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Toulmin's 'argument fields': an Operational or a Critical Notion?

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ABSTRACT: After briefly reviewing the controversies surrounding Toulmin's 'argument fields', it will be argued that such notion was not advanced by the author as a technical or truly operational notion for the analysis of argumentation but, rather, as a critical notion that allowed him to highlight the need to attend to field-dependent evaluative criteria within any rational justification practice. Finally, some remarks will be made about why it is relevant to favour such an interpretation.

KEYWORDS: argument fields, critical notion, field-dependency thesis, operational notion, rational justification, S. Toulmin

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will address the question of how to interpret the Toulminian notion of 'argument fields'. But the first thing I would like to mention is how I came to be concerned with it.

In this regard, I should begin by saying that I am currently doing a thesis on Stephen Toulmin's contributions to epistemology and argumentation theory, trying to correlate both domains (e.g., by linking his understanding of argumentation and his positions in the field of philosophy of science). And I am working under the hypothesis that all his work is rooted in a common concern about rationality¹, and that it essentially seeks to criticise the modern conception of rationality in order to encourage us to take a broader one that allows us to resituate it and reconnect it with practice –adopting a more contextualist and pragmatic approach to the exercise of rational judgement. That is why the 'field-dependency' aspect of argumentative analysis and evaluation (as presented in *The Uses of Argument*) is of obvious importance to my research, given its relevance as a means to Toulmin's critique of modern rationality.

According to Toulmin, one of the main flaws of that modern conception would be to rely on an unnecessarily narrow and restrictive model of justification, the deductivist one (as the only acceptable or sufficient model for providing rational justifications to our beliefs). And, for his critique, the idea of the 'field-dependency' of argumentative evaluation standards is of obvious importance, since it illustrates that formal, a-temporal

¹ Hypothesis based on an overall reading of his written production and on some circumstantial evidence, such as him saying in an interview in the 1990s that "Actually (and perhaps I'll write an essay about this sometime), for those who are interested, the entirety of my work could in fact, from a certain point of view, be regarded as sketches toward a 'novissimum organum'; that is, all my books are in different ways concerned with rationality, reasonableness, the operations of the human reason, and so on" (Olson, 1993: 288).

and a-contextual standards –such as those of deductivism– are not sufficient to evaluate the "rational merits" of arguments; so that substantive criteria, that will be contextually determined, have to be taken into account.

Obviously, Toulmin's argument fields notion is vital to express this idea. But when I started working on this question I realised that, although I was able to grasp the meaning of his dependency thesis sufficiently well, I was not entirely clear about what the notion of argument fields actually meant. After reading many of his works I only managed to have a tentative and loose idea of its meaning (based on my understanding of the field-dependency thesis and on the links between the notion and that of 'rational enterprises' as found in his works *Human Understanding* and *An Introduction to Reasoning*). For me, fields were something like: certain areas in which the relevant rational justification and evaluation procedures are determined (in a certain sense). I.e., in which there is a set of shared beliefs about what counts as reasons to support certain kinds of claims and what is considered to be an adequate procedure for establishing a supporting link between these and those –and whose variety could be understood in terms of what is done in those specific fields, in relation to the ends they pursue, the problems they try to solve, etc.

But this is just some sort of rephrasing of the dependency thesis itself that does not clarify what argument fields are, so I did some research to find a better definition and discovered that this has been a very controversial topic. Here I will just try to present what I have come to in trying to better understand the notion and its implications and, to this end, I will proceed as follows:

First, I will briefly outline the controversy over the interpretation of the notion in order to extract from it some relevant remarks for the second point, which is the central one. There I will try to defend that Toulmin did not really advance this notion (primarily) as a technical or operational notion for the analysis of argumentation, but rather as a useful notion for his critique, through which to illustrate the thesis of the contextual dependency of rational justification. And, finally, I will mention some tentative conclusions trying to highlight the potential advantages associated with a non-technical interpretation of 'argument fields'.

2. SHORT OVERVIEW OF THE CONTROVERSY

Here are a couple of things that came to my attention as I delved into the controversy surrounding the interpretation of the notion after realising my lack of clear understanding of it.

To begin with, I think it can be established that two issues are at stake in this controversy:

The first one would deal with the nature of the argument fields. It would be about finding an accurate definition that would make possible to determine what they are and how to distinguish among them. We could say that it would be about the search for some kind of demarcation criterion for argument fields.

