Notes on Aristotle’s *Topics*, Book III

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In Book III of the *Topics*, Aristotle focuses on practical arguments, that is to say, arguments within the space of practical reason—which have an imperative, an *ought*, or some other normative term (e.g., ‘good’, ‘better’, ‘best’) in their conclusions. He gives commonplaces relating to action, in effect listing reasons for someone to do something. This book of the *Topics* thus has great interest from the perspective of ethics and practical reasoning. It also has great interest from the perspective of marketing, advertising, and other forms of practical persuasion. How do you get someone to do something? Book III provides Aristotle’s answer. He concentrates on one particular form of the issue: how do you argue that one thing is better than another: that *a* is better than *b* (116a1)? Aristotle thinks this gives us the key to other normative questions:

Comparisons of things together should therefore be conducted in the manner prescribed. The same commonplace rules are useful also for showing that anything is simply desirable or objectionable: for we have only to subtract the excess of one thing over another. For if what is more precious be more desirable, then also what is precious is desirable; and if what is more useful be more desirable, then also what is useful is desirable. Likewise, also, in the case of other things which admit of comparisons of that kind. For in some cases in the very course of comparing the things together we at once assert also that each of them, or the one of them, is desirable, e.g. whenever we call the one good ‘by nature’ and the other ‘not by nature’: for dearly what is good by nature is desirable. (119a1-11)

At first glance this book seems to be a random collection of argumentative strategies. To see that it isn’t random, we have to think in terms of some basic philosophical distinctions. We’ve already elaborated the distinction between

- *essence*: what it is to be the thing
- *propria*: what it is
- *genus*: what kind of thing it is.
- *accident*: what it happens to be
There are other basic distinctions we need. We can think in terms of Aristotle’s categories (103b22):

- substance: see the above distinctions
- quality: what it’s like
- quantity: how much of it there is
- relation: how it relates to other things (see below)
- place: where it is
- time: when it is
- position: what position it’s in
- state: what condition it’s in
- activity: what it does
- passivity: what’s done to it

The categories are helpful partly because a comparative judgment in one category can lead us to similar judgments in the other categories. He thinks in terms of grammatical inflections, which correspond closely to the categories (nouns to substance, adjectives to quality, verbs to action, and so on).

Moreover, judge things by their inflexions and uses and actions and works, and judge these by them: for they go with each other: e.g. if ‘justly’ means something more desirable than ‘courageously’, then also justice means something more desirable than courage; and if justice be more desirable than courage, then also ‘justly’ means something more desirable than ‘courageously’. Similarly also in the other cases. (118a34-39)

We also need to draw some distinctions in kinds of relations, including:

- causal: cause and effect
- mereological: part and whole
- teleological: end and means
- similarity
- contrariety

Finally, it will be helpful to have Aristotle’s four causes, or four explanations, in mind:

- material: what it’s made of
formal: how it’s arranged, structured, or designed

efficient: how it’s made

final: what it’s for

These might be combined as a question of engineering: how the material, structure or design, process, and purpose all fit together.

There is one kind of argument Aristotle mentions that is broadly epistemic, having nothing to do with practical reasoning as such. How can we tell that something is better? The better is

...that which is more likely to be chosen by the prudent or by the good man or by the right law, or by men who are good in any particular line, when they make their choice as such, or by the experts in regard to any particular class of things (116a14-19).

Here Aristotle appeals to the opinion of the majority or the wise, and demonstrates his respect for common sense; the endoxa have a certain epistemic status. Here he shows special respect for those who are prudent, good, or experts in the relevant sort of good.

We also see a feature of commonplaces that is hard to reconcile with most interpretations of Aristotle, which treat commonplaces as universalized hypotheticals—which seems clearly right—but also treat those classically, as licensing modus ponens and similar inferences as deductively valid arguments. The inference pattern

The majority (or the wise, or even everyone) thinks that \( p \)
Therefore, \( p \)

is not deductively valid. The conditional

If the majority (or the wise, or even everyone) thinks that \( p \), then \( p \)

is not true in the universal sense that would be needed for deductive validity.

