

On Some Recent Developments in Normative Pragmatics

The systematic study of natural language argumentation continues to flourish almost entirely outside of philosophy. In one sense, this might be for the better.

Draft as of June 29th, 2010

The ubiquity of the process *argumentation* and its product *argument* are apparent. Some curiosity as to the current state of our theoretical knowledge on argumentation seems natural. At the risk of insulting the philosopher's authority for all things argumentative, however, one should recognize that systematic theorizing currently happens elsewhere.

The following definition originated not in philosophy, but with a theory called *Pragma Dialectics*, forwarded by the Dutch linguists Frans H. van Eemeren and the late Rob Grootendorst. "Argumentation is the verbal, social and rational activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by advancing a constellation of propositions justifying or refuting the proposition expressed in the standpoint." It has meanwhile come to guide a prospering research program of significant international influence. Non-specialists are unlikely to know its name.

Sadly, in philosophy, the interested and the trained alike primarily understand argumentation in analogy to proof. As quality criteria, premise truth and deductive validity prevail; interpretative charity is as often recognized as it is scorned at; unified treatments of deduction, induction, and abduction remain absent. Standard teaching-examples include "If all men are mortal, and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal."

It may clearly be of utmost importance to *prove* whether a proposition, "the conclusion," is a necessary consequence of another, "the premises." Nevertheless, when *arguing* that a hypothesis is (dis-)confirmed by evidence, or that a claim is warranted (e.g., by a legal codex), or that a proposal balances the weights assigned to pro and con reasons, then standards of argument validity do normally not simply collapse into derivation rules of a calculus.

Discounting notable yet negligible exceptions, being trained in philosophy rather increase the chances of nurturing a pre-1960 state of argumentation research. Today, it is not uncommon that undergraduate courses in logic include a brief run-down of fallacies such as the *ad vercundiam* (appeal to authority) or *ad baculum* (threat). Limited to a two-hour lecture at the end of the course, this might be called the *argumentation-module*. Here, fallacies will typically count as reasoning errors. Moreover, rhetoric is ornamental, sophists are morally questionable, and “dialectics” is for the most part a taboo-term.

To some, this may evidence that modern philosophy indeed does consist of footnotes to Plato. His division between ‘achieving truth through the art of dialectic’ and ‘achieving persuasion through systematic deceit’ traces to debates with sophists such as Gorgias and Protagoras. Revived amongst others by Kant, it echoes in the deeply entrenched distinction between *convince* and *persuade* – the former trading on genuine insight, the latter on (self-)deceitful appeal. In brief, the rather naïve view is that mere persuasion governs private as well as public discourse, while truth and logical validity are the exclusive assets of philosophical argument.

The very situation surprises, for arguments should count as philosophy’s *native tool*. Normally, the “lover of wisdom” is deemed especially skilled at putting reflexive distance between a tool and its user. Yet, sometime between the 1960s and the 1980s, the study of argumentation has separated from philosophy. This gave rise to a thriving interdisciplinary field, called *argumentation studies* or *argumentation theory*. It brings together scholars from areas as diverse as artificial intelligence, (speech-)communication, jurisprudence or social psychology. Although recognized among some logicians, mainstream philosophy largely ignores this field.

Of special significance for the development of the field are Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. Their *New Rhetoric* (Paris 1958, English translation Notre Dame 1969) is largely a “rediscovery” of insights from classical rhetoric. They introduced the idea of audience-relative argument validity, and the notion of a *universal audience* – a projection of a transcendent recipient-body. Roughly, imagining it serves speakers in determining what finds assent with each particular audience.

A second influence is Stephen Toulmin's *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge 1958) which introduced field-dependent standards of validity. Toulmin also presented an influential model for analyzing argument-structure into *data* (or *evidence*) which – absent a *rebuttal* – support a (*qualified*) *claim* by recurring to a *warrant* for which a *backing* is available. Around the same time, logics for *defeasible reasoning* began to “take off”. Echoing legal tradition, the so-called Toulmin model is a functional specification of the traditional premises-conclusion group.

Upholding field-dependent standards of validity meant to reject the idea that standards of argumentative support are context-independent. Four years later, Thomas Kuhn raised a similar claim in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago 1962). Kuhn took the evaluation standards for scientific frameworks to be relative to institutions, value(-tradition)s, and audiences. The debate is currently known as the *science wars*.

A third important influence is Charles Hamblin's *Fallacies* (London 1970), which criticized the purported then standard definition of fallacies as “arguments that seem valid but are not.” A logician by training, Hamblin demonstrated that some fallacies are not logically invalid (e.g., begging the question), others are not properly arguments (e.g., threats), and yet others fallacious for reasons independent of logical validity (e.g., repetition). Thereafter, maintaining that fallacies are errors of (logical) reasoning became suspect; too many are conspicuously dialogical, including those already identified in the Aristotelian tradition.

