DISCUSSION NOTES

A note on Aristotelian epagōgē

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When examining Aristotle’s concept of induction, one is faced with two apparently conflicting views. On the one hand, on common belief, Aristotle’s concept of induction is incomplete, ill-conceived, unsystematic and generally unsatisfactory when compared with his theory of deduction. On the other hand, both common belief and Aristotle’s own explicit doctrine (cf. APo. II 19, 100b3ff; NE VI 3, 1139b28-31) state that induction (epagōgē), by being able to grasp the universal (katholou) propositions from which demonstrations proceed, is the starting point of all scientific demonstrations effected by categorical syllogisms, most properly in the first figure. In light of the apparent contrast between these two accounts of epagōgē, four major possibilities arise which admit that Aristotle states that epagōgē is the basis of demonstration but differ on how this is to be interpreted. These possibilities are: (1) either epagōgē is in fact incomplete and ill-conceived, but it still can be the basis of demonstration if nous is viewed as a faculty that guarantees the truth of premises initially but inadequately gathered by induction; (2) or epagoge is incomplete and ill-conceived and therefore by itself it cannot be the basis of demonstration — Aristotle is mistaken in his account of epagōgē, at least as this account is traditionally interpreted; (3) or epagōgē is not so incomplete and ill-conceived as is commonly held, but it cannot be the basis of demonstration for it yields insufficient results — hence, there is need for a reinterpretation of Aristotle’s concept of induction; (4) or epagōgē is not so incomplete and ill-conceived as is commonly held and there is the real possibility that it can be the basis of demonstration, for it can lead directly to insight into the universal and necessary causes or natures of individuals investigated.

Most recently, Engberg-Pedersen has entered into the discussion of Aristotelian epagōgē by arguing for possibility (3). E-P defends a unified view of epagōgē in which inference does not play a role and which view, he claims, has the advantage of “being clear and having a point” (p. 318). More specifically, E-P defends the position that in whatever discipline it may be used, epagōgē is the “attending to particular cases with the consequence that a universal [katholou] point is seen, for which the faculty of nous taken as a generalising ability is responsible . . .” (p. 318). Concerning nous itself, E-P argues that it is “not a faculty that guarantees the truth of a universal proposition that is grasped on the basis of inspection of particular cases, it is only a faculty that makes possible that grasp, whether the result be true or false” (p. 311).

By arguing for a unified view of epagōgē “. . . that never betrays its connection with the dialectical situation . . .” (p. 318) and for a limited view of nous, which is merely a generalising ability that yields true or false results, E-P in effect argues against the position that epagōgē can provide a basis for scientific demonstration, for dialectical opinions as such that can be either true or false cannot be the archai of demonstration. In light of the strong claims (explicit or implicit) in the E-P account of epagōgē and nous, this paper will argue against these claims and in so doing it will argue for possibility (4) stated above.

Before proceeding to argue against E-P’s account of induction, I would first like to
make it clear that I do think that his general account of *epaggêgê* as “attending to particular cases with the consequence that insight into some universal point is acquired” (p. 305) is basically a very good one. It seems to capture Aristotle’s general sense of *epaggêgê* as “leading on” towards some universal point, and it might express correctly that sense of *nous* present in the *De Anima*. The problem is, however, that E-P takes his account too far by claiming that this unified view of *epaggêgê* and *nous* is all that there is to Aristotle’s account of induction (cf. p. 307ff). This seems to be a clear underestimation of what *epaggêgê* and *nous* can and must achieve in the context of scientific investigation.

In order to bring more specific criticisms of E-P’s account clearly into focus, the following questions concerning Aristotle’s own account of *epaggêgê* and *nous* must be distinguished: (1) what does Aristotle claim about the methods employed in induction? What sort of process does he take induction to be? (2) What does Aristotle claim about the powers of induction, about *epaggêgê* and *nous*; what product does he think that one can legitimately get from induction? (3) Is the product he expects from induction — from *epaggêgê* and *nous* — sufficient for the task of being an archê epistêmês? (4) Is Aristotle justified about what can be achieved by induction and about whether or not this can provide an adequate basis for scientific demonstration? Because E-P focuses his account on an answer to question (2), I will base my specific criticisms of his account on his answer to that question; though, clearly, both his account of question (2) and my criticisms of his account may imply at least partial answers to the other three questions.

According to E-P, (a) through *epaggêgê* and *nous* one can achieve insight into some universal point by attending to particulars and inference plays no role in this achievement. (b) In E-P’s account of Aristotle’s position, *nous* serves as a generalising ability and no more than this. (c) Moreover, the universal point grasped by *epaggêgê* and *nous* may be either true or false. Since he finds no passage in Aristotle that clearly indicates a use of *epaggêgê* and *nous* that must be seen in contrast to his unified view of induction in which inference plays no role, he concludes that Aristotle indeed has such a unified view (cf. p. 307). Because the incompleteness of E-P’s account of Aristotle’s concept of induction can be most clearly seen in points (b) and especially (c), I will not deal specifically with point (a) and the question of inference. I would point out, however, that I do think that *epaggêgê*, when functioning as the basis of demonstration, can be construed as a process involving inference from effect to cause; to show that in the context of science it must be so construed is too complex to be dealt with here.

(b) Although E-P presents a clear view of what *he means by nous* — “a generalising capacity . . . that is responsible for . . . a universal point . . . whether this point be true or false” (p. 308), he fails to present any conclusive textual evidence that this is in fact what Aristotle always or most importantly means by *nous*. After conceding that he does not mean by *nous* that state of mind (*hexis*) which consists in true knowledge of first principles (cf. *APo*. II 19, 100b5ff; *NE* VI 6, 1141a3ff), E-P introduces his concept of *nous* as merely a generalising ability and contends that this is the sense of *nous* present in the *De Anima* (cf. p. 308ff). Then, rather abruptly, E-P concludes, primarily on the basis of the triviality of his point concerning *nous* (p. 308), and, secondarily, on the admittedly inconclusive evidence of two highly problematic texts — *APo*. I 31 and *NE* VI 11, 1143a35-b5 — that, as the basis of *epaggêgê* for Aristotle, *nous* only is the capacity to grasp a universal point that can be either true or false (cf. p. 311). Even if it is conceded that E-P is correct in his account of the *nous* of the *De Anima*, clearly he fails to argue convincingly that this is, in the context of induction, the only or most important sense of *nous* present in Aristotle. In fact E-P’s own argument in part seems to show otherwise.