That suggests that Aristotle is thinking of commonplaces as something like defaults, universalized conditionals that do not license deductively valid arguments. They are still universal, in some sense, because counterexamples tell against them. But they don’t yield arguments of a simple syllogistic form. The kinds of arguments yielded by commonplaces are defeasibly valid inferences: their premises lend support to their conclusions in the sense that, if the premises are true, it’s reasonable to accept the conclusion. But the conclusion remains defeasible in the sense that it can be defeated by further information. Commonplaces are something like “all other things being equal” conditionals. If most people, or everyone, or the wise people, or the good people, believe that \( p \), it’s reasonable to accept \( p \) in the absence of further information. But we could receive further information that would lead us to refrain from drawing that conclusion.
1 Essence and Accident

Aristotle considers cases where the question of which of two things is better arises because the things are comparable and fairly close. Nobody asks whether health is better than a pebble. They might ask whether health is better than wealth, or whether liberty is better than security, etc., but those are broad ethical and political questions that may or may not have answers.

He structures many practical commonplaces around the distinction between essential and accidental properties. Roughly, the idea is that what is essentially good is better, other things being equal, than what is only accidentally good.

...that which is in itself the cause of good is more desirable than what is so per accidens, e.g. virtue than luck (for the former in itself, and the latter per accidens, the cause of good things)” (116b1-3). “ for what is in itself the cause of evil is more objectionable than what is so per accidens, e.g. vice and chance: for the one is bad in itself, whereas chance is so per accidens. (116b3-6).

Also, what is good by nature is more desirable than the good that is not so by nature, e.g. justice than the just man; for the one is good by nature, whereas in the other case the goodness is acquired. (116b10-12)

Moreover, what is in itself nobler and more precious and praiseworthy is more desirable than what is less so, e.g. friendship than wealth, and justice than strength. For the former belong in themselves to the class of things precious and praiseworthy, while the latter do so not in themselves but for something else: for no one prizes wealth for itself but always for something else, whereas we prize friendship for itself, even though nothing else is likely to come to us from it. (116b37-117a3)

...what by nature exhibits such and such a quality exhibits that quality in a greater degree than what exhibits it not by nature. (119a16-17)

Other arguments are arguments from genus, from what kind of thing a given thing is. The simplest form of such arguments is embodied in instantiation and generalization inferences: If a kind has a property, a thing of that kind has the same property. And if things of a kind have a property, the kind has that property. We have to exclude collective properties, of course; that oaks are widely distributed throughout North America, it doesn’t follow that the oak tree outside my window is widely distributed throughout North America. Even when restricted to distributive properties, the commonplace is only a default. Birds fly, and Tweety is a bird; it follows only defeasibly that Tweety flies.

But Aristotle also lists other kinds of arguments depending on genus:
...that which is known as ‘an $x$’ is more desirable than that which does not come within the genus ‘$x$’—e.g. justice than a just man; for the former falls within the genus ‘good’, whereas the other does not, and the former is called ‘a good’, whereas the latter is not. (116a22-25)

Moreover, if $A$ be without qualification better than $B$, then also the best of the members of $A$ is better than the best of the members of $B$: e.g. if Man be better than Horse, then also the best man is better than the best horse. Also, if the best in $A$ be better than the best in $B$, then also $A$ is better than $B$ without qualification: e.g. if the best man be better than the best horse, then also Man is better than Horse without qualification. (117b33-38)

Moreover, of things that belong to the same species one which possesses the peculiar virtue of the species is more desirable than one which does not. If both possess it, then the one which possesses it in a greater degree is more desirable. (118a27-29)

Moreover, apart from the rules given above, that has such and such a character in greater degree which admits in a greater degree of the definition proper to the given character; e.g. if the definition of ‘white’ be ‘a colour which pierces the vision’, then that is whiter which is in a greater degree a colour that pierces the vision. (119a29-31)

There’s a lot to unpack here. For now, note that at least some of these commonplaces have to be understood as defaults. The Rangers are better than the Astros; it follows only defeasibly that the best Ranger is better than the best Astro. Conversely, Mike Trout is better than Josh Donaldson, but the Angels aren’t as good as the Athletics.

2 Categories

There are other basic distinctions we need. We can think in terms of Aristotle’s categories (103b22):

- **Substance.** See the above distinctions. But Aristotle also focuses on the distinction between appearance and reality, between what a thing is and what it appears to be. What’s good is better than what just appears to be good, though, of course, it’s better to be good and appear to be good than either one alone.

