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The Ecological View of Practical Argumentation

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Abstract

The most intuitive, and presumably the most widely accepted description of what we do when we argue about politics is that we aim to pass our belief on to another person, and that this is done by demonstrating the truth of our claims. Although this is common sense itself, a more careful pragmatics of what happens when we argue about politics seems to raise a number of objections to this basic view. In this paper, I formulate some of these objections and argue that they suffice to justify the abandonment of this view. First, I propose an alternative account of what we do when we argue about politics, which I call the Ecological view. Then, I argue that the Ecological view is immune to these objections. In the final section, I draw a few normative conclusions from this improved model.

Keywords Practical argumentation · Belief-desire model · Attention · Environment · Political motivation · Ecological approach · Enactivism · Phenomenology

1 Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to argue that we must take an ecological view of practical argumentation. Such an account is a better fit to both the phenomenology of argumentation and some of our basic normative intuitions about politics. The phrase “practical argumentation” is meant in contradistinction from epistemic or academic argumentation. Academic argumentation aims at the formation of a belief in our interlocutor. Such arguments have reached their goal if the interlocutor’s epistemic standing has been enhanced. The aim of what I call “practical argumentation” in general (van Berkel et al. 2023), and of political argumentation in particular, extends further: it is satisfied not only in the state of mind of the interlocutor, but in their actions or dispositions. It could be that this practical outcome is the object of the arguer’s efforts: I might be arguing that you should vote for X at the next election (the aim here is an identifiable act). It may also be that my argument aims at your carrying out the appropriate action in an unpredictable future: I might argue, for example, that you must become a defender of the rule of law, when and if some political forces arise that

threaten it (my aim then, is in inducing a new disposition in you). Even very general discussions—about say, whether the International Brigades scheme in the Spanish Civil War was viable—have arguably a similar horizon. They are about increasing our and each other’s political literacy for the sake of sound political action in the future.

Such argumentations, therefore, reach for action, but they are mediated by a certain mental state. This is for two reasons: first, because as argumentations, they deal in meanings, and meanings are picked up by minds. Secondly, because they aim at action, they are agentic, and agency, regardless of the many debates surrounding it, is reason-sensitive, and reasons also, are picked up by minds (Sartorio 2016:p. 171). This is more or less the mainstream view of political argumentation: we argue for truths, we attempt to pass on good beliefs, expecting that sound action will follow. If I wish your actions to be sound, I wish your beliefs to be sound, and I must take responsibility for contributing to this soundness with the best I have: my own beliefs, mediated by discourse. The common view of practical argumentation regards it as a process in which two or more partners try to arouse beliefs in each other for the sake of improved collective decisions, “norms of good argumentation” Goldman argues, “are best seen as a social quest for true belief and error avoidance.” (Goldman 1994:p. 28, see also Goldman 1997; 2004, see a discussion of Goldman in Dutilh-Novaes 2020:p. 211). This means that the common view appeals

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to two equally widely-accepted principles: Firstly, because it wishes to arouse beliefs and beliefs respond to reasons, it appeals to the principle of the “force of the better argument” (heretofore: FBA) (Allen 2012; Habermas 1996:p. 305; Steiner, 2012:p. 139): I will succeed in passing on my beliefs to you if I give you the best reasons to. Secondly, because it assumes that arousing good belief is a proximate goal towards the ultimate aim of influencing our actions or behaviours, it appeals to a model of action in which belief has a central place, most likely the vaunted belief-desire model (BDM). However, a more careful look at the pragmatics and the phenomenology of practical argumentation in normal circumstances seems to belie both of these assumptions. It looks like belief plays a much smaller role than expected in practical argumentation, including in what Goldman would call “good argumentation,” and therefore, that the FBA and the BDM are much less central to practical argumentation than commonly assumed.

2 Pragmatic Objections to the Standard Model

At a pragmatic level, it seems that practical argumentation normally involves many factors that we would like to think are irrelevant to belief or the production of reasons. Dutilh-Novaes (2020), makes a pragmatic argument (pragmatic in the sense that it aims to apply to “‘messy’ real-life scenarios,” Dutilh-Novaes 2020:p. 207) about the importance of trust among the discussion partners:

“With argumentation, however, my estimation of my informant’s reliability is not (purportedly at least) what grounds the transfer of knowledge. Instead, it is my own endorsement of the premises and of the relation of epistemic support between premises and conclusion that justifies my newly acquired belief in the conclusion. Thus understood, one would expect trust to play a negligible epistemic role in argumentation as opposed to testimony where it does play a crucial role.”

