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Hansen, Hans V.; Hassan, Hareim; Boogaart, Ronny; Garssen, Bart; Jansen, Henrike; Van Leeuwen, Maarten; ... ; Reuneker, Alex

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Perspectives on Political Arguments

HANS V. HANSEN & HAREIM HASSAN

*Professor of Philosophy & Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Philosophy
University of Windsor University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor 401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor
Ontario N9B 3P4, Canada Ontario N9B 3P4, Canada
hhansen@uwindsor.ca Hassan32@uwindsor.ca*

ABSTRACT: The terms ‘political argument’ and ‘political argumentation’ are widely used, but no single meaning of the terms is obvious. We want to identify different meanings given to these terms and determine which of them might be most helpful in locating political argumentation within argumentation generally. We first explore the external relations of political arguments; then, we explore the internal features of political arguments. We end with investigating the relations of political argumentation to the public.

KEYWORDS: political argument, political argumentation, practical reasoning, public goods, public sphere

1. INTRODUCTION

We want to inquire into the nature of political arguments. What is it that sets them apart from other kinds of arguments? The word ‘argument’ is, however, as we all know, ambiguous. To resist possible confusion, we shall always use the word ‘argument’ for sets of sentences that divide into premises and conclusions and the word ‘argumentation’ for the sequences of speech acts exchanged by people when they argue with each other, constructively or not, about a question that is the subject of their disagreement. We will respect the distinction and first consider different ways that political arguments are located in argumentation (discourse) and, after that, see what may be said about political arguments independently of their contexts in argumentation: A way to understand this is to consider what are the external properties of political arguments, and what are their internal properties.

2. EXTERNAL RELATIONS OF POLITICAL ARGUMENTS

In this part of the essay, we consider three possible relational properties of political arguments: the source of the arguments, the sphere in which arguments are made, and the fields or domain in which political arguments are found.

2.1 By speaker

Arguments count as political if made by people who have or take a political role. This will include those who hold or are seeking political office and others who contribute to what might be considered political issues. (We must limit the scope here to the arguments these people make during their political work, not their private lives). Fairclough and Fairclough attribute such a view to T.A. van Dijk.

[van Dijk characterize[s] ... political discourse as attached to political *actors* – individuals (politicians, citizens), political institutions and organizations, engaged in political *processes* and *events* – and [he] emphasis that a notion of *context* is essential to the understanding of political discourse. This means that, outside political contexts, the discourse of politicians or any other ‘political actors’ is not ‘political’. ... The institutional dimension is obvious in the case of such political contexts as parliament or government ... but is also present in more weakly institutionalized contexts, such as internet discussion forums ... where citizens avail themselves of their right to publicly criticize government policy for failing to meet legitimate *commitments* and *obligations*. (Fairclough and Fairclough 2012, pp. 17-18)

Here, political arguments (they are part of political discourse) are traced to political actors. Political actors are, in turn, identified by contexts of argumentation, which are the institutions or “places” where political argumentation takes place. However, these institutions or places, although some of them are readily identifiable, can also be either vaguely or circularly identified, as is the case with internet discussion forums. Political arguments happen in such and such discussion places, which are, in turn, identified as those in which political arguments are made. So, theories along these lines cannot give us a sharp demarcation of political arguments.

2.2 By spheres

Habermas gives us a sociological perspective on political argumentation. His work is exactly at the intersection of our interests: argumentation and politics. From him, we have the important concept of ‘the public sphere,’ which he originally identified as a 17th and 18th century phenomenon of informal discussions in private salons and other meeting places. In our day, the public sphere is quite different due to changes in communication capacity and increased levels of education. It is now a much more ubiquitous but also amorphous “place.”

Perhaps it will be helpful to distinguish the public sphere from other spheres in the way Thomas Goodnight (1982) has done. The personal sphere of argumentation is relatively private; it is that in which we argue with our friends about things that concern us personally and are not normally of interest to other people. The technical sphere is related to subject matters in which one needs some kind of specialized education or skills to participate; hence, discussion of pollution levels, the difference between Hegelianism and Marxism, or evolution theory, is carried on by knowledgeable people in the technical sphere. It is of interest not only to the participating discussants but to others equally well-informed with an interest in those questions, but not so much to those without the background to follow the argumentation. Contrast these spheres with:

Argumentation in the public sphere has two key characteristics. First, it is addressed to and offered on behalf of, the general public. Therefore, at least in theory, it is accessible to everyone. ... Second, the outcome of the arguments may affect the community at large, not just the individuals who are deliberating. (Zarefsky, 2019, p. 246)

Zarefsky observes elsewhere that political argumentation “is predominantly the discourse of the public sphere, to which access is in principle unrestricted and for which technical expertise is not the price of admission” (2009, p. 115). It is open to all (p. 120). Hence, the genesis of political argumentation has a broad basis. However, although political arguments dominate the public sphere, they are not the only argumentation activity found there. The arts (e.g., music and other entertainments), popular culture (e.g., fashion, “lifestyles”) and sports (baseball) are also discussed and argued in the public sphere, but they hardly count as political topics.