  Also, if one thing be desirable for itself, and the other for the look of it, the former is more desirable, as (e.g.) health than
beauty. A thing is defined as being desired for the look of it if, supposing no one knew of it, you would not care to have it. Also, it is more desirable both for itself and for the look of it, while the other thing is desirable on the one ground alone. Also, whichever is the more precious for itself, is also better and more desirable. A thing may be taken to be more precious in itself which we choose rather for itself, without anything else being likely to come of it. (118b20-26)

• Quality: what it’s like. Aristotle gives several commonplaces relating to quality. The properties of better things are better; what inheres in better or prior things is better.

...the attribute is more desirable which belongs to the better and more honourable subject, e.g. to a god rather than to a man, and to the soul rather than to the body. So too the property of the better thing is better than the property of the worse; e.g. the property of God than the property of man: for whereas in respect of what is common in both of them they do not differ at all from each other, in respect of their properties the one surpasses the other. Also that is better which is inherent in things better or prior or more honourable: thus (e.g.) health is better than strength and beauty: for the former is inherent in the moist and the dry, and the hot and the cold, in fact in all the primary constituents of an animal, whereas the others are inherent in what is secondary, strength being a feature of the sinews and bones, while beauty is generally supposed to consist in a certain symmetry of the limbs. (116b12-23)

• Quantity: how much of it there is. More of a good thing is better. As Mae West said, “Too much of a good thing is wonderful.”

Moreover, a greater number of good things is more desirable than a smaller, either absolutely or when the one is included in the other, viz. the smaller number in the greater. (117a16-18)

An objection may be raised suppose in some particular case the one is valued for the sake of the other; for then the two together are not more desirable than the one; e.g. recovery of health and health, than health alone, inasmuch as we desire recovery of health for the sake of health. Also it is quite possible for what is not good, together with what is, to be more desirable than a greater number of good things, e.g. the combination of happiness and something else which is not good may be more desirable than the combination of justice and courage. Also, the same things are more valuable if accompanied than if unaccompanied by pleasure, and likewise when free from pain than when
Moreover, when the excess of a thing is more desirable than the excess of something else, that thing is itself also more desirable than the other, as (e.g.) friendship than money: for an excess of friendship is more desirable than an excess of money. (118b4-7)

Clearly, these commonplaces have to be understood as defaults, for the inferences they ground are only defeasibly valid. Aristotle himself treats virtue as a mean. Too much truth telling is bluntness rather than honesty; too much resistance to fear is rashness rather than courage. If an 8 ounce hamburger is good, it doesn’t seem to follow that a 16 ounce hamburger is better.

- **Relation:** how it relates to other things. What relates to better things is better. But there’s much more to say. See below.

- **Place:** where it is. The nearer thing is, all other things being equal, better than the farther thing.

- **Time:** when it is. There are several basic reasons connected to time why a might be better than b: a might be nearer than b—we prefer the nearby pleasure, for example, to the more distant pleasure—or it might last longer, or be reasonably expected to last longer, than b (“that which is more lasting or secure is more desirable than that which is less so” (116a13)).

Plainly, this is at best a default. A good thing that lasts longer isn’t necessarily better. Eating a bowl of pistachio ice cream is great; continuing to eat an entire half gallon isn’t better. A two-hour movie is fun; a four-hour director’s cut isn’t necessarily better. As with quantity, you can have too much of a good thing. The analogy with Aristotle’s account of virtue suggests, in fact, that there is some duration that’s maximally desirable, and more than that isn’t better. Of course, there may be some things, and some products, we’d like to last forever. The longer a hammer lasts, for example, the better. In general, however, this is a commonplace that should be interpreted as a default.

Another temporal commonplace pertains not to the amount of time but to the appropriate time:

Also, everything is more desirable at the season when it is of greater consequence; e.g. freedom from pain in old age more than in youth: for it is of greater consequence in old age. On the same principle also, prudence is more desirable in old age; for no man chooses the young to guide him, because he does not expect them to be prudent. With courage, the converse is the case, for it is in youth that the active exercise of courage is more imperatively required. Likewise also with temperance; for the
young are more troubled by their passions than are their elders. (117a25-32)

We can combine these considerations:

Also, that is more desirable which is more useful at every season or at most seasons, e.g. justice and temperance rather than courage: for they are always useful, while courage is only useful at times. (117a33-36)

- **Position:** what position it’s in. Something in a better, more useful position is better than something that isn’t. An important and general aspect of position is whether something is in a dependent or independent position. Other things equal, something independent is better than something dependent.

