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Argumentation: What It Is & How to Do It

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ABSTRACT: Starting from a review of three theories of argumentation (the dialectical, the rhetorical and the logical) this essay proceeds to take yet another perspective on argumentation. A distinction between the probative and psychological levels of argumentation is introduced and both levels are shown to be pliable by practical reasoning. An argumentation theory based on practical reasoning suggests a way in which dialectic, rhetoric and logic, may be interconnected in the practice of argumentation.

KEY WORDS: argumentation, argumentation theory, dialectical, logical, practical reasoning, probative level, psychological level, rhetorical, strategic manoeuvring

In this essay I use the word ‘argument’ for sets of sentences, propositions, or utterances that divide into premises and conclusions, and the word ‘argumentation’ for the sequence of interactive acts of communication that occur when people argue with one another. The first part of the essay retells how the idea of perspectivism in relation to arguments/argumentation was extended to perspectivism with regard to *theories* of argumentation. After that a distinction is drawn between probative and psychological aspects of argumentation and they are both considered from the point of view of practical reasoning. The essay ends with a suggestion of how the familiar perspectives on arguments/argumentation (logic, dialectic and rhetoric) may be seen to be related to each other through the lens of practical reasoning.

1. PERSPECTIVISM: ARGUMENTATION

In Wenzel’s “Three perspectives on argument” (1990) he distinguishes three perspectives on “arguments”: the dialectical, the rhetorical, and the logical. The rhetorical perspective is really a perspective on argumentation as is the dialectical perspective; the logical perspective looks for an argument in the argumentation. These perspectives, and Wenzel’s elaboration of them, are familiar to all of us so I need not explain or discuss them further here. In another essay (1987), however, Wenzel went on to say that “we need to bring the three [perspectives] together in some eventual synthesis that will constitute a full theory of argument” (p. 102). I understand him to have meant *a full theory of argumentation*. Wenzel’s desideratum was repeated by Tindale (1999, p. 6) twelve years later. Proposals were soon underway by those who agreed that these perspectives should be unified, and

the upshot was a number of different *argumentation theories*, each of which purported to give a better account of the synthesis of the “three perspectives on argument” than its rival theories. Let us consider three familiar argumentation theories and ask of each of them (a) why it thinks it is a better basis for a synthesis of the three perspectives on arguments than the other theories? and (b) what is relationship is between the perspectives in each of the theories?

2. PERSPECTIVISM: ARGUMENTATION THEORY

2.1 *The dialectical perspective*

The Pragma-dialectical theory takes the dialectical perspective on argumentation to be the most important.

Dialectification means that the argumentative discourse is viewed from the perspective of the theoretical ideal of a critical discussion aimed at resolving a difference of opinion on the merits and subjected to rules which incorporate all standards of reasonableness that need to be observed in the argumentative discourse for achieving this purpose. (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 29)

This dialectical basis for understanding and evaluating argumentation must be combined with the desire of argument agents to be effective in their pursuits and seek resolutions in their own interest, that is, with their rhetorical goals. Accordingly, Pragma-dialectics seeks to accommodate the rhetorical aspects of argumentation in a complete, or “extended,” theory of argumentation. Consider the following passages.

To overcome the sharp and infertile ideological division between rhetoric and dialectic, we view dialectic ... as a theory of argumentation in natural discourse, and fit rhetorical insights into our dialectical framework. (van Eemeren and Houtlosser, 1999, p. 483)

In the “extended theory” the dialectical theoretical framework attuned to dealing with the reasonableness of argumentative discourse has been methodically enriched with a rhetorical dimension accounting for the effectiveness of argumentative discourse. (van Eemeren, 2018, p. 114)