The second would have less to do with the notion itself and more to do with its connection to the general idea of field-dependency. The question, in this sense, would rather be something like: What is the relationship between the fields and the standards or criteria of argumentative evaluation?

Clearly, the two issues are not entirely independent (as the treatment of the former often affects the approach to the latter), but they are distinguishable. And by distinguishing between them the evolution of the debate over time can also be better understood.

Regarding this evolution it is worth noting that, without doubt, its peak took place between the late 1970s and early 1980s. More precisely, during the First and Second Summer Conference on Argumentation (held at Utah University in 1979 and 1981). In the first one there were already several contributions on the topic of argument fields –e.g., Willard, McKerrow or Zarefsky (cf., Rhodes & Newell, 1980)– but, in the second one, the topic became one of the main themes of the conference, and many scholars tried to give their own interpretations of the notion. During the following decades some authors continued to address the issue –such as Rowland (1982), Hanson (1989) or Willard (1992), among others– but more and more sporadically. And, by the 2000s, although the topic was occasionally revisited – by Godden (2003 & 2009), Bermejo-Luque (2006) and, again, Rowland (2008)– little attention was paid to it. Thus, while this debate has not completely disappeared, over time it has been addressed in a more and more spaced out and

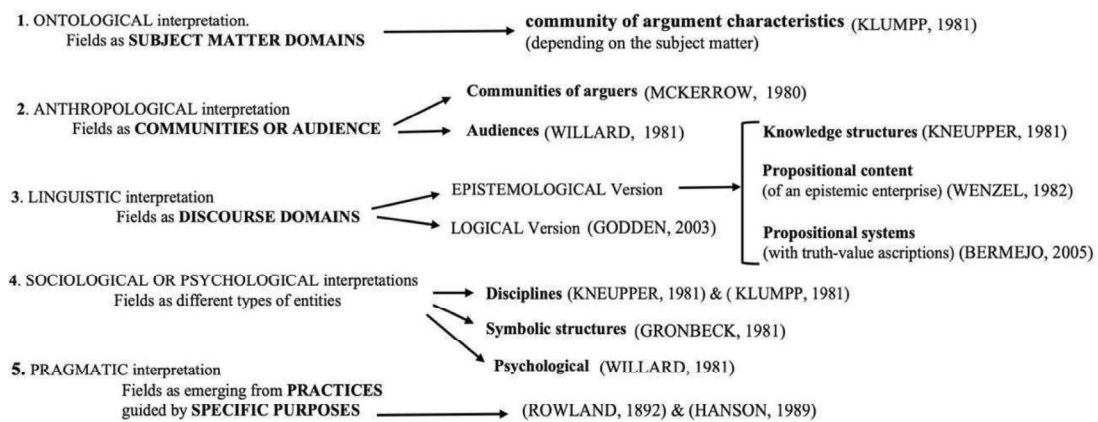
autonomous manner, so it does not seem an exaggeration to say that the controversy (in the strong sense of the term) has been on the decline.

On the other hand, the above-mentioned issues have received varying degrees of attention. In the 1980s, especially at the 1981 conference, the former received much more attention than the latter. There were already those who, for example, accused Toulmin of falling into relativism because of his conception of field-dependent standards, but the main issue was how to interpret the notion of argument field correctly so that it would be useful for argument evaluation. In most subsequent publications the main issue gradually became, rather, whether or not the criteria of argument evaluation are field-dependent and, if so, in what sense they are (and how to interpret the notion was a rather secondary issue, as each particular interpretation served to nuance each author's position on the field-dependency thesis).

However, as they are related issues, it is worth paying attention to the development of the debate around the former –even if what interests us most is the latter– since certain useful clues can be extracted from it. For example, it allows us to notice to what extent multiple interpretations of the notion (more or less reconcilable) have been postulated; as can be seen in “figure 1” (based on the inventory created by Rowland (2008) and expanded by Godden (2009) and myself).

Some authors identify fields with subject domains and characterise them as sets of arguments features (which depend on certain subject matters); others interpret them as communities of arguers or audiences; others, as certain discursive universes –as: “knowledge structures”, or as the “propositional content of each rational enterprise with an epistemic purpose” or as distinct “propositional systems” (with truth-value ascriptions)–; others choose to understand them as sociological entities in a strong sense, as disciplines or as schools of thought; and so on.