The case of trust calls into question the FBA: Trust, in this context, constitute a *causally* important factor for the impact of argumentation although it is no *reason* to believe an argument. Dutilh-Novaes’ remark can be in fact expanded to cover not only trust but a number of other pragmatic features of normal (“real-life”) conversations. For example, it seems that longer conversations have a greater impact on the partners, irrelevant of their soundness (Coffman and Niehaus 2020; Wiegmann, et. al. 2022: 690; via credibility building, Liebman and Gergle, 2016; Ishikawa and Kusumi: 2022). Even further, although it may be expected that a longer conversation has a higher likelihood of reaching a conclusion, it seems that the impact of a longer conversation is greater

even when the conversation is not conclusive, or not more conclusive than a shorter conversation. One could make a similar point about rhetorical talent: in most practical argumentation, it looks like rhetoricians are credited twice: once for being right and another for being persuasive. When we celebrate JFK’s urging “ask not what your country can do for you” we celebrate not only the content of his statement, but we also celebrate the way he was able to capture it. Most likely, we do so because we feel like, packaged in this way, this sentiment will have more effect than its pedestrian version, something like: “citizens have duties towards their country.” It seems we intuitively admit that the better argument does’t have its own unforced force unaided after all: packaging matters and it belongs under a different logic; something else than argument is happening, that “something else” is valuable and it needs a separate treatment. In any case, the implication there is that good ideas don’t lead to persuasion unless they’re well packaged, and this seems in tension with the FBA. This should give us reasons to question the FBA principle.

Now, this also puts significant pressure to bear on the BDM. After all, what we are noting is that it looks like even “good,” normal and successful conversations are “good,” “normal” and successful thanks to causal factors. Now, “good” beliefs are sensitive to reasons and to reasons only (Goldman 1979; Turri 2015). And as we just noted, practical argumentation normally deals with more than just reasons. One can only conclude, in the spirit of Dutilh-Novaes, that such conversations, although aiming at action, deal with more than just beliefs. The independence of action, especially socially and politically relevant action, from belief is of course, not a surprise at all. It has been a theme for philosophers and anthropologists for a long time. Take the case of myths, which, according to anthropologists, tightly rule the behaviours of a society without appealing to belief (Veyne 1983; Midgley 2011). Or take the case of fiction (Radford 1975, Currie 1989, esp. Lamarque 1981), where our behaviours and emotions are disconnected from belief (cases such as play, fear and love, although more complex, could, under further analysis, fall under the same category). For our purposes, let us look at two more obviously political phenomena, so-called post-truth politics (PT) and conspiracy theories (CTs).

2.1 Post-Truth Politics

I have recently argued that the only plausible definition of Post-Truth Politics is the following “post-truth politics is a political situation in which discourses produce the required political response *regardless of their being believed to be true.*” (Chouraqi 2019, 2022, 2024). But you don’t have to take my word for it either. Post-Truth practitioners seem to agree. In the context of the wider conspiracy theory

surrounding the US presidential election of 2020, Sidney Powell, one of Donald Trump's lawyers, had declared that Dominion voting machines had contributed to falsifying the results in favour of Joe Biden. Powell claimed that "upon instructions" from Hugo Chávez, Dominion had created a falsifying program which had subsequently been used by de Chávez in Venezuela and by Biden in 2020. She additionally alleged that Dominion entertained close links with the Clinton Foundation and the George Soros organization (two darlings of far-right conspiracists). As you might recall, Dominion's response had been very robust and they filed a libel complaint against Powell and others (some of the cases are still pending) for the sum of \$1.3 Billion. The line of defence chosen by Powell and her team deserves our attention. It argued that post-truth speech is not subject to the rules of libel because it is not subjected to the rules of truth at all: "no reasonable person could conclude that [Trump's] statements were truly statements of fact."¹ It further referred to a legal precedent which stated that "potentially defamatory statements in the guise of statements of fact uttered during a bitter political debate are particularly likely to be understood as rhetorical opinion."²

The legal case is obviously fallacious on many counts, but the distinction to which it appeals should give philosophers pause. It seems that the practitioners of post-truth politics (like Powell and her master Trump) consider themselves to be uttering "rhetorical opinions" (Trump has long spoken of "truthful hyperbole") which, unlike lies proper, are not subjected to the alternative of truth and falsity. In other words, a "rhetorical opinion" is a declaration one makes in order to produce a specific effect, and one expects this effect to follow *whether this declaration is believed or not*. Discourses can have some currency, whether they are believed or not. In post-truth politics, discourses no longer aim to be taken to be true, yet they remain action-inducing and action-informing. It is this last double-feature that remains unexplained in the literature.

The first feature, whereby not all discourses are to be evaluated for their truth, is widely acknowledged. Although

it predates the popularity of the phrase "post-truth," the Frankfurian analysis of "bullshit" (Frankfurt, 2005) seems to pick up the same intuition: some discourses do not make truth-claims. But Frankfurt's account leaves open the second, double question: what is their ability to motivate action, and to direct the content of such action? Another line that has gotten some recent exposure, is the idea that such post-truth discourses mostly possess signalling value (Bergamaschi Ganapini 2023, Williams 2022, Mercier 2020). Such views argue, like Frankfurt, that the contents of one's discourse are not meant to be believed or even be assessed for truth-value, but rather, they are meant to "signal" one's belonging to a certain group; i.e.: the group of those who embrace this discourse. In some extreme cases, it is worse; they are meant to serve as a test of a group member's loyalty: their ability to embrace a very fringe discourse is a test of their willingness to make membership prime over common-sense, previous allegiances, or even normal socialisation as a whole (Whitehouse 2024). Post-truth discourses, in this view, always say the same thing: "I am one of you."

