ask pertinent questions. Agricola devotes certain considerations to this to clarify the way to carry out this first step easily, without wasting time on intricacies.

Although not all public speeches meet with opposition, Agricola believes that all claims can, in principle, be questioned and disputed. What discriminates the dynamics of scholastic or competitive (*certamen*) disputations, or disputes in court, from, for example, exhortative and complacent speeches, is the speakers' firm will to induce each other to contradict himself, to win the adversarial argument, and convince the audience of the greater probability of the position the victor defends.

Agricola states that it is the opponent who shows the speaker the most appropriate way to find *quaestiones*. More than anything else, disputation is the epistemic tool that facilitates the precise identification of priority and decisive questions. For a speaker, the usual way to proceed to identify the decisive questions on which to focus his speech is to consider the matter to be addressed with the mental disposition to refute his previous reasoning, recursively, simulating a sort of disputation within his own mind. The crucial point at which the main contrasting reasons clash corresponds to the decisive and priority questions. Developing the mental attitude to contradict one's own reasoning and to identify the priority contradictions to be resolved is one of the purposes of teaching dialectics.

Clearly, a necessary condition of *quaestio* is disagreement. However, the speaker's ability to find questions depends upon the ability to identify possible disagreements as well. Identifying the main and decisive questions is all the simpler the higher the level of argumentative clash. Further, this can be achieved best through the epistemic tool of dialectical disputation between talented experts. Disputation is the device that dialectics recommends that the speaker uses to adhere more easily to his primary task of identifying what to focus his attention on as a priority.

Agricola presents his method to identify decisive questions through disputation by making the fundamental distinction between *quaestio* and *status quaestionis*. The *quaestio* is defined as «*caput*

certaminis»[21], the point from which the dialectical clash originates and descends. *Status quaestionis* is defined as the decisive point at which the proof or refutation of the *quaestio* subsequently falls in favour of one or the other party: the entire question depends upon the *status quaestionis*' nature. It is the pivot of the question. Agricola, whose direct source is Quintilian, defines the status as the question that originates from disputation and contradiction, and observes that in scholastic disputations among experts in each disciplinary field, or in disputes in court, the object of the disagreement is always determined manifestly for all of the subjects called into question: what is disputed is the *status quaestionis*.

With respect to the question proposed, the disputants present different reasons for and against, i.e., different arguments that defend the affirmative or negative answer to the question itself. Such arguments can be considered dialectical polysyllogisms. A dialectical polysyllogism is a sequence of two or more syllogisms in which the conclusion of each syllogism, except for the final link in the chain, plays the role of a premise for the following syllogism. It is dialectical because at least some of its premises are probable, dubious, or controversial. Calling the "first prosyllogism" and "last episillogism", respectively, the first and last syllogism in the chain of polysyllogism, it can be said that the *status quaestionis* corresponds to the probable, dubious, or controversial premises of the first prosyllogism, while the *quaestio* corresponds to the conclusion of the last episillogism. Indeed, the *status quaestionis* is a probable, dubious, or controversial premise of the first prosyllogism raised in the form of a closed and polar question that has only two mutually exclusive possible answers, one affirmative and one negative. Instead, the *quaestio* is the conclusion of the last episillogism, and is always raised in the form of a closed and polar question as well. It is evident why the entire *quaestio* depends upon the way the *status quaestionis* is determined: the determination of the *status quaestionis* inevitably determines the entire *quaestio* in one direction or another. If there is broad consensus in both parties, or in the judging assembly's arguments in defence of the affirmative answer

21. Agricola, DID, II, 12: 45.

to the *quaestio* beyond reasonable doubt, on the credibility of the affirmative answer to the *status quaestionum*, the *quaestio* would be *ipso facto* resolved in favour of the pro side. A specular observation would be possible for the counter side. In contrast, the *quaestio* remains unresolved, and sometimes it even becomes "vexed", when one or more status quaestionum remain controversial, or when not of all of the answers of the status quaestionum are in favour of the same side.

Agricola observes that a given judicial case or philosophical problem can be composed not only of several *quaestiones*, but each of these, in turn, can have multiple *status quaestionum*. Multiple *status quaestionum* are given when the following two conditions occur jointly: the determination of a certain *status quaestionis* does not allow one to determine in an affirmative or negative way other controversial steps in the logical concatenation of the argument; these controversial steps correspond to fundamental points for holding the argument as a whole.