The systematic treatment achieved in the Pragma-dialectic research program suggests that fallacies be treated as problematic effects of situated language use. Thus, both the good argument and the fallacy are “relocated” from logic to pragmatics. Further, where argumentation occurs for the purpose of critically testing a proponent's justification of a standpoint, it is properly called *dialectical*. Combining speech act theory with critical rationalism, the program has strongly influenced the scholarly view on argumentation, its function, and basic units. To reconstruct arguments, exactly three structures (*single*, *coordinate*, *subordinate*) and three schemes suffice (*analogical*, *symptomatic* and *causal*). The latter guide analysts in evaluation. Each scheme is associated with critical questions to which bad arguments provide no good answer.

A crucial assumption is that arguers make implicit appeals to *reasonableness* when justifying or refuting standpoints. Moreover, the primary function of argumentation is located in the rational *resolution* of a difference of opinion – as opposed to a settlement. For resolutions to come about, interlocutors must incur both substantial and procedural concessions. Next to cognitive ones, they must also bear out psychological attitudes such as non-dogmatism, fairness, non-violence. Situated in the midst of *normative pragmatics*, then, the theory spells out necessary conditions for the resolution of differences of opinion.

One may contrast this view with epistemological issues pertaining to human belief or knowledge. Premise-conclusion groups may (fail to) satisfy a number of conditions such as truth, truthfulness, logical validity, reliability. These epistemic ends do retain some importance; after all, when reconstructing and evaluating argumentation, analysts may always intervene critically, if these ends are flouted.

In contrast to the *informal logic* approach where (besides *acceptability*, *sufficiency* and *relevance*) truth is a recognized evaluation-criterion, the Pragm-dialectical theory largely avoids regulating the content of arguments. Unlike the procedural one, the *substantial* aspect is left to participant agreement, as reconstructed through the conventionally incurred commitments for a given speech act, rather than ascribing speaker-belief. Hence, arguers may, but they need not believe their own premises; the theory principally covers (self-)deception scenarios. Further, arguments may, but need not perfectly satisfy forms of logically valid inference.

Reasonable resolutions are tied to participants converging on some propositions; interlocutors must agree both on the acceptability of a premise and its justificatory potential for a standpoint. Thus, it remains in principle possible that arguers – lay persons, scholars and the nobility included – agree on descriptive or normative standpoints which someone else knows to be *false*. This is the theoretical cost of describing argumentation generally.

The risk of incurring it is minimized through recovering the classical fallacies via rules regulating the discourse behavior of rational discussants. The discussion rules cover four analytical stages (*confrontation*, *opening*, *argumentation* and *concluding*

stage) in which arguers determine *what* the difference of opinion is, *how* it shall be treated, then *do* treat it and, finally, establish *who* maintains or retracts a standpoint.

Violations of any rule in any stage always capture some aspect of a traditional fallacy. For example, hindering opponents to forward standpoints in the confrontation stage (e.g., by disqualifying arguers as incompetent or unreliable) comes down to a violation of the *Freedom Rule*. It states that there are no special conditions on who may forward what. Thus, hitherto separated fallacies can be unified (also new fallacies come about). For example, an appeal to authority (*ad verecundiam*) will not suffice to demonstrate that a standpoint is true. The same holds when the “authority” is the majority (*ad populum*). Both fallacies, then, are treated as instances of the use of an *inappropriate* argument scheme – here a scheme supporting a standpoint’s acceptability, rather than its truth.

The immediate consequence is to view an argumentative exchange as rational *to the extent that* fallacies identifiable via this theory are absent. Rather than as reasoning errors, fallacies are construed as dialogue moves which hinder the resolution of differences of opinion on the merit. Conversely, resolution-non-conducive effects, then, are captured as specific rule-violations. Although having become more technical over the years, the latest version, *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation* (Cambridge 2004), is comparatively accessible. Since 2009, some of the discussion rules may on empirical grounds count as compatible with norms accepted by lay-arguers.

The more recent *extended Pragma-dialectical theory* attempts to integrate rhetorical and dialectical insights. After all, it is one thing to define an ideal model of rational interaction. It is another to explain the striking deviations between the ideal and everyday argumentative realities, the more important of which are institutionally regulated (e.g., in court or parliament). Consider as a hypothesis that discourse is regularly “swamped” by fallacies for the simple reason that audiences are persuaded by them in a rather inconspicuous manner.