In these passages, rhetorical moves are pictured as constrained by a framework of dialectical rules that determine what passes for reasonable argumentation. So, the rhetorical strategic maneuvering in argumentation discourse is subject to the standards of reasonableness provided by the dialectical rules for an ideal critical discussion. An additional reason why the dialectical perspective should be considered basic to the rhetorical perspective is that the dialectical rules are proposed as general or universal principles whereas rhetoric is concerned with particular occasions. “It seems natural, then,” writes Tindale (2004, p. 15), “that the specific should be embedded in the general.” As for logic, it is also embraced by the dialectical rules for a critical discussion: good dialectical practice requires logical standards and one of the rules of the Pragma-dialectical code of conduct, the validity rule, demands that there be a satisfactory relationship between the

premises and the conclusion of arguments, and to determine that is the job of logic. In this way the dialectical perspective is seen to be basic to both the rhetorical and logical perspectives.

While staying true to the main tenets of its original formulation, the Pragma-dialectical theory continues to evolve. In more recent accounts of the relationship between dialectics and rhetoric van Eemeren makes the following observation.

Viewed from a critical point of view, paying attention to rhetorical effectiveness is in fact only worthwhile if this happens within the boundaries of dialectical reasonableness. Similarly viewed from a practical point of view, setting dialectical standards of reasonableness is only of any significance if this goes together with paying attention to the rhetorical tools for achieving effectiveness. (van Eemeren, 2018, pp. 114-15)

This remark shows a further development in the pragma-dialectical theory, suggesting a kind of symbiotic relationship between dialectical and rhetorical perspectives on argumentation.

2.2 *The logical perspective*

Following Wenzel (1990, p. 25) we may take the logical perspective to be a focus on the acceptability, relevance and sufficiency of premises, the three familiar criteria that are associated with informal logic. We should note that this is a wider conception of logic than what formal logicians work with. Logic, as they see it, is only concerned with questions of consistency and validity. But it is the broader conception of logic that is in play for discussion of argumentation theories, and since the wider conception includes the requirement that premises must be acceptable in addition to being logically sufficient, we may call it the ‘epistemic perspective’ as well as the ‘logical perspective’.

According to Ralph Johnson in *Manifest Rationality* (2000), “Logic ... sees the *telos* of rational persuasion as governed especially by Logos. It does not deny that Ethos and Pathos have roles to play, but these are secondary” (p. 269). So, this view gives priority to the logical perspective over the rhetorical one on the basis that logic is more central to rational persuasion than are other means of persuasion. Johnson also distinguishes the illative core of an argument (the premise-conclusion set) from what he calls an argument’s dialectical tier, an essential part of an argument in which an arguer carries out their rational obligations to respond to objections pertaining to the illative core (p. 165). The illative core is subject to logical evaluation but the activity in the dialectical tier – which is dependent on the illative core -- is subject, we presume, to dialectical norms. Logical norms may thus be seen as basic or prior to dialectical norms because the dialectical tier is ontologically and functionally dependent on the illative core.

Harvey Siegel defends the view that it is the epistemic (logical) perspective that is the most important in argumentation theory. In “Arguing with arguments” (2022) he maintains that “epistemic norms enjoy conceptual priority in argumentation” (p. 1). There are two arguments for this claim, one based on practice, the other on the concept of ‘argument’. The argument based on practice is that ‘arguments’ in the sense of

propositional abstract structures of premises and conclusions, “are what we traffic in when arguing” (p. 3, and *passim*); that is, they are what we use when engaged in the activity of argumentation. Without such arguments, thinks Siegel, there can be no argumentation (p. 28); they are the essence of the practice of argumentation (p. 10). Hence, Siegel considers his theory to be an epistemic theory of argumentation because the standards (norms) for arguments in the abstract propositional sense are epistemic standards (p. 28).