Agricola is clear: «*omnes quaestiones ex contradictione* […] *oriuntur*»[22]. The antilogy, the contradiction between reasons, is what gives rise to the *quaestio* and the disputation. To identify the contradictions, the points of clash – the determination of which decides and resolves clearly the question – it is suggested that both sides of disputations should be discussed jointly. This is the case for two reasons: the first concerns the development and determination of the disputation itself; the second its preparation. Firstly, it is necessary to discuss a question from both sides in compliance with the principle that a discussant who has not refuted the counterpart's arguments accurately can never claim legitimately to have justified his position sufficiently. Secondly, it is necessary to discuss a question preliminarily from both its sides, because the mind's insight into the specific question is strengthened only in this way, and because the mind can recognize better the contradictions and the decisive and priority clash points on which to focus attention only in this way, which thus facilitates the victorious outcome in the disputation. On the one hand, discussing a question in advance on both sides

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22. Agricola, DID, II, 14: 136-137.

allows the disputants to anticipate and refute the opponent's attacks better and, on the other, to see the counterpart's weaknesses and thus make targeted attacks. The full understanding of the profound contradictions from which the questions originate allows the mind to explore, discriminate, and build argumentative strategies in the best possible way to determine and resolve disputes rationally for its own benefit. The best way to do this is to analyze the largest number of arguments *pro et contra* for a given question comparatively and, consequently, to analyze the largest number of arguments relating to the *status quaestionum* comparatively, thus beginning a "recursive" process of disputations, which coincides precisely, on a larger and more systematic scale, with cooperative practice and with the epistemic, heuristic, and didactic method of the rational search for truth by the community of learned men.

3. Argumentatio *and* expositio *in the* disputatio

In addressing the types of *oratio* as dialectic *instrumentum*[23], Agricola analyzes their structure and effect, and the essential properties of *argumentatio* and *expositio*.

With respect to the *oratio* structure, recalling Quintilian[24], Agricola writes: «every speech is structured in such a way that it is either continuous or concise. Continuous speeches are, for example, accusation speeches as well as praise and encouragement speeches. Concise speeches are, for example, disputations and exchanges of controversial speeches of scholars (*alternantia scholasticorum certamina*). Zeno compared this form of speech with a closed fist, that with an open hand. These are called "continuous speech" (*oratio perpetua*), and they have been assigned to the rhetorician; but this is called verbal exchange (*altercatio*) in court, and it was believed that it belonged to the dialectic»[25].

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23. Agricola, DID, II, 15: 38.
24. Quintiliano, *Institutio oratoria*, 2, 20, 7: «Itaque cum duo sint genera orationis, altera perpetua, quae rhetorice dicitur, altera concisa, quae dialectice, quas quidem Zeno adeo coniunxit, ut hanc conpressae in pugnum manus, illam explicatae diceret similem [...]».
25. Agricola, DID, II, 15: 12-14.

Further, Agricola analyzes the similarities and differences between the continuous and concise types of speech.

Similarities. Although Agricola does not dispute the view of the rhetorical tradition that the dialectician's task is to speak convincingly (*probabiliter*), to find and judge what can be said credibly about any matter, and the rhetorician's task is to speak ornately and elegantly (*ornate et eleganter*), he believes that both continuous and concise speech are the dialectician and the rhetorician's common property, because it is possible to speak in a convincing and ornate way with both types of speech: speaking convincingly and speaking elegantly are not functions of exclusive relevance to only a specific type of speech. The primary example is the verbal exchange, the trial in court (altercatio): in this case, the speaker uses both the questioning of witnesses and the flow of continuous speech to reach a point from which he can corner the opponent with individual arguments or even derive a contradiction from their answers. By contrasting the type of speech preferred by the university and "scholastic" philosophy of his time with the one «Aristotle and many other authors who are highly famous in philosophy»[26] employed, Agricola argues against the widespread attitude of the masters of dialectics and the philosophers of the late medieval universities who showed a preference for a form of discourse based upon questions and answers, such as disputations, and recalls that Aristotle and other prestigious authors of Greek and Roman classicism philosophized using largely continuous speech. However, Agricola's main argument is precisely the thesis that there is no type of speech in philosophy that can be considered peculiar: as in verbal exchanges in court, both continuous and concise discourse are fully legitimate in philosophy as well.

Differences. Prima facie, the verbal exchanges are more pressing in disputations than in orations because the disputants question each other insistently with the only goals to refute, corner, and force the other to contradict himself.