Such a "signalling" hypothesis, although it convincingly accounts for much of the social dynamics in such groups, also fails to address the question of motivation. We "embrace" certain discourses in order to get in with the crowd of those who also "embrace" them. But what does "embracing these discourses" mean? Does it mean believing them? This is plausible, since, although it is implicit, the claim "I am one of you" is to be believed. Mercier (2020: 154), for example, argues that practices follow beliefs after all, so that one's belief can be inferred from one's actions, in the traditional, Lewisian sense (Lewis 1986: 23). If so, signalling explain little: it is still, after all, about those who believe a set of truths (the "in-group") and those who don't. Or should we take the signalling hypothesis seriously and follow it down an infinite regress, of candidate group members non-epistemically embracing claims that existing members have non-epistemically embraced in order to acquire membership, and so all the way down? The question will still remain as to why groups have constituted themselves around a set of statements that its members do not believe. Again, the signalling view is compatible with the ecological view I present here, but it stops where the ecological proposal begins: it leaves open the question of what "embracing discourses" means, if not "believing them." Secondly, neither Frankfurt nor the literature on signalling can address the consonance between the action carried out by such groups and the contents of these discourses without returning to the belief-model that they intended to abandon. Although many post-truth discourses are—like all discourses—also signalling, they seem to provoke action that cannot be entirely explained by personal or group loyalty. It seems in a robust sense, that the contents of the discourse matters (although we should not fall back into making them matter via *belief*).

¹ "Determining whether a statement is protected involves a two-step inquiry: Is the statement one which can be proved true or false? And would reasonable people conclude that the statement is one of fact, in light of its phrasing, context and the circumstances surrounding its publication. Keohane, 882 P.2d at 1299. This inquiry is determined as a matter of law. *Bucher v. Roberts*, 595 P.2d 235, 241 (Colo. 1979) ("Whether a particular statement constitutes fact or opinion is a question of law."). Analyzed under these factors, and even assuming, arguendo, that each of the statements alleged in the Complaint could be proved true or false, no reasonable person conclude that the statements were truly statements of fact." (*Dominion vs Sidney Powell*, Civil Action No. 1:21-cv-00040-CJN p. 26–27).

² "Sack, *Sack on Defamation*, § 4:3:1[B], 4-43 et § 4:3:1[A], 4-31 cited in *Dominion v. Sidney Powell*, 29).

They matter not just as a conduit for expressing or testing loyalty, but they have an informing role in the resulting behaviour: they figure in the motivational chain that results in *this* set of actions and not in *that* set of actions. For example, Donald Trump's infamous "fight like hell" or "we're going to lose our country" do not merely reinforce the loyalty of the MAGA activists to Trump, but it leads to specific outcomes that align closely to the contents of the discourse, not merely to its signalling function, namely, fighting. So, both the Frankfurtian and the literature on signalling leave us with the double question of how action is provoked and how it is informed, by discourses, if not via belief. My proposal will be that this "embrace" is best cashed out as a set of practices and that these practices can be explained without appealing to belief only if one subscribes to the ecological account of practices. Before fleshing out the ecological vision, let me turn to other cases that further motivate the ecological turn.

2.2 Conspiracism

The case of conspiracism illustrates the same point as the case of Post-Truth, but it takes it to the extreme. For conspiracy theories not only seem to survive and resist their implausibility, but in fact, they are rewarded for their preposterous character. Talk of lizard people, mass fraud, fake wealth by the billions, and in general, hyperbole, seem to fare very well, and in fact, fare better than more modest conspiracy theories. Indeed, there is much evidence that the more extreme the statements, the greater their success in the virtual environment. The case of pizzagate is an easy illustration, but in general, the well-known comparative success of bad news over good news, and of fear-inducing stories over reassuring ones, seems to suggest that the more striking the image presented by a discourse, the more successful this discourse will be. There seems to be a genuine political premium on implausibility rather than plausibility.

There seems to be an empirical correlation between the implausibility of falsehoods and their success on social media measured in terms of engagement, virality etc. but also, and more worryingly, in terms of political action. This is, in short, the reason why media scholars have moved from measuring persuasion to measuring engagement. It seems that they implicitly admitted that the political meat of the matter took place at the level of engagement, not at the further stage of belief. And in this logic, it seems obvious why outrageous theories garner engagement, they are, after all, more engaging. Now, this does not mean implausibility on its own constitutes appeal. But implausibility affords other things that may be appealing in their own right. Conspiracy theory scholars have proposed several of them: it is easier to provide many of the things that appeal to conspiracy theorists if the requirement of

plausibility is waived. This could be a sense of agency (Douglas et. al. 2015), a sense of social connection and embeddedness (Murray et. al. 2023), a sense of existential meaning (Schöpfer et. al. 2023), a sense of control (Stojanov et. al. 2020). In all of these cases and more, a sober and realistic account would surely fail where a fantastical account can find success. Now, what is assumed here is that the appeal of these precious things competes favourably against the presumed unappealing character of their implausibility. This, you will note, follows exactly the opposite logic to the logic of reason. For in that logic, the more successful account is expected to be the most sober one. In other words, the internet, and probably the public sphere in general, places a premium on the crazy which contradicts any expectations derived from the standard model. The more implausible, the more successful, and the data show it (Vosoughi et. al. 2018; Record and Miller 2022).