2.3 By fields

To say that political argumentation can be identified with argumentation in the public sphere is to identify it by “place” and indirectly by who is doing the arguing. Another way to carve up argumentation activity in a society is in terms of fields. In Zarefsky’s 1982 essay, he reviews different ways of distinguishing argument fields. One is by academic fields such as law, science, ethics, religion, and politics. (Notice that fields constitute a broader category than subjects such as Aristotle’s political subjects, discussed below; they are subjects belonging to, or within, a field.)

Fields of argumentation can be distinguished by their situational features, that is, the situations that give rise to argumentation in each of them. This conception of fields is akin to what Pragma-dialecticians call “domains”: they give a partial list: law, commerce, academia, medicine, and politics. (Notice that the examples of fields a few sentences back would all fit within the academic domain.) Each of the domains is said to have its own particular type of “communicative activity” – roughly, a “kind of discourse” – that has developed within the domain to meet the domain’s needs and has become conventional. Thus, conventional types of communication have developed in the legal domain for drafting indictments, trial procedures, appeal procedures, etc. In the political domain, the types of conventional argumentation activities include the prime minister’s question time, debates, interviews, parliamentary debates, etc. This reminds us of van Dijk’s view discussed above, but more is being said here. It is not only who makes political arguments, but something is said about what kinds of arguments are predominant in the domain. A genre of argumentation has developed with each domain-specific conventional communication. In the legal domain, for example, where the need is to have a third party settle a dispute, the genre of argumentation is adjudication (van Eemeren, 2010, p. 147); in the scholarly domain, where the need is to decide a question of knowledge, it is disputation; and in the types of political where the need is to preserve a democratic political culture, the predominant genre of argumentation is deliberation (2010, pp. 140 -148).

Saying that political arguments are those made by certain speakers in specific contexts of argumentation, or are a key activity in the public sphere, or are the

arguments found in political argumentation activity may serve to pick out political arguments extensionally. Still, it tells us little about what the arguments are actually like. What are they like, internally, without reference to their larger context? We will explore this in the following parts of this project.

3. INTERNAL FEATURES OF POLITICAL ARGUMENTS

3.1 Premises and principles

Perhaps an analogy can help us identify the nature of political arguments. We can say that moral arguments are those that essentially contain at least one moral premise (principle or judgment). Frankenna, reflecting on Socrates' method in Plato's *Crito*, observes the following:

In each of these arguments Socrates appeals to a general moral rule or principle which, upon reflection, he and his friend Crito accept as valid. ... In each case he also uses another premise which involves a statement of fact and applies the rule or principle to the case in hand. Then he draws a conclusion about what he should do in this particular situation. This is a typical pattern of reasoning in moral matters ... (Frankenna, 1973, p. 2)

By analogy, we may say that mathematical arguments are those that rely on a general rule or principle of mathematics (e.g., the transitivity of 'greater than') and arguments about aesthetic value depend on aesthetic principles (objects of art must be objects of aesthetic contemplation) and arguments about economic predictions depend on principles of economics (e.g. increase in demand leads to increase in prices) and scientific arguments as those which essentially have a scientific law, singular causal statements or explanatory hypotheses as a premise. Why not then say that a political argument is one that essentially has a political principle, or consequence of a political principle, as a premise?

Although initially attractive, this proposal faces the complication that it is not always possible to distinguish political principles from neighboring ethical and economic principles since some principles belong to more than one field (subject area). "Expenditures should not exceed income," for example, can be both an economic and a political premise, and "Violent aggression should be prohibited" can be both a moral and political premise. However, the fact that some political arguments are also at the same time economic or ethical arguments does not prevent them from being political arguments. Still, the kinds of principles or judgments that we hypothesize underlie political arguments ultimately rely on may not be on the surface of the discourse but rather lie buried in unexpressed assumptions of which even argument-makers themselves are not aware. That sort of difficulty can affect the identification of all kinds of arguments by their essential principles as premises, political arguments included. These problems, taken together, affect the practical feasibility of identifying political arguments by their premises.