Figure 1. Outline of interpretations



Thus, not only is it difficult to find a clear definition of the notion in Toulmin's work, but when looking at the secondary literature things become even more complex. The interpretations are not only multiple, but can be more or less compatible with each other and overlaps among them can be found. Some, such as the one proposed by Rowland in the 1980s (which I think is the most faithful to Toulmin's approach) sought to reconcile many of them, but it seems that, even in the face of the most holistic and complex interpretations, one can always find examples of Toulmin's lax and varied usage of the term that overflow them. In fact, after following the debate I realised that, although each interpretation was relevant and clarifying in its own way, I still only managed to have approximately the same rough idea as before about the meaning of the notion.

In addition, if we look at the evolution of the discussion about this first issue, we see not only that it progressively dissolved, but that it dissolved even though it did not manage to reach a resolution. With regard to the causes of this dissolution a few retrospective observations are worth noting.

On the one hand, it seems to have been implicitly concluded that the attempt to create a systematic theory of argument fields cannot succeed (as Rowland himself acknowledged in 2008); and, on the other hand, the debate around the notion may have ceased because the associated idea of the need to attend to specific contexts in order to analyse and appraise arguments has become tacitly accepted by the majority of argumentation scholars. In other words, the development of the discussion shows us the apparent impossibility of reaching an agreement on how to define the notion and, at the same time, the possibility of preserving, despite this, the basic Toulminian insights that, in my view, the notion was intended to illustrate.

I believe that the unfeasibility of agreeing on how to define the term on the basis of Toulmin's writings may already be a clue to what I want to defend here, namely, that he did not present it as a technical and operational notion for the study of argumentation, but only as an illustrative means to expound his contextualist and pragmatic positions. So now I will just briefly outline some of the reasons why I think this interpretation is plausible.

3. ARGUMENT FIELDS AS A NON-TECHNICAL NOTION

3.1 Difficulties in finding a specific definition of the notion

The first reason has to do with these very difficulties over agreeing on a specific definition of the term. I think that this difficulty has several causes:

a) Toulmin didn't offer a precise definition of it. In *The Uses of Argument* he gave several partial definitions that are somewhat lax and not clearly consistent with each other (cf. Toulmin, 2003 [1958], pp. 14, 154), and which didn't reappear in later works.

b) In fact, in all his works, rather than offering definitions, Toulmin gave examples of arguments belonging to different fields. But trying to delimit the notion through them is almost impossible, since in supplying examples he used it in a very unsystematic way (especially in relation to the level of specificity that these fields would have).

For example, he sometimes compares the arguments employed in ethical debates with those employed in legal or scientific forums (relating the notion apparently to his concept of 'rational enterprises' such as Ethics, Science, Law, etc.); at other times, he compares the kind of arguments to be used in clinical medicine with those in theoretical medical research (so it seems that the notion would have more to do with the kind of practices in which arguments are used); at others, he goes so far as to ask about the features of arguments characteristic of discussions of popular music as opposed to "some other field of argument" (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1984, p. 367) (being more in line with thematic domains); and so on. Indeed, as can be seen in the following quote, he goes so far as to mention as different fields of argumentation: discussions about sports, art, business, pure mathematics or about the practical judgements of everyday life.

[...] the kinds of substantive considerations that actually support our warrants vary greatly between different enterprises and fields of argument: in scientific, medical, and legal arguments, in discussions about sport, art or business, in abstract discussions of pure mathematics, and in the practical judgments of everyday life. In all these fields, our warrants derive their foundation and authority from backing of quite different sorts. Hence the colloquial point of the phrase 'in the nature of the case'. (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1984, p. 67).

So, there would be from a very broad field which he seems sometimes to have considered the field of common sense (Toulmin, Rieke & Janik, 1984, p. 118) to fields as narrow as the one of discussions about sport. Hence, it is almost impossible to give a definition of the notion that concretises its specificity without finding examples that overflow and contradict it.

c) On the other hand, he not only used the notion unsystematically, but often used other notions interchangeably (as quasi-synonyms). For example, sometimes the notions of 'rational enterprises' or 'rational disciplines' are used in an analogous way; in others, as in his dissertation, he speaks of 'fields of reasoning'; in *An Introduction to Reasoning*, although the notion reappears occasionally, 'fields of discussion' is preferably used to indicate approximately the same thing. To which we must add the use of many other related terms in various writings, such as: areas or 'fields of experience/practice/activity', 'fields of work/inquiry/thought', 'forums of arguments', etc.