I conclude from this preliminary and brief examination of the pragmatics of practical argumentation that in practice, it never fits the standard view, that is, it never conforms to the FBA and the BDM. Rather, what we observe is that practical argumentation typically involves a mix of causes and reasons. Two inferences are possible on the basis of this. The first would involve censuring the practice of political argumentation for failing to conform to the standards of exchanging reasons. The second would suggest that this is a feature of our political and argumentative practices, not a bug. It would require that we explore whether it is possible that practical argumentation unfolds differently from what the standard account would predict, because perhaps it is not in the business of producing beliefs. Since only reasons motivate belief, and since political arguments non-trivially involve reasons mixed with causes, it might be best to say they don't aim at belief.

We have argued that 1) the final aim of practical argumentation is action and 2) that practical argumentation normally involves a mix of causes and reasons. I conclude that practical argumentation, can produce action without appealing to belief. The question this leaves us with is the following: what kind of theory of motivation do we have to endorse in order to account for what happens when social agents argue?

3 What We do When We Argue

In this section, I try to extract an alternative account of motivation from the account of the intentional arc in the broad tradition of ecological philosophy and psychology, and argue that the pragmatic descriptions of practical argumentations presented in section two seem a good fit for such an ecological account.

3.1 The Ecological Account of Motivation

An alternative to the BDM can be found in the broad tradition of ecological psychology, and its related philosophical versions in phenomenological and enactivist theories of the intentional arc (Merleau-Ponty 1945; Dreyfus 2005, Noë 2004). For such authors, behaviour is a response to an environment, or sometimes, a *Lebenswelt*, or even a world-view (since what appears and the world we live in are, for our purposes, phenomenologically identical) which presents itself not in epistemic terms, as a set of true or false facts or beliefs, but as an environment that solicits my behaviour: the world and the objects around us, argues Merleau-Ponty famously, does not appear to me as “a there is, but an I can.” (Merleau-Ponty 1945:p. 171; see also Gibson (1979), Noë (2004). A clue could be in paying closer attention to the notion of the intentional arc. Here is Merleau-Ponty’s (1945/1970) now canonical account:

“The life of consciousness – epistemic life, the life of desire, or perceptual life – is underpinned by an “intentional arc” that projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships. This intentional arc creates the unity of the senses, the unity of the senses with intelligence, and the unity of sensitivity and motricity.”

So, the intentional arc is the unity of the subject and their environment such that action (“motricity”) need not be motivated, but rather, constitutes the very life blood of this unity. The BDM account, of course, endorses the notion of an intentional arc in the loosest of ways: as a recognition that some reasons come from the outside, are processed mentally, resulting in beliefs, which in turn yield actions. One should not be too hasty in assuming that the richer but also more specific and less consensual notion of the intentional arc, is acceptable to those who endorse the BDM account. Yet, the objections to the BDM account mentioned above, should give us reason to give it a try. In this more specifically phenomenological account of the intentional arc, it is the circularity involved in the term “arc” which is emphasised. The idea there is that we are caught up in a circularity which we cannot break out of by, for example, finding any external anchoring in transcendental truths or objective knowledge. The correlate of the intentional arc is a world which is the milieu of our life, but not an objective realm of independent objects. This is important because it means that the notion of belief, if it is operative at all in such a picture, is severely weakened, to become closer to high-degrees of credence (van Leeuwen 2018, 2023, see also Jackson 2020) or dispositions. A belief is simply what we call the part of the world which is not up for grabs in the present situation,

the part of the world that none of the options available for my action, shall call into question. Under these conditions therefore, one might still be entitled to talk about belief, but this sense becomes so rarified, that it is not clear why one should want to hold on to the label belief. Our argument has now taken us to a position where one must choose between the common sense idea that beliefs motivate action (in the BDM) and the other common sense idea that beliefs aim at truth (Velleman 2009,p 244 ff.). Van Leeuwen (2018, 2023) suggests that the former is enough for bona fide belief, others (Mandelbaum 2014) think the latter is necessary for it. I tend to agree with van Leeuwen that what we call beliefs are in fact dispositions or high degree credence and agree with Mandelbaum that such things are no beliefs at all (indeed, in recent years van Leeuwen (2023) too seems to have replaced talk of belief with talk of credence for this reason). What matters, beyond a game of labels, is that the two basic assumptions can no longer be held together. Whatever the case may be, in such a view, action responds not so much to beliefs in the sense of a mental state aimed at truth, but to a certain normative impulsion: actions are motivated not by desires and beliefs, but by the inertia of the world I live in in its current form. Since an environment is not an object of belief, the standard for appropriate action is independent from the standard for belief (i.e.: epistemic standards such as truth). In this context, the condition for the production of behaviour is the constitution of an appropriate environment: an environment is this that can elicit behaviours from me, and this that sets the standard for appropriate and inappropriate behaviours. In other words, motivation for action lies in our environment, not in our beliefs. This means that changing another’s actions or dispositions—the ultimate goal of practical argumentation—is a matter of changing their environment. In the rest of this paper, I argue that practical argumentation influences actions not via belief, but by interfering with the constitution of the environment of the interlocutor. How is this done?