Caution: We note that arguments *for* political principles, as offered by political theorists, are not what politicians (practicing politicians) traffic in when engaged in

political activity. Political argumentation in the activity of politics is *from* political principles, not towards them.

3.2 Subject matter

Can political arguments be identified by their subject matter? That is, by the factual premises and conclusions of which they are made? Aristotle seems to have thought so: “The most important subjects on which people deliberate and on which deliberative [political] orators give advice in public are mostly five in number, and these are finances, war and peace, national defense, imports and exports and, the framing of laws” (*Rhet.* 1.4.7). We might add some subjects of contemporary political interest: education, health services, infrastructure, pensions, and immigration. But not all arguments falling under such headings are political arguments. When a farmer reasons that he should turn his fruit orchard into a vineyard because it would be more profitable, his argument is primarily economic (finances), not political. Similarly, the argument that I should eat more vegetables is about health, not about politics. This is not to belittle the fact that many non-political arguments have political echoes. But not all arguments about topics that are also pursued in politics are best seen as political arguments, in our view, because it makes the concept of ‘political argument’ too amorphous and takes away from what should be the focus of understanding and evaluation in political arguments. Hence, defining ‘political argument’ in terms of subject matters alone is not satisfying.

It is better to see political arguments as making proposals about action in the subjects that Aristotle identified. He said that we do not argue about ends or goals of action but about the means of bringing the ends about (*E.N.* 1112b13). If we agree that the goals of politics are given – at least, on a very general level -- then what remains is figuring out how to achieve those goals, and this is where proposals supported by arguments enter the picture. We then have political arguments as those whose conclusions are proposals for actions to reach a community’s (a city’s, a region’s, a state’s) goals. So, it is not simply the subject matter of arguments *per se* that makes an argument political, but that it has the logical feature of being a proposal for a course of action to meet one of the goals. Taking some of the subjects Aristotle thought were especially political, consider this display:

Subject Matter	Community’s Goals	Proposed Means (Political Proposal)
Finances	Sound management	- Increase taxes to balance the budget - Decrease expenditures to balance the budget
War and Peace	Safety and Security	- Engage in diplomacy with hostile neighbours - Increase the size of the military
Trade	Strong economy	- Improve infrastructure to facilitate exports - Weaken currency to increase exports
Laws	Justice	- Pass laws $L_1, \dots, L_n$, to promote social equality - Enforce present laws more stringently

As we can see, proposals from different subject areas are tied to different general goals. The display does not indicate what reasons might be given for the proposals, but we can add those with our imaginations. That political arguments have proposals for meeting goals is an internal property of political arguments; that the alternative proposals will vie for attention and acceptance by decision-makers is an external property of political arguments.

3.3 Practical argumentation

Isabella and Norman Fairclough write that “politics is most fundamentally about making choices about how to act in response to circumstances and goals, it is about choosing policies”; accordingly, they view “political discourse as primarily a form of argumentation, and as involving more specifically practical [arguments], [arguments] for or against particular ways of acting, [arguments] that can ground decisions” (Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012, p. 1).¹⁰ With others, they see that it is the genre of deliberation, with its main type of argumentation being practical reasoning, that makes political discourse unique (p. 20).

This identification of political argumentation as practical argumentation suggests that it satisfies a scheme something like this:

(Sc1) We should obtain a goal, *G*.

Doing action *A* is a means of obtaining *G*. [proposal]

So, (practically speaking) we should do *A*.

This is a practical argumentation schema, and particular political proposals might take this form. For the Faircloughs, “deliberation involves ... considering *alternative practical arguments*, supporting *different claims* and examining and weighing considerations that support these alternative claims. This is what agents deliberating together are doing” (p. 50). Deliberation is not a kind of argument but a kind of thinking that becomes argumentation when it is done in concert with others. So, deliberation seems to consist of a kind of meta-practical reasoning about which practical reasoning argument to choose: second-order practical reasoning about first-order practical reasoning. This is an internal property of deliberation (in politics).

Fairclough and Fairclough make an important observation about practical reasoning.