Secondly, disputations offer the disputants greater opportunities for a plethora of "deception maneuvers" (*fraudes*) that are carried out primarily by setting subtle pitfalls for the opponent in the form of

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26. Agricola, DID, II, 15: 27-28.

insidious and captious questions: «the continuous speech (*perpetua oratione*) usually has a more seductive (*speciosior*) appearance of truth (*veritatis color*); the verbal exchange (*altercatione*), on the other hand, allows a more precise (*exactior*) investigation (*disquisitio*)»[27].

Then, using metaphors from the forensic world, disputation is more suitable than oration to investigate the truth because both sides are eager to insist on any point that might contradict the other, and the truth shines in the contradiction. Disputation brings the contradictions to light and, with them, the truth. In fact, a judge constructs his own judgment by comparing all of the arguments and refutations proposed. The goal is not absolute truth, but – quite the contrary – greater possible plausibility. Further, while disputation is more suitable than is oration to investigate truth, oration is more suitable than is disputation to represent truth as the result of the investigation. In fact, while concise speech belongs to the disputing sides, continuous speech belongs to the judge when the verdict is issued. The breadth of the development of the speech allows the judge to balance and put in the right proportion the various plausible reasons and standing arguments in such a way that no one prevails over the others.

Based upon the criterion of the speech's effect (*orationis effectu*) on the listener, Agricola maintains that «every *oratio* [...] will either be an *expositio* or an *argumentatio*»[28]. Both are general modes (*generalia*), and not parts, of speech, but the exposition is targeted to the ready-to-believe, and the argumentation to the skeptical, reluctant-to-believe, audience: while the exposition finds believing listeners, the argumentation tries to arouse trust to convince the listener of a certain point of view (*ratione pervincere nititur*) about a state of affairs. He notes: «*expositio* finds trust – so to speak – *argumentatio* generates it»[29]. Then, Agricola distinguishes between on one side the *ratio essendi*, cause, that whereby «a state of affairs is», and, on the other side, *ratio cognoscendi*, reason, that whereby «a state of affairs is known». The state of affairs' causes may be explained only if it is unquestioned, while its reasons must

27. Agricola, DID, II, 15: 54-56.
28. Agricola, DID, II, 16: 9-10.
29. Agricola, DID, II, 17: 3-4.

be argued only if it is considered doubtful. Therefore, although there is no solely argumentative or expository speech, it is more probable that exposition becomes argumentation than the converse, argumentation becomes an exposition.

In analyzing the notion of *argumentatio* and observing its consequences and applications, Agricola assumes that disputation is a theoretical scheme because it represents well a class of phenomena that concern the search for truth and the elaboration and communication of arguments. During the disputation, the participants' tasks and obligations are clear and regulated rigidly, with respect both to the action of confirmation and construction of the argument, and to the action of dissolution and deconstruction. Agricola notes: «Just as it is the task of a disputation speaker to confirm what he has set out to prove, so the one who takes the opposite position has the task of dissolving everything that has been confirmed»[30].

Agricola schematically distinguishes two types of complete and dialectical argumentation – *enumeratio* and *ratiocinatio* – and two types of incomplete and rhetorical argumentation (i.e., it illustrates only one case or does not make all of the premises explicit) – *exemplum* and *enthymema*. One of the distinctive features that Agricola captures between complete and incomplete argumentation is that, during a disputation, the contradicting opponent can attack not only the veracity of the premises of complete argumentation, but he can *also* attack the veracity of the conclusion of incomplete argumentation. Agricola dwells to a greater extent on analyzing why speakers use incomplete rather than complete forms of argumentation typically, not only in ordinary language, but also when a lecture or a disputation is held: in fact, although every *ratiocinatio* and *enumeratio*, if they begin from true premises and are executed correctly, always allow us to draw certain and reliable conclusions, it is generally preferred to use *exemplum* and *enthymeme*, both because it is often difficult to enumerate all, or most, of the parts or species of an induction, and because often the *propositio maior* of a *ratiocinatio* is so evident that it does not need to be recalled specifically, but

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30. Agricola, DID, II, 21: 2-4.

the mind understands it immediately with the *propositio minor*. Specifically, Agricola addresses the definitions of the *propositiones maiores* of the *ratiocinationes* first. Then, he explains why we tend to convert them into particular statements, both in ordinary language and in lectures and disputations. Referring implicitly to Boethius, Agricola identifies the universal statements of the *propositiones maiores* with the *loci communes* or maxims. However, he notes that there is a tendency in ordinary language to convert the universal statements of the major premise, i.e., commonplaces, into particular statements to be in touch more with the concreteness of the matter dealt with and to seem less abstruse.