How are the (logical-) epistemic components of argumentation related to the dialectical and rhetorical components? Siegel sees the norms of other perspectives on argumentation as “reasonable and legitimate ways to evaluate arguments” (p. 5) and sometimes appropriate (p. 26), but although they are compatible with epistemic norms they are not of equal priority (p. 28). Underlying this claim, perhaps, is a conceptual argument. It is the view that ‘argument’ in the abstract propositional sense is the basic concept from which other senses of the term, ‘argument’ as argumentation, for example, flow (p. 24) or are derived (p. 28).¹ So, because the abstract sense of ‘argument’ is the conceptually basic meaning of ‘argument’, the norms attendant to it are conceptually prior to norms that are relevant to secondary meanings of ‘argument’, such as ‘argumentation’. If it is granted that dialectical and rhetorical norms pertain primarily to argumentation rather than to arguments, then we can see why they are conceptually secondary norms in relation to epistemological norms since they pertain to a derived sense of ‘argument’. Siegel offers no comment on how the norms of dialectics and rhetoric might be related to each other; he is not espousing a particular synthesis of the three perspectives in this essay.

2.3 *The rhetorical perspective*

Wenzel (1987, p. 108) proposes what he admits is a controversial hypothesis, to wit, “logical evaluation is constrained by the possibilities of rhetorical analysis. In other words, the rhetorician must clear the way (indeed, must lead the way) for the logician.” The point is that rhetorical analysis must precede logical evaluation because arguments (in the product sense) are uncovered and identified through rhetorical analysis. Tindale goes even further. His view is that the rhetorical perspective embraces both the logical and dialectical perspectives. In *Acts of Arguing* he writes, “the most appropriate synthesis of the main perspectives of argumentation theory is one grounded in the rhetorical [perspective]” (1999, p. 6) and in a subsequent book, *Rhetorical Argumentation*, he urges that,

a complete theory of argument will accommodate the relationships among the three [perspectives: product, procedure, and processes]. Still, it is the rhetorical that must provide the foundation for that theory, and it will influence how we understand and deal with the logical and the dialectical in any particular case. (2004, p. 7)

¹ I am not sure what argument there is for this claim. Could the concept of ‘argument’ have developed from the concept of ‘argumentation’ through analysis of ‘arguing with someone’? “Why are you saying (arguing) that?” “These are my reasons (my argument)”.

The idea here is that the perspectives of logic and dialectics should be situated “within a rhetorical casing” (1999, p. 15). The casing Tindale has in mind, however, is a broader conception of both rhetoric and argument than what we associate with the dialectical and logico-epistemological, or philosophical, perspectives. It “mixes them with newer innovations” (2004, p. 20). In particular, he adds the concept of an argumentative situation in which “an argument is the discourse of interest that centers, and develops in, the argumentative situation” (p. 23). This harkens back to the idea that rhetoric is concerned with the process aspect of argumentation. It is only as the process of argumentation develops, thinks Tindale, that we will be able to identify the roles to be played by logic and dialectics in individual cases. Since it proposes to combine a network of concepts rather than identify fundamental norms of argumentation, it might be more helpful to think of the rhetorical perspective as binding all three perspectives together rather than being a foundation.

What is alleged to be the advantage of the rhetorical perspective on argumentation, over its rivals, is that it is through rhetorical analysis that the roles of logic and dialectic in each particular argumentation instance come to light. Our understanding of argumentation situations guides us in telling which logical standards should be in play and which other considerations are dialectically relevant. So, the rhetorical perspective on argumentation does not assume particular logical or dialectical standards as having universal application but leaves them to be situationally determined.

2.4 Reflection

What might lie behind the presence of these three distinct perspectives on argumentation? The dialectical perspective has its roots in interpersonal argumentation; that is, disagreements between individuals or small groups (Is *King Lear* better than *Macbeth*? Did the war end in 1865, not 1864?). The rhetorical perspective has developed out of a tradition in which the object was the persuasion of groups such as juries and political bodies (this man is innocent; this policy better increases national security). The rhetorical aspects of argumentation is less committed to explicit interaction than the dialectical (read: dialogical) aspects. The logical-epistemic perspective stems from our desire to know the world, both physical and social, in which we live (Is climate change real? Do children of rich parents live longer than children of poor parents?) and accordingly is closely tied to scientific methodology. Each of the perspectives champions its own standards and methods and wants to extend them to the subject matter of the alternative perspectives in order to make a general theory of argumentation. But the attempt to embrace all the perspectives in any one perspective necessarily leads to considerable gerrymandering of concepts (round pegs are forced into square holes) and this meets with resistance from those who see their preferred perspective less honored than they think it should be.