... agents do not move *from* premises *to* a claim for action that is allegedly *supported* or *justified* by those premises. ... A more accurate view of what goes on would be [that] ... People come up with a tentative choice, a judgment, an idea, as possibly the right thing to do, and then think of its implications for various spheres of life. ... In order to *increase the rationality* of their final decision people have to think of challenges to their original hypothesis, i.e., the hypothesis that the action is the right one. ... Criticism, not justification, is the way that rational argument can advance our ... rational decision making. (2012, p. 49).

The method of evaluation of arguments is intimately connected with the argument kinds to which they belong. Thus, another internal feature of political

¹⁰ We have made three changes of ‘argumentation’ to ‘argument’ in this sentence

arguments is that practical reasoning arguments are evaluated in part by the acceptability of their consequences. Fairclough and Fairclough share the critical rationalist perspective on argument evaluation with the Pragma-dialectical theory.

Christian Kock is very much in agreement with the Faircloughs about the role of practical reasoning in political discourse. He acknowledges Aristotle's insight that extends practical reasoning from personal to political interests.

Ethics is about deliberate choice by individuals and political argumentation is about [i] the collective [ii] deliberate choices [iii] by the polity: [iv] politics is about making these choices well so that the good life of all citizens is optimally secured; [v] rhetoric is one of the principal means to do this. (Kock, 2017, p. 53).

Political deliberation is a kind of group (collective) practical reasoning in the face of an exigency: a choice must be made between alternative proposals. "On any important decision," said Aristotle, "we deliberate together because we do not trust ourselves" (*N.E.* 1112b10, as quoted by Kock 2017, p. 47).

The argumentation that goes on is between the deliberators as they try to persuade each other which proposal to choose, that is, which argument is best. That political (and ethical) argumentation is about choice rather than facts (propositions) contrasts it with argumentation in science, which attempts to determine what is true or probable. But choices are neither true nor false (Aristotle, *E.E.* 1226a4). From this, Kock concludes that political argumentation, because it is about choices (proposals), not propositions (sentences that have a truth value), lies outside the scope of logic. In Kock's view, logic can only deal with propositions; hence, appeals to logic cannot aid in making choices. So, here is agreement with the Faircloughs: practical reasoning – political argumentation -- does not proceed logically from premises to conclusions.

But Kock takes a step further. Value orderings (value preferences) differ among people. That is because values are subjective and allow value-holders to prioritize their values as they wish; moreover, values are incommensurable: they resist being reduced to other values, so there is no one set of value priorities that can ground objective decision procedure in political argumentation. So, there may be good arguments on both sides of a political proposal, but there will be no rational procedure or logical means to decide between them. Such situations are typical of political argumentation, and Kock characterizes them as constituting legitimate dissensuses (p. 173). What, then, is the character of political argumentation? "The kind of argumentation through which we may work upon other individuals' free choice," thinks Kock, "is rhetoric" (p. 178). This distinguishes his position from the critical rationalists' position, which chooses between competing proposals on the basis of how their logical consequences fit with our values and desires. The rhetorical method is to weigh, in some non-mathematical way, the competing proposals and, through the resources of rhetorical persuasion, find the one most palatable (p. 282). Whether there is much in-practice difference between the Faircloughs and Kock on how deliberation can lead to political choice awaits further examination.

We have looked at the internal constitution of political arguments to see what kind of arguments they are and found that they are practical reasoning arguments that support political proposals. They are the subject matter of the argumentation activity type: deliberation.

4. POLITICAL ARGUMENTATION AND THE PUBLIC

The quest for a good definition of political argument and political argumentation is to be continued.

However, here is another attempt to bring empirical and normative dimensions of political argumentation together:

A sequence of speech acts constitutes political argumentation if implemented; therefore, empirically speaking, it affects the public, and normatively, the effects of good political argumentation should be positive, i.e., should serve the public good.

Since we include the effect on the public as a necessary condition to public argumentation and, normatively speaking, the positive effect on the public, i.e., advancing public interest, as a good political argumentation, we need to provide some explanation on how we understand the public and public interest.

Four terms are relevant to our discussion: Public sphere, public interest, private sphere and private interest. How do we distinguish them? Roughly speaking, the private sphere refers to the domain of personal life and individual autonomy, so it is the realm of individual choice. Life in the private sphere is a private existence that “referred to the family and the intimate circle of personal friends, the spheres of individual work and the consumption of goods, and the realm of individual beliefs and preferences” (Constant, as explained in Geuss, 2001, p. 1). On the other hand, public life is situated in the public sphere, which relates to the domain of collective life and societal interactions. So, in the public sphere, we have “public existence,” which is “designated action in the world of *politics*” (ibid our emphasis). As we can see, politics is fundamentally a public phenomenon. This is not to say that in private existence, we are not engaging in political argumentation; it means that the nature of our argumentation to be political has to be about subjects that affect the public existence.