To confirm the *argumentations*, Agricola divides the exposition of strategies into two fundamental parts. The first (a) concerns the ways in which a conclusion is reached (*viae quaedam colligendae intentionis*), which he refers to as «*ductus*»[31], i.e., ways to approach the argumentation: the second (b) concerns the way the disputation's adversarial nature tends to make the argumentation more complete.

1. With respect to the ways to approach the argumentation in a disputation, Agricola states that «there are two approaches to prove any state of affairs. One is the *ductus directus*: from some propositum we reach directly (*recta via*) the conclusion that we want to prove [...]. The other approach is the *ductus obliquus*: we assume, for example, that contradictory proposition (*contradicente*) of what we want to prove is correct and then we deduce something wrong from it – from this we return to the starting point and make it clear that what this conclusion is drawn from is wrong; and as this builds the contradictory proposition to what we are trying to prove, it follows that this is precisely what is correct»[32]. Therefore, while we reach the conclusion directly with the syllogism, the proof of the thesis takes place with the *reductio ad absurdum* by proving the absurdity, falsity, or implausibility of its contradictory proposition.

As any argument can be developed and explained at will with either of these two approaches – direct or indirect – approaching the argumentation directly or indirectly is irrelevant if we consider

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31. Agricola, DID, II, 20: 40.
32. Agricola, DID, II, 20: 26-34.

what is achieved through the argument: the awareness of a claim's truth or falsity. What may also make the difference (*discrimen*) in the choice of one of the two approaches to arguing a thesis is the presence or absence of a contradictor (*adversarius*) and whether the speaker is in a disputation. The distinction is not at the logical level, but at the pragmatic level. It concerns the outcome that one wants to achieve with the speech in a certain communicative circumstance, which depends upon the fear of being deceived by long chains of reasoning and the audience's role. Thus, an indirect approach is more appropriate when the interlocutor has less confidence in his ability to control the speaker's fraudulent maneuver. Further, although the logical outcome is the same, for the audience attending to the disputation, as well as the disputants, the indirect rather than the direct approach appears to be more energetic and incisive (*acrius*). With the indirect approach, we counter what the opponent has said that is wrong and should be rejected. In contrast, with the direct approach, we draw the truth of a conclusion correctly from a series of premises and assumptions. Therefore, what distinguishes the two approaches is the way in which one relates to the opponent in a disputation and jointly, the impression of the relationship that one wants to give to the audience. Hence, with the indirect approach, it appears that the arguer exerts more pressure on the opponent, while with the direct approach, the arguer gives the impression that he largely wants to lead and instruct the opponent. In short, the indirect and direct approaches to argumentation have their own peculiarities that depend upon the goals and communicative context: the indirect approach corresponds more to the function of criticising a thesis expressly and strongly, while the direct approach corresponds more to the function of explaining and proving in a clear way and by means of evidence that a thesis is rightly to be believed. Agricola writes: «Directus itaque monenti, obliquus est exprobanti similior»[33]. It appears to us that Agricola intends to show that the direct way of approaching the argumentation is more effective in a lecture, while the indirect approach is more effective in a disputation.

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33. Agricola, DID, II, 20: 139-140.

2. Agricola highlights the adversarial nature of disputation: «the opponent does not give up and mistrusts everything, does not allow anything to go unpunished (because either punishes what would harm him, or, if he cannot do this, either tries to turn it into his advantage […] or to make it as harmful as little as possible)»[34]. The adversariality of the disputation tends to make the arguments more complete. Agricola's perspective is that, even assuming you dispute with the utmost scrupulousness, if your opponent does not question the conclusion of your incomplete argumentation, then your argument is sufficient in those circumstances; however, if the opponent does question your incomplete argumentation, then it is necessary for you to complete it in some way, based upon the contradicting opponent's specific criticism. If the criticism's goal is primarily to challenge the correctness of the inference, it will probably be necessary to make the implicit premises explicit, show the irrelevance of some exceptions, and limit the argument's scope. However, if the criticism is intended to challenge the premises' veracity or plausibility, it will be necessary to weaken their modal value and make them more credible by advancing further reasons and justifications, and grounding them in assumptions the validity of which the opponent does not deny further.

In summary, like the direct approach to argumentation, the incomplete approach is also more effective in a lecture. Conversely, like the indirect approach to argumentation, the complete type of argumentation is also more effective in disputation. Therefore, it can be said that disputation is a device that encourages speakers to remain more connected to the subject matter and develop their arguments better. Next, Agricola sets out two strategies to refute an argument: (c) the refutation known as *solutiones ad hominem*; (d) dissolution to dissolve the argument, referred to as *solutiones ad rem*.