I think it is right that the use of rhetoric in persuasion must be restrained by rules of some kind; I am not sure they have to be the particular rules proposed by Pragmatics or only dialectical rules. I think it is right that interpretation and analysis must precede argumentation evaluation; I am not sure that the interpretation and analysis must

necessarily be restricted to what rhetorical and/or dialectical categories have on offer. (We must resist the temptation to say that *whatever* is needed for interpretation belongs to rhetoric.) I think too that argumentation that does not satisfy relevant logical / epistemic standards is not good argumentation and should not persuade a reasonable person; but I am not sure that this necessary condition requires that epistemic norms have conceptual priority over other norms in a theory of argumentation. (Having priority in the evaluation of arguments does not imply having priority in argumentation theory.)

3 ARGUMENTATION AS PRACTICAL REASONING

3.1 *Probative and psychological levels of argumentation*

We can understand our argumentation engagements as operating on two levels at once. On what we may call the probative level we make, listen, and respond to arguments; on this level we mainly traffic in propositions (sentences that make arguments and sentences that make questions or criticisms). On another level, the psychological (or non-probative) level, we say and do things that affect the psychological climate (the discursive environment) in which the probative activity is taking place. This can also include indicatives and questions (“that is an insightful analogy you propose”; “Do you really want to associate yourself with that kind of politics?” ...) but also gestures (winking, slamming the door, laughing, raising an eyebrow). The purpose is to dispose an argumentation participant to respond to probative moves in a desired way, not to add to evidence or criticism. Thus, what a persuader-by-arguments should seek to do, in addition to making good arguments and criticisms, is to foster a psychological climate that, at least, will not hinder the reception of their arguments and criticisms and, at best, will facilitate their critical acceptance. If one does not coordinate the moves on the probative and psychological levels one is likely to frustrate one’s purpose: a good argument may be stubbornly resisted; a fallacy complaint may not be taken seriously. On the probative level we should adjust our arguments to our argumentation partners, but on the psychological level we attempt to adjust the attitudes of our argumentation partners to the reception of our arguments and/or criticisms made on the probative level.

Pragma-dialectical theory understands the rhetorical aspects of argumentation as strategic manoeuvring. I think we should take the further step and recognize that strategic manoeuvring is practical reasoning in the context of argumentation. That there is “manoeuvring” gives the game away. That one *selects* arguments and presentational devices and *adjusts* them to an audience indicates that one is choosing means to an end. That argumentation is a “goal-directed ... activity” (van Eemeren, 2018, vii) reinforces the view that argumentation is practical reasoning because being goal-directed *is* the hallmark of practical reasoning. And Tindale (2004, 5) writes that the rhetor emphasizes “the means used” in argumentation communications. Nothing new here. After all, Aristotle thought that rhetoric is the ability to see which practical means would best accomplish a desired goal on a given occasion with a given audience (*Rhet.* I, 2, i). My point is not to

complain about rhetoric but to say about it what others do not say often enough: *In the activity of argumentation the role of rhetoric is to support practical reasoning aimed at influencing the cognitive and/or affective states of other people.*

At both the forensic and psychological levels our participation in argumentation is, essentially, an activity of practical reasoning. On the probative level, for example, we practical-reason that an appeal to patriotism will, on a given occasion, be more fitting than an appeal to sympathy. At the same time, on the psychological level, we practical-reason that standing beside our nation's flag, letting patriotic music play in the background and interspersing our forensic argumentation with references to national heroes will advance the likelihood that our point of view will be accepted. In another situation we take the sting out of a personal criticism on the probative level by asking for clarification and on the psychological level by inducing laughter, making our critic blush, or taking on an exaggerated attitude of guilt. The covid pandemic had the consequence that a lot of television interviews were conducted electronically from the interviewee's chosen location, mostly their homes or offices. Notice the backgrounds they chose for themselves: books, no books, flags or religious symbols, sport trophies, a plain brick wall, an image of a natural setting. Whatever background they intentionally presented themselves against can be understood to be a means of influencing the psychological climate in support of their views.