Recognition of these realities led to the idea that argumentative interactions might be understood as attempts at balancing two goals. Roughly, arguers seek to maintain an impression of reasonableness *vis à vis* an audience and to resolve a

difference of opinion in our favor. These goals may conflict, and attempts at avoiding conflict are analyzed as acts of *strategic manoeuvring*. For example, in the confrontation stage, parties seek a definition of the difference of opinion and an allocation of the burden of proof which best serves their own position. In such cases, if the rhetorical aim (*persuasion*) takes precedent over the dialectical aim (*reasonableness*), one speaks of derailments of strategic maneuvering. Three analytical factors by which managing the balance between these two aims can be analyzed are *audience adaptation*, *topical choice*, and *presentational devices*.

As an example of audience adaptation, consider media-covered events such as political talk-shows. These lose their *prima facie* disturbing character once it is appreciated that arguers primarily address different audiences, namely those sharing their standpoint. Naturally, both speakers *direct* their discourse at the immediate opponent. But they thereby *address* audiences for which the argumentation serves the primary function of sustaining prior belief. After all, if a proponent were to persuade an opponent on such an occasion, the opponent would appear unreasonable to audiences supporting him. The weathered proponent expects as much, for it is also true of her audience.

Via audience adaptation, one may explain why such events do normally yield close to zero evidence for belief change. Presumably, naïve agents will reject this explanation. After all, it suggests that belief change is a mutually unexpected effect of arguing with political opponents. In this sense, such a debate could be called a systematic (self-)deception game – a diagnosis which is rather incompatible with the normally professed motivations for political action. Importantly, approaches to argumentation which include rhetorical constraints such as audience management merely allow for this diagnosis, and do not demand it.

It should now have become natural to recognize that communicative contexts are governed by different constraints on reasonable participant behavior. Seeing as much requires no more than a comparison between a scientific discussion, a parliamentary debate and a family discussion. As the context shifts from domestic *via* political to scientific, validity standards become comparatively more objective. On this

assumption, genuinely normative approaches to argumentation capture standards to which those operative in a scientific discussion *should* converge.

As arguers maneuver strategically in contexts that are more or less constrained as to an acceptable display of reasonableness, argumentative analysis turns context-sensitive. This means that contexts can be identified with differently specified constraints on maintaining reasonableness. Hence, there are as many different ways of flouting the ideal as there are different descriptions of such deviation.

Turning back to philosophy, it might now appear even more surprising why scarce attention rests on a theory of natural language argument. A plausible explanation is the comparatively lesser significance assigned to genuinely epistemic considerations, for which philosophers claim expertise. Yet, if this were the whole story, one still had to explain why epistemologists have not provided a rival theory which is applicable to everyday discourse. Rather, philosophical contributions treating argumentation epistemologically have at best reached the programmatic stage. How, then, does one explain the almost exclusive upholding of deductive validity as a criterion of argument quality, and that systematic theoretical reflection of argumentation is rather not a preferred activity among philosophers?

Possibly – this is the internal part of the explanation sketch –, deductive validity suffices for institutional philosophy, which understands itself as a primarily non-empirical, reflexive-interpretative subject. After all, deductive logical validity is unsurpassed as a standard of criticism; and as philosophers we truly strive on disagreement. Thus, “show me an interesting deductively valid argument and I will show you at least one false premise.” Conversely, “show me a deductively valid argument with true premises and I will show you a piece of triviality.”

Moreover – this is the external part –, mostly found irrelevant by the average scientist and journalist alike, present day institutional philosophy is a largely self-referential expert-discourse. If this discourse disseminates into a public context, then through simplification and with significant time-lag. Now, dominant political ideology demands that philosophy demonstrate *immediate* use value. Moreover, every special science we know today originated in philosophy, cognitive science being perhaps the

most recent example. Yet, budget comparison to those of the special sciences strongly suggests that political and administrative consultancy continues to deeply misunderstand the dynamics of scientific knowledge. Perhaps, this can be explained by an overly strong focus on the (industrial) sophistication of old technology.

One might for various reasons grant exceptional status to the artful proof that a theorem is (not) a logical consequence of an axiom. Otherwise, when we discuss – philosophers included –, what alternative is there to using the very modes of verbal interaction studied in argumentation theory? So, could it be that philosophers avoid argumentation as a theoretical object for psycho-economic reasons? Do we fear the inability of demonstrating a difference in immediate use-value, because even a null-result contributes to being denied appropriate amounts of recognition *and* funds?

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A slightly abbreviated version of this text is forthcoming in *The Philosopher's Magazine*.

Word Count 2542 (all in)