The *ad rem* and *ad hominem* solutions are distinguished because the former concern the subject matter of the question, while the latter are simply ways to avoid or escape the obligation to refute the substantive aspects of a question directly and clearly.

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34. Agricola, DID, II, 22: 64-68.

3. Taking refuge in an *ad hominem* method of refuting indicates or admits that one is unable to counter-argue the substance of the opponent's arguments, or that it is preferable to discredit the opponent rather than refute the substance of his arguments. In the first case, this speaks to either the soundness of the argumentation or more often of the disputants' abilities and limits; however, in the second case, it reveals a great deal about the nature of the disputation itself and its purposes (and with it of the argumentative discourse), and about the ability of the public (or of those who judge) to discriminate what is a substantial argument from what simply appears to be an argument.

4. We turn our attention now to *solutiones ad rem*. Agricola's main point is: «omnem argumentationem solvi aut negando eo, quod propositum est, aut multiplici distinguendo»[35]. He clarifies that an argument cannot be refuted if it is not, at least formally, as complete as possible. The first condition for refutation is the syntactic correctness of the reasoning. Secondly, only complete argumentation is able to make "distinctions" of meaning, as only complete arguments make explicit all of the premises in which a certain term appears, and it is possible to establish the semantic congruity of an argumentation only by comparing the meaning of a certain term in multiple propositions. Finally, it is possible to examine and deny the credibility of all individual statements exhaustively only at the end of the process of distinguishing and clarifying the meanings of the terms, assuming their consistency. Now, as we have seen, it is up to the arguing disputant to build his argumentation as completely as possible; therefore, making the arguments complete is a process peculiar to him. Instead, what is peculiar to the contradicting opponent is to be *negans et distinguens*[36].

The use of the *expositio* in disputes is typically designed to present evidence and testimonials to support a claim about the actual circumstances and the precise state of affairs. Hence, Agricola explains that «omnis disputantis expositio» must meet two prerequisites. First, it must be credible (*probabilis*), because if it is

35. Agricola, DID, II, 21: 14-15.
36. However, as denying basically means arguing *against*, the task and technique peculiar to the contradictor appears to be the *ars distinguendi*.

not, if its trustworthiness and reliability are doubtful and uncertain, then it is not possible for it to engender trust in any other state of affairs; what is not credible cannot make anything else credible. However, credibility is not sufficient; indeed, in addition, it must be appropriate and suitable (*accomodata*) in a meaningful conjunction with the state of affairs that the disputant wants to prove by means of the *expositio*. An exposition is appropriate if it is possible to derive from it the credibility of what we intend to show.

Agricola analyzes what makes the exposition "credible" first and then what makes it "appropriate". He notes: «an *expositio* gains credibility if it is rich in content (*argumentosa*), appropriate (*consentanea*) to the circumstances, and internally consistent (*consequens*)»[37]. He goes on to note that an exposition is *argumentosa* when it details the causes (not the reasons) of what it addresses. Then, it is *consentanea* when there is conformity with respect to people, places, times, and so on. There is conformity with respect to people if their actions or thoughts are presented according to their disposition, or if the spatial or temporal information is plausible. Finally, it is *consequens* not only if there is conformity between the matter and the manner in which it is presented, but, above all, if there is a logical coherence between what precedes and what follows. The phases must follow an established sequence, and be presented in such a way that each is connected to the previous and the next as in a chain. Thus, an *expositio* is credible when it is self-explanatory, likely, and connected as a story.

However, credible exposition is not sufficient in a disputation; it must also be relevant. This is true because often the two parties in disputations do not question the credibility of the testimonies and the events exposed. Where disagreement occurs is in their relevance in that disputation, in their capacity to be suitable evidence in support of certain statements. Agricola writes: «to make *expositio* appropriate and suitable our intention: this constitutes the foundation and the pivot of our entire disputation»[38]. To do this in the best possible way, the disputant must put himself in

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37. Agricola, DID, II, 22: 77-78.
38. Agricola, DID, II, 23: 7-8.

the opponent's mind: «if we put ourselves in the opponent's mind and repeatedly take up all the individual points that will come into the *expositio* and ask ourselves: "what does that contribute to the matter?", "How will it be useful?", and if we have then recognized that what we want to show is useful for the opponent, then we will also easily see how the narration has to be designed so that it is useful to us. And in the same way that we want to thwart what runs counter to us, we must also exclude it from the *expositio* so that it does not harm»[39].