In the standard model, changing someone’s opinions involves giving them reasons. This is because the influence of reasons is acceptable for the truth-seeker: they influence us without diverting us from our own goals, i.e.: knowing the truth. As I alluded to above, in the context of politics, this is what Habermas famously called the “unforced force of the better argument.” Similarly, changing our interlocutor’s *environment* involves that we give them what they are looking for. A knowledge-seeker is looking for reasons. In the ecological view, an organism is looking for a “fit” between themselves and their environment (Gibson 1979; Hoffman, et al. 2015). What Gibson proposes there is a certain pragmatism that bypasses the question of truth: organisms will carry out the actions that result from the mutual pressure that their nature and the milieu apply to each other. Behaviour does not result from belief therefore, but it is aimed at

the construction of a world in which the organism can find a home, a world that “affords” them a life (Gibson 1979). Importantly, the non-epistemic character of this construction are visible in Gibson’s account because such a world is a partially selected area of objective reality, and it unproblematically involves fantasized and imagined features (such as values and meanings) alongside facts (Gibson 1979:p. 239–268). Although this is not usually formalised in this way, phenomenologists and ecological psychologists argue that in order to achieve this fit, and therefore, in order to elicit action, an environment needs to satisfy three conditions, I will argue that in a successful argument interlocutors help each other fulfil these conditions. The conditions are the following:

A) First, the environment must belong to the subject of the action and the subject must belong in it. Let’s call this the ownness requirement: the environment must be seen as *mine*. Consider a simple example: if I see a boat dangerously veering towards the bank of the canal on the bank of which I am standing, I shall respond appropriately by either warning its captain or getting out of the way, not by seeking to steer the boat myself. Appropriate action comes from my responding to the environment that is mine (one that is static and on terra firma), and the captain’s in responding to hers: one that is in motion, and with access to the rudder. In other words: I will respond to an environment because I consider it to be “my” environment and because I consider myself to fit into it in this or that way. Interestingly though, it could be that I am wrong, and that I, in fact, have the ability, from within my environment, to do more than warn the captain or get out of the way. I could, perhaps, use the rope that is lying on the floor before me to pull the boat away. But for this, the rope would have to acquire what theorists of attention call saliency: it needs to appear as relevant to me, to acquire a place in my field of attention. This would certainly change and enrich my environment by adding one object to it, as well as the multitude of “I cans” it introduces. This is why Gibson argues that there is a strict identity between an environment, a perceptual field and an attention field. Whatever doesn’t appear as actionable doesn’t appear at all, and whatever doesn’t occupy my attention doesn’t appear either.

In the political context, think of the debate about the value of voting: I might be making the argument that my vote will make no difference, or that “I’m not interested in politics.” Your effort, in response, could be entirely devoted to showing to me that I am, indeed, *de facto* interested in politics, because politics feature in my environment (perhaps because I use public transport say, or benefit from the protections offered by the rule of law currently under threat). In so doing, you bring to my attention a set of facts about the relation between political decision making and public services. But it is certainly not the case that you replace my belief that my use of public transport is immune to politics with your

belief that it isn’t. Rather, you *point out* to me something that, once pointed out, becomes actionable. In the process, you used the ownness requirement to change my behavioral disposition: you made my environment larger (it has politics in it now) and different (it will induce different behaviours on my part). Theories of the extended mind, as well as much media theory take this fairly commonsense point as their starting point: it is thanks to reporting about Sri Lanka that the fate of Sri Lanka enters my environment as one of the coordinates that orchestrate my behaviour: it is because I hear about the fate of Sri Lankan textile workers that they enter my world, and consequently, that my actions will follow (i.e.: I might no longer buy clothes from Primark). Note: this doesn’t mean that my *beliefs* about Sri Lanka have changed, in fact, I may have been entertaining the correct belief about exploitation in South-Asian sweatshops long before I changed my behaviour. What the reporting does is make this information fit in my pre-existing worldview.

B) Secondly, the environment must be unified. Call this the cosmetic requirement, with cosmetics as the art of making things whole and organically seamless. This follows from the previous point: other environments do not elicit any action from me until they are shown to be continuous with mine, that is, until it is shown that they are part of mine (and that my environment is greater than I previously took it to be). Conversely, my environment is not actionable until I have made its parts continuous with each other. This is the theme of many tragedies, where characters are rendered unable to act by the tensions between their dual condition as say, daughter and lover (like Juliet), or the State and the family (Antigone, Creon), until a way of either bringing these two dimensions of their lives together, or of eliminating one (usually violently), is found (Nussbaum 1985:p. 32). In this sense, Dworkin (1977:p. 32, 2011:p. 8, 209) is right when he finds Sartre’s solution to such problems—that one must commit without reason—to be a cop out. But he is, I submit, wrong, to think that this is because it violates an objective standard according to which this commitment must be chosen. Rather, what one should not violate, is a sort of existential logic drawn from the cosmetic requirement. The stake of such tragic scenarios is arguably the conflictual restoration of the cosmetic principle. The cosmetic requirement refers therefore to a sort of existential logic: if epistemic logic seeks that we not believe two mutually incompatible proposition at the same time, an existential logic seeks that we not live by things (in this example, identities or social functions) that cannot be lived by at the same time by the same person. Examples of practical arguments to illustrate this abound: you may describe for me an existence in which my duty to my family clearly takes precedence over my duty to the State, and the effectiveness of this language upon me shall be dependent on the extent to which this looks like a live possibility. Typically, this is achieved not through

argument but through painting a picture, a picture whose cohesion stands as a promise of a cosmetically sound life.