But despite all this diversity and confusion, there is something common to all the examples and terms used as quasi-synonyms. They are always used for the same

fundamental purpose: to illustrate the need to attend to the specific contexts or situations in which processes of rational justification are carried out in order to understand them properly and to assess their rational merits fairly. This seems to indicate that Toulmin was not trying to use them to explain what argument fields are, but simply to make explicit that not all arguments can be judged in terms of a single model of rational justification.

For all these reasons, I believe that the interpretation according to which the notion of ‘field’ is understood as a critical notion subordinated to that of ‘field-dependency’ (serving to illustrate it) is plausible. This plausibility increases if we take into account Toulmin's own statements about his works and approach.

3.2 Toulmin's remarks on the purpose of his works

To begin with, as is well known, Toulmin insisted that when he wrote *The Uses* he had in mind to elaborate a philosophical critique focused on epistemological matters, not to elaborate some sort of argumentation theory or to advance a model for analysing arguments.

When I wrote it, my aim was strictly philosophical: to criticize the assumption, made by most Anglo-American academic philosophers, that any significant argument can be put in formal terms: not just as a syllogism, since for Aristotle himself any inference can be called a ‘syllogism’ or ‘linking of statements’, but a rigidly demonstrative deduction of the kind to be found in Euclidean geometry. [...] In no way had I set out to expound a theory of rhetoric or argumentation: my concern was with twentieth-century epistemology, not informal logic. Still less had I in mind an analytical model like that which, among scholars of Communication, came to be called ‘the Toulmin model’. (Toulmin, 2003, p. vii).

Thus, it seems implausible to think that when he introduced the argument fields notion he was intending to offer a truly technical and operative concept for rational analysis and evaluation.

Moreover, in some interviews he explained that, in that book, what he tried to do was to elaborate a more general account of what he had already stressed in his first two publications with respect to the specific fields of Ethics and Science (Olson, 1993: 289). That, in short, would be the fact that different modes of reasoning have to be differentiated “by reference to the larger activities of which they are a part, and to the ends which these promote” (Toulmin, 1953, p. 103). Or, as he put it retrospectively with regard to his early works,

My questions were: How the reasons we rely on in different kinds of research, inquiry and decision function, and, how these functional differences affect the ways in which arguments and beliefs are to be judged in one field rather than another. (Toulmin, 2010, p. 336).

In fact, in an interview in the 1990s, when talking about the general sense of his works, he said that what he had tried to do was

to help people understand what they need to know about Physics, what they need to know about Law, what they need to know about all these different ways of acting pragmatically if they want to

see how the ways in which we reason both legally and scientifically, or in any other field, fit and accommodate those aspects of human life. (Atienza & Redondo, 1992, p. 349).²

Two things can be discerned from these quotations. The first one is that he used the term 'field' in a colloquial (broad and vague) non-technical sense. And, if one takes into account that he sometimes speaks of 'fields of reasoning', sometimes of 'fields of discussion', etc., this seems to support the idea that the notion of argument fields was never intended to be a truly technical notion. The second one is that the term is always used in a context in which the important thing is to emphasise the need to adopt a contextualist and pragmatic approach to rational justification; i.e., the fact that we must pay attention to the concrete practices in which it is deployed in order to understand it and judge it adequately. This is the main point, and to what his field-dependency thesis leads to, since, as he also stated in the interview:

what I've been trying to do is to find ways of giving explanations of the Lebensformen, of giving explanations of those aspects of the forms of life, which we need, which enable us to see how those forms of life supply the backing for the warrants that go into our practical modes of argumentation. (Atienza & Redondo, 1992, p. 348).

In short, I think that this also supports the idea that the argument fields notion has always been contingent on the question of field-dependency.

3.3 Toulmin's disinterest in clarifying the notion

A final type of reason that supports my reading of the notion would be Toulmin's own disinterest in giving it a more concrete form. Even after there had been a debate about it, he didn't bother to provide a clearer definition.