Finally, Agricola analyzes the role of exposition specifically for those who «in Philosophia disputant», as there are elements of *expositio* even in philosophical disputations. Typically, these are not testimonies or evidence, but clarifications and elucidations of the disputed question. The elucidation is preliminary to any well-argued philosophical disputation and the clarification of the meaning of the terms is a necessary condition for real and generative disagreement. Indeed, Agricola observes: «in most disputations in which the person who is presenting has not presented his thoughts with an *expositio*, we can see that all *argumentationes* are ignored and the day is only wasted with unnecessary shouting, because what he represents and what his opponent attacks are two different things»[40]. However, the *expositio* serves a second function, understood here as a description of the facts and the question in the philosophical disputation, which is associated more strictly with the *inventio* method. Indeed, Agricola reminds us that Duns Scotus used to precede a more complicated question (*perplexior quaestio*) with an analytical and coherent description of the shape of the case to be kept in mind (*formam imaginandae rei*), just because «it is almost unbelievable what a large increase in possibilities for defending the facts it brings». Thus, for the philosophical disputation, the *expositio*, both as a clarification of the terms and as a description of the case, is, respectively, both a necessary condition for a generative argumentative disagreement and a very effective technique to find and develops ways to argue for or against a question.

39. Agricola, DID, II, 23: 155-161.
40. Agricola, DID, II, 23: 168-172.

4. *Precepts of* inventio *and* dispositio *for* disputatio

Agricola describes *step-by-step* and in detail the way the *inventio* method should be taught. He believes that mastering the *inventio* method is a prerequisite for taking part in disputations. Learning to master the *loci* requires not only knowing the doctrine, but acquiring it as second nature: a mental attitude, an inherent way of thinking. Therefore, learning takes place by putting into practice argumentative analysis and invention constantly and gradually through the *loci*. He splits the learning process into two stages.

The first stage takes place by imitation. The dialectic student must become familiar with analyzing increasingly complex authoritative arguments. The recommended procedure for argument analysis includes:

1. Identification of general and specific *quaestiones*, and advanced *propositiones*, by stripping the argument from its figures;

2. Clarification of the hidden premises and reconfiguration of the *ratiocinatio* in its complete form;

3. Identification and comparison of the middle term with the extreme terms, and then description of their belonging or inherent relation to recognize the *loci* with which it is easier to derive the argument and prove the conclusion.

The second stage takes place through student exploration, nearly by trial and error. To master the analysis and evaluation of authoritative arguments, the student must become accustomed to building good arguments by finding the middle term on his own. Here, too, there is a recursive procedure to follow:

1. Take the statement to prove or disprove and describe the subject and predicate through all *loci*;

2. Compare the *loci* of the two objects with all of the others;

3. Ascertain the *loci* that agree and those that diverge to identify convincing middle terms for the same *conclusio*.

Basically, Agricola illustrates his approach to teaching the *inventio* method in the way summarized above and provides examples for each case analyzed. His treatment is surprisingly interesting as well for the theory of contemporary argumentation. Here we illustrate only a *concisa disputatio* between Amphitryon and Lycus on the *quaestio* whether Hercules has a divine nature. The argumentative exchange

between the two *altercantes* is this. Amphitryon's *propositio* is: "It has always cost dearly to be born a god". Lycus' refutation is: "Whoever you see in misery, know that that is a man".

Agricola reconstructs the hidden premises of Lycus' double argument for refutation, and we reproduce it in the following diagram.
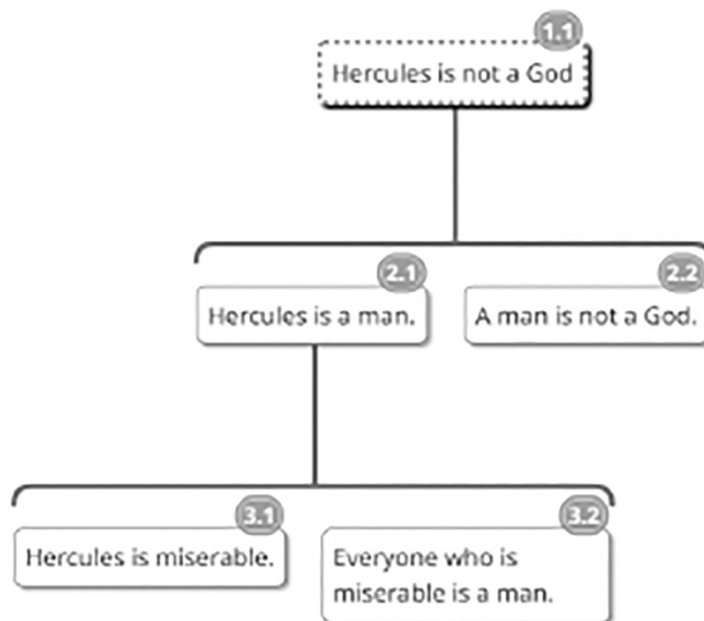
Agricola observes that: the first syllogism concludes that Hercules is not a God by finding the middle term in the *locus* of opposites compared to God; and the second syllogism concludes that Hercules is a man by finding the middle term in the *locus* of the *adjacentia* compared to Hercules.