  Also, that one of two things which if all possess, we do not need the other thing, is more desirable than that which all may possess and still we want the other one as well. Take the case of justice and courage; if everybody were just, there would be no use for courage, whereas all might be courageous, and still justice would be of use. (117a36-117b2)

Something independent in the sense that it can’t be got from something else is better than what can be got in that way.

  Also, what cannot be got from another is more desirable than what can be got from another as well, as (e.g.) is the case of justice compared with courage. (118a16-17)

  Also, A is more desirable if A is desirable without B, but not B without A: power (e.g.) is not desirable without prudence, but prudence is desirable without power. (118a17-20)

- **State:** what condition it’s in. Something in better condition is better. To say more, it’s helpful to have Aristotle’s four causes, or four explanations, in mind:
  - **Material:** what it’s made of
  - **Formal:** how it’s arranged, structured, or designed
  - **Efficient:** how it’s made
  - **Final:** what it’s for

Aristotle doesn’t make much of these in Book III, but there are obvious commonplaces relating to them that are useful in practical reasoning of all kinds. What is made of better material is better. (“Better ingredients make better pizza.”) What is designed better is better. What is better made is better. And—something Aristotle does mention—what serves a
higher purpose is better. We might take the appropriate combination of materials, design, process, and purpose as engineering, and add that what is better engineered is better.

Again, these commonplaces are defaults. Better ingredients don’t make better pizza if they aren’t combined well. A Squier bass in good condition isn’t as good as a beat-up Warwick.

- **Activity: what it does.** Something that has good effects is good; something that has better effects is better.

  Moreover, whenever two things are very much like one another, and we cannot see any superiority in the one over the other of them, we should look at them from the standpoint of their consequences. For the one which is followed by the greater good is the more desirable: or, if the consequences be evil, that is more desirable which is followed by the less evil. For though both may be desirable, yet there may possibly be some unpleasant consequence involved to turn the scale. Our survey from the point of view of consequences lies in two directions, for there are prior consequences and later consequences: e.g. if a man learns, it follows that he was ignorant before and knows afterwards. As a rule, the later consequence is the better to consider. You should take, therefore, whichever of the consequences suits your purpose. (117a5-15)

  Moreover, if one thing makes good whatever it touches, while another does not, the former is more desirable, just as also what makes things warm is warmer than what does not. If both do so, then that one is more desirable which does so in a greater degree, or if it render good the better and more important object if (e.g.), the one makes good the soul, and the other the body. (118a29-33)

  Also, if one thing does, and another does not, impart such and such a quality to that which possesses it, or to which it belongs, then whichever does impart it is of that quality in greater degree than the one which does not impart it; and if both impart it, then that one exhibits it in a greater degree which imparts it in a greater degree. (119a17-19)

- **Passivity: what’s done to it.** If creating something is good, the thing itself must be good; if creating it is bad, the thing itself must be bad. If destroying something is good, the thing must be bad; if destroying it is bad, the thing must be good. Similarly, if something is good, creating it is good, and destroying it is bad. We can evaluate a thing by considering the value of creating or destroying it, or even just by thinking about its absence. (“Got milk?”)
Moreover, judge by the destructions and losses and generations and acquisitions and contraries of things: for things whose destruction is more objectionable are themselves more desirable. Likewise also with the losses and contraries of things; for a thing whose loss or whose contrary is more objectionable is itself more desirable. (117b3-7)

With the generations or acquisitions of things the opposite is the case: for things whose acquisition or generation is more desirable are themselves also desirable. (117b7-9)

Also, that which is more free from connexion with evil: for what is not attended by any unpleasantness is more desirable than what is so attended. (117b31-33)

Moreover, that is more desirable in whose absence it is less blameworthy for people to be vexed; and that is more desirable in whose absence it is more blameworthy for a man not to be vexed. ” (118a24-26)

Moreover, argue by showing that the thing in question is in like measure objectionable and desirable: for a thing of such a character that a man might well desire and object to it alike is less desirable than the other which is desirable only. (118b37-39)

Purity matters too; something that isn’t mixed with badness—that doesn’t have a downside—is better, other things equal, than something that does.