It is noteworthy that, as Godden (2002) pointed out, when Toulmin participated in the 1992 ISSA conference, which included several of the authors who had participated in that debate, he made no mention of the controversy or the notion. Moreover, in that talk, in some interviews and in the updated preface to *The Uses*, he stated that if he were to rewrite the book he would change some things, but among those mentioned was certainly not to specify the notion of argument fields, but things like: That he would broaden the "context, and show that it is not just the 'warrants' and 'backing' that vary from field to field: even more, it is the forums of argumentation, the stakes, and the contextual details of 'arguing' as an activity" (Toulmin, 1992, p. 9); or the need to clarify the notion of 'backing' in different ways in relation, once again, to the different "fields of practice and argument" (Toulmin, 2003, p. viii). So, again, the importance of context and practice is stressed, but the notion of field is secondary and lax.

Actually, one can find some other circumstantial evidence that seems to point not only to the fact that Toulmin showed no real interest in clarifying it, but that he probably did not think it would be a good idea to do so. That is, he would not find it convenient to attempt to make it a technical or operational notion. For example, he once said that

² The original interview was published in Spanish, the passages offered here have been translated by the author of this paper.

The success of *The Uses of Argument* is largely due to the fact that I chose colloquial words (grounds, backing, and so on) which everybody understands. So too did Aristotle. His 'four causes' are the 'from what', the 'who did it', the 'what sort it is', and the 'in aid of what'. (The terms essential cause, material cause, formal and final cause, were mediaeval Latin introductions, which confused rather than elucidated his meaning.) (Toulmin, 2006, p. 29).

It seems plausible to think that he considered that, what he said about the scholastic technification of Aristotle's concepts (which would have confused rather than helped to elucidate their meanings) could be applied to the ones he himself proposed. Or, as another example, when Richard Rieke spoke on argument fields at the aforementioned conference (a couple of years after publishing *An Introduction to Reasoning with Toulmin and Janik*), he opened his paper by warning:

Research into argument fields carries with it the caveat that the scholar maybe looking for that which does not exist. As it was with phlogiston it may be with fields. Research tends to discover that which it sets out to find. (Rieke, 1981, p. 173).

After which he emphasised the need to systematically examine situation-after-situation to discover where communities or forums of reasoning may exist, and to avoid categorising hastily and "from the outside". I think Toulmin himself could have uttered such a warning. A warning which, on the other hand, is in line with what Rowland would later arrive at after giving up the enterprise of generating a theory of fields. I.e., the idea that:

[...] fields exist at so many levels of specificity that description rarely is useful apart from a particular case study. [...] descriptive studies of fields would need to be tailored to the specifics of a given controversy in order to be useful. (Rowland, 2008: 238).

With which I believe Toulmin would also have agreed, given his persistent insistence on paying attention, not only to contexts, but also to the specific situations and problems to be addressed.

4. CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above I would like to defend the following tentative conclusions:

1. Most likely, the argument fields notion was not presented by Toulmin as an operational notion in relation to argument analysis³, but as a colloquial notion with a critical function –against non-contextualist and non-pragmatic conceptions of rational justification.
2. That, being a colloquial notion, it is vague and imprecise by nature. And, regardless of whether it can be concretised for the purposes of specific research, this ambiguity or vagueness should be maintained when speaking of it in general theoretical terms. Since over-specifying or over-technifying it may have more disadvantages than advantages, such as generating unnecessary epistemological problems (like those that Toulmin tried to undo in *The Uses*).

³ Although it can be operationalised in different ways in different investigations on argumentation according to the concrete interests that guide them –to which I think Toulmin would not object at all as long as it is not taken as a strong theoretical term.

I think all this is important for one reason:

As I have already remarked, when the question of argument fields re-emerges nowadays, it comes up in connection with the second of the above-mentioned issues – the one related to the question of the contextual dependency of argument evaluation standards. And, in my view, the standard way of approaching the issue is not the appropriate one precisely because it is always addressed by presupposing one or another technical interpretation of the term that allows to demarcate a concrete level of specificity of the fields (regardless of whether they are equated with disciplines, communities, etc.). Thus, at the end of the day, each field is interpreted as a sort of autonomous and clearly differentiable "framework", as if there were clear discontinuities and no overlapping between them. And, if we combine this with Toulmin's hard contextualism, the ghost of incommensurability tends to creep in. In other words, a technical interpretation of fields usually leads us to accuse Toulmin of being a relativist or, if not, to try denying his relativism on the grounds that he did not claim that each field set its own standards (which is quite difficult to support in the light of his writings); but, given that in several of his works he made an energetic critique of relativism, I think that to assess whether or not he really fell into relativism (even if he didn't want to) we have to start by not misrepresenting his words. And, an important first step in this regard is, precisely, to reject a technified conception of argument fields.

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