Amphitryon's refutation of Lycus' argument consists of this *propositio*: "Whoever you see as a hero, do not consider him miserable!". In this way, Amphitryon intends to refute the minor premise of Lycum's polysyllogism, that "Hercules is miserable". Let us see the process in the following diagram.
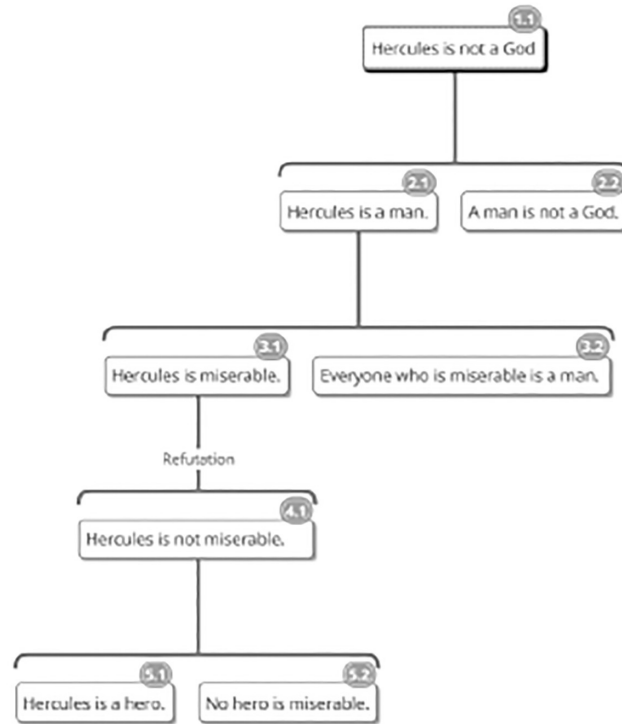
We hope this brief example is sufficient to understand the heuristic and argument analysis and evaluation skills a disputant must master. Further, just as there is a method to find arguments out, there is one to arrange them in a *disputatio*: «so, for example, in scholastic disputations (*scholasticae contentiones*), in disputes in court, and ultimately in all controversial questions for which consent must be obtained from a reluctant listener. In these cases, it will be necessary to pay attention to how the *quaestiones* are arranged among one another, as well as how the *argumentationes* are arranged within the *singulis quaestiones*, and then how the parts of each *argumentatio* are arranged»[41].

41. Agricola, DID, III, 11: 3-8.

The disputant determines the order of the discussion of separate questions, which is often based upon what he considers to be those of primary importance. In contrast, the order of discussion of related questions is determined, beginning with the question the resolution of which conditions the other. Finally, for questions derived from a single question, it is necessary to discuss: first, the single question; then, those derived from what is inherent in the individual terms that constitute the original question; and, finally, the questions in which circumstances come into play. This last process is called *divisio*: Agricola notes that it is useful «for locating the eyes and bones of a question (*controversiae*)»[42].

With respect to the elements of the argumentation, the natural order is: for the *ratiocinatio*, major premise, minor premise, and then conclusion; for the *enumeratio*, parts or species, then whole or genus. Nonetheless, as Agricola notes, it would be absurd to follow this order slavishly in all argumentative situations. Often some premises are hidden, while in other cases they are adorned with a plethora of rhetorical figures, and in still other cases, the order is reversed completely, and so on.

The last issue that Agricola addresses are three strategic rules (*cautiones*) to be observed in disputations (*altercationes*), both in the demonstration phase and in that of refutation.

The first is this: hide the direct link between what you want to prove and the chain of reasons you use to prove it. This is because it is necessary to overcome the opponent's distrust immediately, and induce him to accept as probable, or even well-founded, statements that will lead him to defeat. Imagine the *ratiocinatio* as a complete polysyllogism, which forms, so to speak, a sort of pyramid with the *conclusio* at the top and the last link in the (two) reasons chains at the base. Agricola's recommendation is to avoid a top-down approach, because a self-confident opponent would challenge the first reason proposed immediately, as it is associated directly with the thesis to be demonstrated. He suggests to adopt a *bottom-up* approach: begin from the last link in the reasons chain, which the opponent cannot deny easily and that justifies the major premise of the *ratiocinatio*;

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42. Agricola, DID, III, 12: 68.

and then, focus on the one that justifies the minor premise. Of course, this is simply strategic advice. Nothing in the disputation rules prevents one from proceeding in the opposite direction: «but just as we slide down from a certain highest peak, from which we got the beginning, to that last point, which we set out to prove, just as conversely it will also be allowed to make a start with what we are trying to prove to reinforce this by means of *argumentatio* and to support this *argumentatio* in turn with another until we finally come to something that the opponent cannot deny»[43].