Also, things exhibit such and such a character in a greater degree if more free from admixture with their contraries; e.g. that is whiter which is more free from admixture with black. (119a26-28)

3 Relations

We also need to draw some distinctions in kinds of relations. Part/whole relations, means/end relations, similarity relations, and relations to standards all play a special role in Aristotle’s account.

Mereological: part and whole. If the parts of a are better than those of b, a is better than b, and vice versa, other things being equal. This is only a default, but it lies behind many practical inferences. We evaluate academic departments, for example, by evaluating their members. But Aristotle’s primary point is more sophisticated, and provides a way to evaluate the parts individually by addition or subtraction. John Stuart Mill later makes these commonplaces fundamental to his approach to inductive reasoning.
Moreover, judge by means of an addition, and see if the addition of A to the same thing as B makes the whole more desirable than does the addition of B. You must, however, beware of adducing a case in which the common term uses, or in some other way helps the case of, one of the things added to it, but not the other, as (e.g.) if you took a saw and a sickle in combination with the art of carpentry: for in the combination the saw is a more desirable thing, but it is not a more desirable thing without qualification. Again, a thing is more desirable if, when added to a lesser good, it makes the whole greater good. Likewise, also, you should judge by means of subtraction: for the thing upon whose subtraction the remainder is a lesser good may be taken to be a greater good, whichever it be whose subtraction makes the remainder a lesser good. (118b10-19)

Moreover, you should judge by means of addition, and see if A when added to the same thing as B imparts to the whole such and such a character in a more marked degree than B, or if, when added to a thing which exhibits that character in a less degree, it imparts that character to the whole in a greater degree. Likewise, also, you may judge by means of subtraction: for a thing upon whose subtraction the remainder exhibits such and such a character in a less degree, itself exhibits that character in a greater degree. (119a22-26)

**Teleological: end and means.** Something or someone directed at a better end is better, and an end attained by better means is better; these are powerful and frequently adopted commonplaces. Aristotle’s chief concern is to talk about means relative to ends. Ends are better than means, for means have value only in relation to ends. So, intrinsic goods are generally better than instrumental goods.

...that which is desired for itself is more desirable than that which is desired for something else; e.g. health is more desirable than gymnastics: for the former is desired for itself, the latter for something else. (116a29-31)

Also, that which is desirable in itself is more desirable than what is desirable *per accidens*; e.g. justice in our friends than justice in our enemies: for the former is desirable in itself, the latter *per accidens*: for we desire that our enemies should be just *per accidens*, in order that they may do us no harm. This last principle is the same as the one that precedes it, with, however, a different turn of expression. For we desire justice in our friends for itself, even though it will make no difference to us, and even though they be in India; whereas in our enemies we desire it for something else, in order that they may do us no harm. (116a31-38)

...the end is generally supposed to be more desirable than the means,
and of two means, that which lies nearer the end. (116b23-25)

...a means directed towards the end of life is more desirable than a means to anything else, e.g. that which contributes to happiness than that which contributes to prudence. (116b23-25)

...the competent is more desirable than the incompetent. (116b116b26) [also translated as “the possible is better than the impossible.”]

Moreover, of two productive agents that one is more desirable whose end is better; while between a productive agent and an end we can decide by a proportional sum whenever the excess of the one end over the other is greater than that of the latter over its own productive means: e.g. supposing the excess of happiness over health to be greater than that of health over what produces health, then what produces happiness is better than health. For what produces happiness exceeds what produces health just as much as happiness exceeds health. But health exceeds what produces health by a smaller amount; ergo, the excess of what produces happiness over what produces health is greater than that of health over what produces health. Clearly, therefore, what produces happiness is more desirable than health: for it exceeds the same standard by a greater amount. (116b26-36)

Another commonplace rule is that what is nearer to the good is better and more desirable, i.e. what more nearly resembles the good: thus justice is better than a just man. (117b10-12)