We need only the simplest ideas about practical reasoning to understand how argumentation is practical reasoning from both sides of a standpoint or thesis. An agent wants to bring about a certain goal, G, and believes that the means, M, is sufficient for that to happen. Whether or not G is an acceptable goal is a moral, perhaps prudential, question; whether M is a sufficient means within the agent's capacity is a factual question and, if M involves affecting persons, also a moral question. The one resisting the advances of a protagonist can defend their position by being critical of G or M, or both.

This idea of how practical reasoning works in argumentation is very similar to the technical Pragma-dialectical concept 'strategic manoeuvring', although it may be somewhat broader. On the psychological level of argumentation, for instance, practical reasoning, unlike strategic manoeuvring, need not be limited to linguistic expression, and it does demand that arguers have a design or plan for a course of argumentation other than in a very general and vague way. Practical reasoning moves and responses in argumentation may just be intuitive responses to an interlocutor's last contribution; nevertheless, they can be viewed as being in the service of advancing or resisting an arguer's position. Also, the practical reasoning view of argumentation pays more attention than strategic manoeuvring to the active participation of antagonists.

Here I am taking the view that what argumentation is, at bottom, is practical reasoning, and accordingly that practical reasoning should be our perspective on argumentation theory. This is very similar to Tindale's preference for the rhetorical perspective but digs deeper because practical reasoning underlies rhetorical insights, and is broader, and more open to the many factors that encircle the activity of argumentation. Also, a focus on practical reasoning can sideline the persistent negative connotations associated with rhetoric in contemporary culture. The proposal that practical reasoning is

fundamental to argumentation will meet resistance from those who think that practical reasoning is dependent on epistemic reasoning (Siegel 2019), but it may gain some support from others who think that epistemic reasoning rests, ultimately, on value reasoning (Hardwig 1991). Discussion of these alternative positions, important as they are, is not possible within the present limits. For now, let us explore how the practical reasoning perspective on argumentation might unfold, and, in particular, how the three perspectives with which we began our inquiry not only complement each other but may be viewed as intertwined.

3.2 *A practical-reasoning theory of argumentation*

As a first attempt to outline the practical-reasoning perspective on argumentation, we can formulate the following ten theses.

(T.1) *Initial situation – telos.* An agent, A, has the goal of influencing the cognitive or affective states of a target B. Importantly, A and B are persons.

(T.2) *Initial situation – constraint.* A must use only symbolic means (language and gestures) to achieve A's goal and B has only the same means for resisting or acquiescing to B's goals.

(T.3) *Means – Method.* Because of T.1 & T.2 A engages in practical reasoning about how best to achieve A's goal. The target, B, may at the same time engage in practical reasoning about how to respond to A's efforts. This involves A and B making moves on both the probative and psychological levels of argumentation.

(T.4) *Means – Information.* Because of T.2 and T.3 agent A relies on knowledge of human nature in general, and the particular circumstances of their targets. The more information the agent has about the target the better they will be able to influence the target in the desired way. General knowledge of human nature such as that people like to be reassured, minds are changed incrementally, people are more likely to be influenced by someone they trust, etc. is useful for A's purpose. So is information about individual targets helpful, such as what are their present beliefs, fears and loyalties, economic standing, history, and education. Information about targets is grist for the practical-reasoning mill that agent A needs to effectively influence their target. Similar considerations apply from the target's point of view. It is in this way that practical reasoning is the foundation of the activity of arguing.