The second rule concerns refutation. This can be carried out according to two methods, *interrogatio* and *asseveratio*, either by posing questions in a Socratic way with the goal of inducing the adversary to contradict himself, or by arguing analytically the thesis that contradicts that which the adversary holds. Both methods can follow both the top-down and bottom-up approaches described above. In any case, Agricola suggests conducting refutation via *interrogatio* because it can detect the opponent's traps more effectively. Of course, the most prominent model is Plato's, who «demonstrated every method and every art of the *altercatio* with supreme intelligence and equal care and sharpness of mind in his dialogues»[44].

The third rule concerns the response to the refutation: in this case, Agricola recommends deriving absurd consequences from the adversary's denial.

Conclusion: disputing as second nature

We have analyzed the disputation role in Agricola's dialectic, specifically his treatment of putting into practice the *loci* doctrine. We summarize it as follows.

Disputation is simply an intellectual instrument. Pathological abuse or proper use of disputation depends solely upon teachers and scholars. Teachers abuse disputation when they use it pedantically only to teach inference rules. They use it properly to teach a heuristic and critical method to identify and judge arguments for or against

43. Agricola, DID, III, 15: 75-80.
44. Agricola, DID, III, 15: 122-123.

controversial questions. Scholars abuse the disputation eristically when they appeal in bad faith to quibbles for the sole purpose of deceiving the opponent and winning. They use it properly to research critically what is most convincing and deserves more trust within the scope of probable knowledge. Assuming that disputants are experts in the matter and intellectually honest, the most powerful antidote to eristics is precisely the essential adversariality of disputation: i.e., the high level at which reasons clash.

Disputing properly is an epistemic duty of the scholarly community. Taking a *contrastivist* approach to argumentation, aware that every question assumes hypotheses, the scholarly community's task is to disseminate and strengthen rational and regulated disagreement. As «every question originates from *contradiction*», disputing both sides of a question (*caput certaminis*) is the most effective method to find new, priority, decisive research questions (*status quaestionis*) in a field of study.

Disputation, as concise speech, investigates the truth shining in contradiction. The disputant's duty is to force the opponent to contradict himself. *Expositio* and *argumentatio* are discourse modes through which, respectively, *ratio essendi* (cause) and *ratio cognoscendi* (reason) of a state of affairs are expressed. While the exposition meets with trust, because it targets a ready-to-believe audience, the argumentation must generate trust, because it targets a reluctant-to-believe audience. Because of this, it is preferable that in disputation: firstly, argumentation is as complete as possible and is developed as *reductio ad absurdum*; secondly, refutation is addressed to the substance of the arguments and carried out through distinctions, and thirdly, exposition is designed to clarify and describe the state of affairs appropriately.

A prerequisite for taking part in disputations is mastering the *inventio* method. Agricola illustrates his teaching with procedures appropriate to: firstly, analyze authoritative arguments to understand dialectic art (and treasure its secrets), and secondly, build good arguments to practice the art. Both processes rely on identifying the middle term (respectively, in others and by oneself). However, in conclusion, what is most important is that the method of disputing becomes second nature to students/scholars. In fact, according to Agricola, disputation can only be the art of dialectics *in actu*

exercito. Dialectics, like any art, can be learned only with diligent and constant exercise in disputing. Mastering dialectics is not possible «si non omnia diligens meditatio assuefecerit, firmaverit, indiderit, et prope in naturam verterit […] nisi de arte fiat usus, et in opus verba vertantur»[45]. The habit of disputing also develops that habit that interests Agricola most, that of being able to identify the middle term *spontaneously*: «if we have accustomed our mind through much practice to keeping our eyes open, then it is able to immediately ascertain what agrees and contradicts the object»[46]. Disputing should become second nature. For a scholar to know the way to dispute is necessary, but, perhaps, not sufficient; he must also *be* a disputant.

45. Agricola, DID, III, 16: 34-35, 52-53.
46. Agricola, DID, III, 16: 111-114.