Let us move to public good and private good. Generally speaking, there are two essential features to make sense of their differences: excludability and rivalry (Geuss, 2001). Public goods are non-excludable and non-rival goods, which means (1) no one is excluded from benefiting the goods, and (2) accessing A to the goods does not limit accessing B to the goods. Examples of public goods are security provided by the military or public places such as parks. On the other hand, private goods are both excludable and rival. This means that if I don’t have money, then I cannot enjoy the goods, or if I have access to it, it affects someone else access. An example of private goods would be anything we must buy from our pocket. We also use public good in the sense of that which is in the public's interest instead of private interest.

So, political argumentations are proposals argued for that, if implemented, will affect the public existence as opposed to private existence. As discussed, the nature of these proposals are practical arguments, meaning they are justified positions on how to achieve X, Y and Z. The nature of these goals is such that they affect public life, either in promoting public goods and interests or harming public goods and interests (since not all goods are necessarily physical in nature, we also use interest to capture non-physical goodness such as acknowledging and protecting human dignity, the rule of law, etc.).

Now, let us move briefly to a normative dimension of political argumentation

and ask why does good political argumentation have to affect the public positively, i.e., advancing public goods and interests? One way we suggest differentiating public interest from private is through the most obvious way: whose interest is being advanced? Private interest includes individual, family or group interests, above all financial interests. But, normatively speaking, what is wrong with advancing one's own family or group interest in the context of political argumentation? At the end of the day, this seems to be a common feature of politics, especially in non-democratic systems, however unfortunate it is. The answer to these questions depends on two other questions: who provides the interest? On whose expense?

In our discussion on political argument and political argumentation, the answer to the first question is public office and public officials. The answer to the second question is constituency. So, good political arguments are proposals on how to advance public goods and interests, and bad political arguments are proposals which harm public goods and interests but advance private interests through the means of public offices. We all know intuitively that something is wrong when the core of politics, i.e., being a public servant, is exploited. What justifies politics in the first place is being a servant of the public. No wonder during the election campaign, all that politicians are talking about is that they are the servants of the people, i.e., the public, because it speaks to our intuitive understanding of politics.

One objection to linking the public sphere and public interest to our discussion of political argumentation might be about the blurred line between the public sphere and the private sphere. Yes, it is blurring, but not to the degree of dysfunction. We all get upset when we hear that a public official who is supposed to serve the public interest misuses his authority by advancing his own interests.

Another challenge to our approach might be formulated as the following. Many actions and argumentative activities happen in the private sphere and personal life, but they could have public ramifications. For example, how a parent raises their children will have public ramifications because it shapes, to an extent, their character and how they interact in the public sphere. We believe our argument still stands even in examples like these from the private sphere, not because every argumentation in private life is political, but because those with ramifications on the public have a political dimension. No wonder why governmental agencies intervene when there are signs of child abuse in the household. This is because, on the one hand, it is the state's duty to safeguard the dignity of everyone, including children; on the other hand, it is in the public's interest that children grow up in a safe space and become functioning citizens.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We began by considering what might count as political *arguments*. After several attempts, we arrived at the conception of political arguments as arguments directed at others and anticipated responses. Hence, we turned to reviewing various suggestions about political *argumentation*. Although they all require some kind of inter-personal deliberation in pursuit of political goals, the theories we consulted varied in the kind of argumentation they used in the course of the deliberations (rhetorical, dialectical). Only one of the sources considered, Fairclough and Fairclough, went as far as to explicitly

identify the kind of argument deliberators must use in pursuit of their political goals: practical reasoning. Practical reasoning occurs in both private and public spheres. What we consider political is practical reasoning on the matters that affect the public.

So, it seems to be the only necessary condition that an argument or an argumentative activity has to satisfy to be a political argument/ation is, if implemented, it affects public life as opposed to private life. Then what follows is, regardless of who is an arguer, a politician or a regular citizen, or where the argument is made, in a parliament building or a coffee shop, or whether the subject of an argument is economy, culture, education, environment or what have you, or whether the argument is strong, or weak or whatever argument type might be, or whether the implication of the arguments are positive or negative on the general public, as long as an argumentative activity affects the public, it will fall under the category of political argumentation.

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