(T.5) *Constraint – Ethical.* Because of (T.2 - T.4) the agent and target incur ethical obligations to treat each other as persons, with respect. "In acts of persuasion, so act as to treat both yourself and others as ends in themselves and never merely as means" (Johnstone, Jr. 1981, 310, via Kant 1785, 429). So, here ethical considerations become relevant. That's inevitable since A and B are engaged in inter-personal attempts of trying to bring about changes in each other. Treating a person with respect in the course of argumentation involves recognizing their autonomy by using good argument and being open to responses.

(T.6) *Constraint – Standards*. Because of (T.5) our attempt to affect others who are autonomous rational beings, our argumentation must meet logico-epistemic standards.

(T.7) *Constraint – Method*. Because of (T.6) both pro and contra-arguments for a thesis should be sought (see Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2). This is where dialectical considerations come into the picture. Insofar as dialectical theories are about objections and responding to them, they are a good fit with the dialoguing that constitutes much of argumentation. (In Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (1.2.7) rhetoric is pictured as an offshoot of dialectics and ethical studies; on the practical reasoning model dialectics emerges as a restraint on practical reasoning (rhetoric) due to rational and moral considerations.)

(T.8) *Constraint – Testing*. Because of (T.7) evaluation is needed for the pro and con arguments offered up by dialectical activity. This is where criteria, formal and/or informal, for being in agreement with logical/epistemic standards become part of argumentation theory.

(T.9) *Constraint – Transparency*. Because of (T.5 - T.8), transparency is needed. This thesis could have been placed earlier in the list, but the openness required by ethics for good argumentation (T.5) should include the sharing of standards, methods, and criteria for testing in the process of argumentation. (Transparency is basically the same requirement as Johnson's manifest rationality requirement.)

(T.10) The theses T.1 - T.4, are the bases of the activity of influencing others through symbolic means. The theses T.5 - T.9 turn influencing into normative argumentation. The theses T.1 - T.4 are thus the base conditions for the activity of argumentation. The constraints (T.5 - T.9) combine to reign-in free-wheeling, un-fettered, self-interested practical reasoning aimed at influencing the attitudes of others.

3.3. *Some loose ends*

On the view outlined above, argumentation is not an extension of the concept 'argument', and argumentation theory is not an extension of logic. Argumentation is a form of persuading or influencing others and argumentation theory falls under the broad umbrella of persuasion theory. Arguments – in the abstract propositional sense – are in service of persuading by reasons; they are essential components of good argumentation, and the concept of 'argument' is necessarily embedded in normative theories of argumentation.

As for the question of how the three perspectives on 'argument' "hang together" or are to be combined in a theory of argumentation, the practical reasoning perspective proposes an answer. Picture a sequence of concepts with each, save the first, depending for its presence in argumentation theory on its predecessor: <practical reasoning, rhetoric, ethics, rationality, dialectics, logic>. Because we engage in practical reasoning about how to influence people we have use for much of the information falling under rhetorical concepts; because we are trying to influence others we have ethical considerations; because we have ethics (respect for persons) we have standards of rationality; because we have standards of rationality we have dialectical requirements, and because we have dialectical requirements we need logical/epistemic standards to chase the chaff from the wheat.

There is a perspective that considers practical reasoning in argumentation as just one type of argumentation activity, a deliberation dialogue, in which two or more people jointly engage in practical reasoning to decide the best course of action to realize an end in which they have a shared interest. The view argued for in this essay is that all kinds of dialogues (critical discussions, persuasion dialogues, inquiries, negotiations, etc.) issue from practical reasoning of the individual parties in the course of the argumentation in which they find themselves and in which they try to satisfy their own interest. It may not be a selfish interest, but practical reasoning, I suggest, underlies *all* argumentation.

So, what is argumentation? When people engage in argumentation they attempt to influence the cognitive or affective states of some other(s) person/people on the basis of arguments or argument criticisms. How does one do argumentation? One uses practical reasoning on the probative level to choose arguments and criticisms which one believes will further one's goals and, on the psychological level, one uses practical reasoning to select things to say or do that will affect the discursive environment in a way that will make co-arguers receptive to arguments and/or criticisms made on the probative level.

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