Thirdly, our environment must be phenomenologically complete. It should not be more limited than the agent's field of consciousness. Call this the horizontality requirement. Husserl talks about horizons for such an environment: where the environment ends and where the field of our consciousness ends are the same, i.e.: the horizon line (Jacobs 2016; Jorba 2020). The benefit of such an horizontal environment, is that it ensures cosmetic closure: there is no other realm, beyond the limits of my current environment, which is relevant to me (Barber 2008). If there were, we would return to a problematic fragmentation. Think of a world in which Antigone's status as a sister eluded her attention whilst her status as a princess didn't. This world would be too partial to constitute a full environment in which she could lead her life. In a sense, this requirement is always and a priori fulfilled: since the environment is the same as the field of consciousness, the latter cannot, in principle, exceed the former. What the horizontality requirement introduces however, is a qualitative experience of the completeness achieved by the earlier two requirements: what lies beyond the horizon has no practical incidence on our world. When the constitution of a world or environment has failed the horizontality requirement, it may be that some contents appear at the "fringes" of our world that should in fact be closer to its center (Watzl 2017:p. 190). This means that an environment surrounded by such horizons is stable enough as to be relatively immune to the world outside and therefore a sufficiently solid ground for our action (Walsh 2017). An example of this can be extracted from discussions about history and generations. It seems that our concern for the impact of our actions diminishes as we think of the next generation, ten generations, or one hundred generations from now. It fades, one might say, horizontally. Importantly, it seems that there is a point where this concern ceases. Similarly, McMahan (2019) argues that our interests are "time-relative" in this way, both as regards relations between generations and relations to ourselves: my death in 50 years is less of a concern for me now than it will be in 30 years, and my behaviour accords with this fact. One important consequence of this for our concerns is that this horizontality means that the reliability of our views need only be valid in this delineated horizontal context. Although it does tend towards the highest levels of validity within this context (i.e.: it tries to satisfy all three requirements listed here), it doesn't tend towards universal (let alone objective) validity, i.e., it doesn't tend towards truth. In this sense, arguments that allow us to achieve a better horizontally-bounded universe are not relative, yet, they do not aim at truth or belief conduciveness.

Taken together, these three requirements are meant to achieve a sort of homeostasis, a relationship between the subject and their environment that is stable enough and

sustainable enough to accommodate a rich life. Part of this quest for homeostasis is based on the fact that environments, because they depend on several moving parts, are dynamic. In fact, environments and their relations with their organism, are constantly being reconfigured. It is in the space opened up by this dynamic quality that practical argument takes place. Practical argumentation, I argue, is an intervention in this constant process of configuration of an environment. When successful, it influences the reconfiguration by placing the subject in a new context in which the world appears differently to them, so that other sets of behaviours and actions seem appropriate. When this process is successful, the result is an increased match between the organism and their environment, and/or a richer environment.

3.2 The Ecological Account of Practical Argumentation

This should be enough to lay out my proposal: that practical argumentation is a dynamic practice of reconfiguring each other's environment so as to increase the likelihood of certain behaviours taken to be politically or socially desirable. I have tried to convince you that when we argue about social matters, we try to allow our interlocutor to settle on a certain environment which is both improved from the perspective of their own quest (a quest for the satisfaction of the ownness, the cosmetic and the horizontal requirements), and from the point of view of my own aspirations (an environment coherent with the kind of disposition that will yield the behaviours I value). The reason why this settling can happen is that, assuming we are sincere, we regard the environment in question to be more liveable both for ourselves and for our interlocutor. In this context, winning an argument simply means having created an integrated experience in the other which relatively relies on a set of images (broadly construed) that tend to encourage, invite and elicit sound political behaviour.

