8.2: Plato and Aristotle

For a quick look back at the key origins of a clear argumentation process we need to travel back to ancient Greece and the influences of Plato and Aristotle. Plato felt that a discussion was the most productive way to solve a conflict. He called these discussions, a dialogue which worked best when conducted by the "all-knowing, great minds" of Greece, which he called the Philosopher Kings. Plato appreciated discussions as an unlimited number of positions could be examined and reflected on through the process of question and answer. Plato called this process the Dialectic Approach.

Plato’s discussions were very focused.
“Plato’s dialectic is a purposeful conversation, a dialogue that addresses ideas and arguments, encourages contradiction and counter-arguments, and stresses analysis and synthesis as the primary means for discovering knowledge. The capacity of the dialectic for self-examination and self-instruction sets it apart from other kinds of discourse.”¹

According to Plato, the dialectic is the art of being able to pose questions and provide answers. They start with a hypothesis, or as we would call it a claim, and through the discussion add knowledge to test if the soundness of the hypothesis.

The Dialectic Approach involved developing an opening thesis or position and an antithesis or opposite position. These positions were fully developed and discussed. The goal of this dialogue was to arrive at synthesis, which Plato said could be considered the absolute Truth. Synthesis could be thesis, antithesis, or a new position developed during the dialogue process. To Plato, synthesis equaled the Truth and no further discussion was needed.

Aristotle’s approach to argumentation focused more on persuading others. His philosophy of argument is embodied in his Rhetorical Approach. Aristotle’s book, THE RHETORIC, is generally considered the most important single work in the literature of the Speech discipline. Book I of The Rhetoric opens with this definition: “Rhetoric is the counterpart of Dialectic.”² The Rhetorical Approach may be described as a process for discovering all of the available means of "artistic" persuasion on any subject. This is opposed to "inartistic" forms of persuasion like torture or even being threatened with an "F" for not doing your homework.

Reference