Moreover, you should distinguish in how many senses ‘desirable’ is used, and with a view to what ends, e.g. expediency or honour or pleasure. For what is useful for all or most of them may be taken to be more desirable than what is not useful in like manner. If the same characters belong to both things you should look and see which possesses them more markedly, i.e. which of the two is the more pleasant or more honourable or more expedient. Again, that is more desirable which serves the better purpose, e.g. that which serves to promote virtue more than that which serves to promote pleasure. Likewise also in the case of objectionable things; for that is more objectionable which stands more in the way of what is desirable, e.g. disease more than ugliness: for disease is a greater hindrance both to pleasure and to being good. (118b27-37)

Similarity. What is similar to something better is better; something more similar to something good is better.
Also, that which is more like than another thing to something better than itself, as e.g. some say that Ajax was a better man than Odysseus because he was more like Achilles. An objection may be raised to this that it is not true: for it is quite possible that Ajax did not resemble Achilles more nearly than Odysseus in the points which made Achilles the best of them, and that Odysseus was a good man, though unlike Achilles. Look also to see whether the resemblance be that of a caricature, like the resemblance of a monkey to a man, whereas a horse bears none: for the monkey is not the more handsome creature, despite its nearer resemblance to a man. Again, in the case of two things, if one is more like the better thing while another is more like the worse, then that is likely to be better which is more like the better. This too, however, admits of an objection: for quite possibly the one only slightly resembles the better, while the other strongly resembles the worse, e.g. supposing the resemblance of Ajax to Achilles to be slight, while that of Odysseus to Nestor is strong. Also it may be that the one which is like the better type shows a degrading likeness, whereas the one which is like the worse type improves upon it: witness the likeness of a horse to a donkey, and that of a monkey to a man. (117b12-28)

Standard. Relations to some standard can also provide a basis for normative judgments. Something that meets or exceeds a standard is better than something that doesn’t. As Winston Churchill once said, “Sometimes it’s not enough to do your best. Sometimes you have to do what’s required.”

Moreover, if one thing exceeds while the other falls short of the same standard of good, the one which exceeds is the more desirable; or if the one exceeds an even higher standard. Nay more, if there be two things both preferable to something, the one which is more highly preferable to it is more desirable than the less highly preferable. (118b1-4)

Moreover, if in any character one thing exceeds and another falls short of the same standard; also, if the one exceeds something which exceeds a given standard, while the other does not reach that standard, then clearly the first-named thing exhibits that character in a greater degree. (119a20-22)

Other People. A variety of considerations relate to the relations between the agent, the goods in question, and other people. Pleasurable things are, other things equal, better than painful ones. Things we do ourselves are better than things provided by others. Personal things are better than things widely shared. But things we can share with friends are better than things we can’t. The more conspicuous is better than the less conspicuous; luxuries are better than necessities.
An objection may be raised suppose in some particular case the one is valued for the sake of the other; for then the two together are not more desirable than the one; e.g. recovery of health and health, than health alone, inasmuch as we desire recovery of health for the sake of health. Also it is quite possible for what is not good, together with what is, to be more desirable than a greater number of good things, e.g. the combination of happiness and something else which is not good may be more desirable than the combination of justice and courage. Also, the same things are more valuable if accompanied than if unaccompanied by pleasure, and likewise when free from pain than when attended with pain. (117a23-25)

Another rule is that the more conspicuous good is more desirable than the less conspicuous, and the more difficult than the easier: for we appreciate better the possession of things that cannot be easily acquired. (117b28-30)

Also the more personal possession is more desirable than the more widely shared. (117b30-31)

Moreover, things which our friends can share are more desirable than those they cannot. Also, things which we like rather to do to our friend are more desirable than those we like to do to the man in the street, e.g. just dealing and the doing of good rather than the semblance of them: for we would rather really do good to our friends than seem to do so, whereas towards the man in the street the converse is the case. (118a1-5)

Also, superfluities are better than necessities, and are sometimes more desirable as well: for the good life is better than mere life, and good life is a superfluous, whereas mere life itself is a necessity. (118a6-8)

Roughly speaking, perhaps, necessities are more desirable, while superfluities are better. (118a14-15)

Also, if of two things we repudiate the one in order to be thought to possess the other, then that one is more desirable which we wish to be thought to possess; thus (e.g.) we repudiate the love of hard work in order that people may think us geniuses. (118a20-23)

So also that of which a man would rather that it were his by his own doing is more desirable than what he would rather get by another’s doing, e.g. friends than money. (118b7-9)