However, it does raise the question of whether and how environments can be interfered with via argumentation. Let me focus on this question before concluding by examining political implications of this ecological approach to practical argumentation. My argument so far is that argumentation is not primarily and not typically truth-conducive. It is not a passing on of beliefs, but an intervention in the configuration in the interlocutor's environment. Yet, argument is a linguistic practice, and we are used to assuming that language can convey reasons and therefore influence reason-sensitive things such as beliefs. But now that we've left belief behind, we should ask how language has the ability to produce influence without belief. How does language interact with our processes of environment-constitution? As hinted above, the short answer has to do with the fact that language conveys beliefs but beliefs are only a subset of a wider range

of contents, let's call them "thoughts" in the broadest sense. One thing that the verbalisation of thoughts does is stimulate attention and imagination: the communication of thoughts has the power to bring some images (in the broad sense) to salience, to draw attention to these images regardless of their truth. This is, as I mentioned, what fiction, play, myth and several other cultural practices, do. They train our attention on imaginary thoughts without making truth-claims, but with strong effects, both emotional, behavioral and agentic. A related, subsequent question will have to do with clarifying how this interference happens. The main point I wish to make here is negative: it should not be assumed that my ability to affect your environment involves that I can convince you that looking at the world my way will fulfil the requirements listed above better. This would only be another kind of truth-conduciveness. The idea here, rather, is that an image (a worldview in the sense of an actionable environment) can be compelling on its own merits. This is, you will recall, the starting point of the ecological approach and the notion of the intentional arc.

Although the methods of neuroscience are prone to conflict with those of ecological psychology and phenomenology, the recent work of neuroscientists on neural entrainments seems to corroborate this general point: in conversations, our brains become alike (Duhigg 2024:p. 11). This, is importantly, not an account of agreement, for this "likeness" doesn't measure an agreement between beliefs, but rather, between the thoughts of the interlocutors. This is what neuroscientists have described as the "conceptual pact" that results from successful conversation (Brennan and Clark 1996): in conversation, we try out and practice the other's perspective and in the process, our worldviews become alike and our environment (the world insofar as it is the object of our worldview) becomes reconfigured in consonant ways, and it becomes viewed as "the alignment of cognitive (para)linguistic representations between interlocutors." (Benus, 2014). As a result, neuroscientists have taken to defining clinical entrainment in terms of resulting behaviour: "Conversational entrainment" they claim, is "the phenomenon whereby communication partners synchronize their behaviour" (Borrie et. Al. 2019). What happens when you and I are arguing about politics is that I am trying to make you practice looking at the world the way I do, in the hope that this will be appealing enough to you (i.e.: in the hope it will satisfy all three requirements above) that it will have effects on your behaviour or your disposition.

I have argued in part I that practical argumentation involved a mixed notion of motivation: it leads others to adopt behaviours and dispositions through a mix of causes and reasons. It is distinct from epistemically-aimed argumentation because of the presence of causes in the mix. The causes I singled out were trust, time and rhetoric. It looked like none of these should increase the convincingness of reasons, but perhaps

their constitutive role in practical argumentation suggests that somehow they do increase the likelihood of our adopting new courses of actions. It is now easier to see how trust, time and rhetorical talent can all improve one's ability to intervene in another's environment-constitution even if they are strictly speaking impotent to intervene in their *beliefs*. After all, it is because I trust you that I will seriously practice entertaining the thoughts and images induced by your argument. And indeed, it has been demonstrated often that trust is a precondition for successful conversational entrainment (Lubold and Pon-Barrie, 2014; Borrie et. al. 2015; Lubold et. al. 2019). There is, moreover, a plausible case to make that the more the thoughts and images induced by your argument differ from those I already entertain in the current state of my environment, the more I will need to trust in you if I am to practice entertaining them. But the same goes for time: it is to be expected that the longer you and I engage with a certain way to approach things, a certain set of ideas and images, the more likely it is that I will find how to fit them in my existing worldview, and come to appreciate how they increase my worldview's ability to satisfy the three requirements. Finally, it seems that rhetoric, at least insofar as it can be reduced to the ability to convey thoughts and ideas in a vivid, colourful, clear and rich way, is basically the name of the ability to interfere with environment-constitution. As such, it is a strong factor for entrainment although a weak factor for belief (Menninghouse et. al. 2015). It is hard to conceive of a definition of vividness that doesn't involve that a vivid thought is one that is deeply and richly connected to a set of other vivid thoughts: i.e.: a thought is vivid if it enriches my worldview and fits within it.

Our suspicion towards the view that argumentation is epistemically polarized was the fact that successful conversations seem to rely not on reasons (as the epistemic account would predict), but by a mix of causes and reasons. Although the list is surely longer, we focused on three of these causal factors: trust, rhetoric and time. The theory of entrainment and behind it, the ecological account I have been pursuing, allows us to explain the role of these causes. In turn corroborating the ecological hypothesis.

The main idea is that argumentation is an exercise in changing each other's way of looking at the world, and one can acquire a view of the world without endorsing it as true. This is why all sorts of pragmatics are involved: the time of exposure, the prestige of the speaker, their proximity to the listener, the vividness of rhetoric etc. none of which is relevant to the quest for truth or persuasion.

4 Some Normative Consequences

There are two sets of immediate consequences to the ecological view. The first has to do with the consequences of the separation between the BDM and political action. Above,

I have made use of the enactivist notion of motivation to suggest that argumentation can yield action without being truth-conducive. Let me briefly examine some consequences of this fact for the usual association between democracy and deliberation (leaving aside the question of whether all democracy is deliberative).

The defeat of the FBA means that it is no longer possible to assume that democracy and deliberation connect because it constitutes an exchange of reasons, but because it establishes common worlds and therefore community. In this sense, deliberation is not a kind of problem-solving aimed at decision-making (Landemore, 2015; Benson 2024) but a kind of world-building aimed at cohesion (Arendt 1958). One further consequence of this is that deliberation is not a process of universalization, but rather, a much more provincializing process of building local culture and identities. Recall that an environment is actionable as long as it is comprehensive enough to be surrounded by horizons, what lies beyond which can be safely ignored for practical purposes. In other words, deliberation in practice is in tension with the universalising project of much democratic theory. This establishes a tension between two virtues that one would wish to uphold together: the virtue of public debate and of universalism. It can certainly explain how, in an age of intensified and accelerated political discourses, fuelled by social media and the internet, identity and culture have made their well-advertised return to the centre of politics coming from both the Right and the Left.

I have recently argued that this disconnection between belief and action constitutes the fuel for conspiracy theories and post-truth politics, as discourses that motivate without persuading (Chouraqui 2025). High-quality beliefs have been shown not to imply high-quality behaviour. Even worse, argumentation and debate may have backfiring effects: certain rhetorical forces that emphasise causes over reasons may lead to the building of monstrous worlds, what has been recently discussed as echo chambers. This too, is a consequence of the ecological nature of political action and political discourse. An echo chamber is a monstrous, exaggerated form of the general structure of any behaviour: it presents a highly coherent and actionable environment. Yet, it can be combatted on its own terms. After all, it would seem quite plausible to those suspicious of such echo chambers that living in one might constitute a failure not just epistemic but existential too. Those who live in echo chambers, it is assumed, live in a world too small for their own needs. This is why they often become alienated from their families, and this is why it is widely lamented how they often, in the course of a lifetime, come to the contradictions of their worldviews with painful effects. In other words, and although I can only gesture at this here, the three requirements I have described above constitute a basic normative structure that could offer us a basis for many of our strong

normative intuitions about politics. Politics may be simply in the business of allowing people to build actionable, organically unified and fulfilling environments for themselves individually and together, and any abuses of this project may still be censored as such. High-quality behaviour can only be expected from high-quality environments, that is, environments that fulfil the three requirements mentioned above. We can even expect that high-quality environments will achieve the kind of political goodness formerly expected from good beliefs, in particular, because they require socialisation: the ability to fit into a shared world.

There is a second tier of consequences to this view, which has to do with the political impact which the standard model itself has had. The first of these has to do with a sort of anthropological fallacy. After all, the standard model depends on a certain anthropology that says that humans want to act out of true belief. All sorts of critical, political and gender theories have, in their own ways, reacted to this crucial Enlightenment idea by emphasising that this amounts to erasing identity and culture. This could be because it leads to hypocrisy: the view that because identity and culture influence our views via causes but not reasons, they in fact do not have a part in politics. But a deeper form of this criticism is that, by advertising this idea, it has precisely made culture and identity, which are, to a large extent, causal (i.e.: they influence and construct our environments in ways not justifiable universally), irrelevant to the good life promised by a democratic order. This, in turn, can be held responsible for a large part of the so-called problem of alienation: namely, the experience that the democratic order seeks to pry us apart from our situated environment and situations. And what should be more natural? If the project is to build a world of high-quality behaviour and if we believe that such a world should result from good belief and an engagement with reasons only, what should be more natural than to seek to weed out all arbitrary influences? Indeed, if what humans truly want is to live by true beliefs, then any interference (be it cultural, personal, religious or generally parochial), should be excluded without any second thoughts. But this, the foregoing argument suggests, is an anthropological mistake which derives from the wrong understanding of human motivation.

The second has to do with rampant polarization: if this anthropological view is adhered to, it is also natural to transfer to the practical realm the logical bivalence that characterises the truth-falsity polarity, leading to increased polarisation. Although I have discussed this point at length elsewhere (Chouraqui 2025), let me briefly mention that the result of this reliance on BDM and FBA can only be political polarization of the kind we observe today. The ecological logic I have been describing above has the potential to extirpate us from this bind, because oneness, cosmetic integration and horizontality are all incremental measures, not

categorical ones. They represent a resource for moderation and pluralism which the indexing of politics onto the logical structures of truth cannot accommodate.

Like any pragmatic account, my proposal has not been concerned with objections to do with the distinction between essential and pragmatic features of argumentation. At best, I have suggested that this distinction makes little difference to the question at hand, for even an essentialist will recognize that the point of a good account of argumentation is to understand how force or influence gets distributed in practice. In this context, we must give the pragmatist a fair hearing. In this paper, I have attempted to achieve a more precise mapping of the circulation of forces in societies in which argumentation is the bread-and-butter of politics. I have come to suggest that the main force that circulates in the networks of practical argumentation should be understood as the ability to influence the constitution of one's environments, and that this, rather than belief, is what has practical results in our behaviours and dispositions. In this view, argumentation is not truth-conducive, but it is still subjected to an existential logic defined by the oneness, cosmetic, and horizontality requirements. Therefore, argumentation retains its positive normative valence (under the usual conditions of trust and sincerity), because it does improve the cognitive standing of the interlocutors, although not necessarily the truth-value of their beliefs.

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