

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Two Conceptions Of Openness In Argumentation Theory



One of the central values in dialectical models of argumentation is that of openness. Sometimes this value is embodied in the form of specific rules – such as those in the pragma-dialectical code of conduct (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992) which specify such things as rights to challenge, burden of proof, and so forth. But usually openness has a more informal quality to it. In any case, the concept lacks the precision one finds with, say, the concept of inferential validity in logical models of argumentation where we find not only well-defined exemplars of deductively valid forms of inference, but also a relatively clear definition of validity in general. It is perhaps because of this informal quality that argumentation scholars have not fully appreciated how the value of openness is used in two distinct ways when evaluating the quality of argumentative conduct. In one way, the concept of openness reflects an epistemic orientation. In the other way, the concept of openness takes on a more socio-political orientation. This paper spells out these two different senses of openness, articulates their rationales, and then explores some of the implications of this distinction for understanding the nature of reasonable argumentative conduct.

## *1. Two Functions of Argumentation.*

In large part, these two conceptions of openness in argumentation theory are responsive to two different functions of argumentation: a cognitive function and a social function. So, to get a better lock on the two sense of openness, we begin by considering these two different functions. There has always been a tension in argumentation theory between a cognitive understanding of argument and a social understanding of argument. Logical approaches most clearly exhibit a preference for emphasizing the cognitive function: that of *belief management*. Logical approaches have a tendency to reduce the argumentative function to processes of individual reasoning – so much so that not only are notions of interaction and audience easily erased from the picture, but discourse itself is largely stripped away until only something call ‘propositions’ remain. But whether

or not such a reduction seems prudent, it does isolate this cognitive function of argumentation. Argumentation does clearly have a truth-testing function. It is this epistemological aspect that dominates the study of argument in philosophical traditions. And this concern is quite proper. This concern derives from the very structure of accountability and reason-giving that forms an integral basis for ordinary language uses of argument.

Rhetorical approaches, alternatively, most clearly exhibit a preference for emphasizing the social function of argumentation: that of disagreement management. Rhetorical approaches have a tendency to reduce the argumentative function to processes of social influence and conflict resolution – so much so that virtually any form of persuasion is included within the scope of the concept, so that any symbolic process (even pictures and music) have sometimes been claimed to be argument (e.g., Fleming, 1996; Shelly, 1996). Again, whether or not this expansion seems fruitful, it does emphasize this social function of argumentation. And argumentation does have a clear social function of *disagreement management*. It is this social aspect of argument that dominates its study in communication, political science, and the social sciences generally. And again, this attention is quite proper. It is crucial to theories of democratic decision-making and conflict management.

Now, ultimately, careful consideration of these two functions of argumentation reveals that neither really operates independently of the other. And neither has any clear analytic or evaluative priority. The cognitive demands of argumentation on individual belief make a claim on individual belief in a way that is implicitly social. If an argument is sound for one person, it should be sound for all. In fact, it is this universal projection of reason that gives argumentation its normative claim on the belief of any particular individual. Likewise, the social process of conflict management or persuasion presupposes a particular kind of cognitive functioning. Differences of opinion are to be resolved, consensus is to be achieved, by submitting standpoints to the demand of reasoned justification and public accountability. Arguments should be persuasive only where they can be shown to be inferentially adequate. Still, while the cognitive and the social functions of argumentation do not exist independently, they can be distinguished analytically. And the two senses of the value of openness reflect these two difference functions of argumentation.

## *2. Two Senses of Openness.*

Well, what are the two senses?

On the one hand, openness can be taken as an epistemic value. Openness here means something like open-mindedness toward different ideas. It involves a willingness to entertain competing viewpoints. It requires a tentativeness, a non-dogmatic attitude that acknowledges the possibility of error or at least of improvement in thinking. Openness in this sense involves a willingness to entertain criticism, to engage in careful scrutiny of all sides of a position, to encourage efforts at falsification. Moves that discourage entertainment of alternative standpoints, that obstruct full testing of their rationales, or prevent serious consideration of potential objections violate this sense of openness. Openness in this first sense, then, amounts to a call for *freedom of inquiry*.

On the other hand, openness can be taken as a socio-political value. Openness here means something like open-access to social decision-making and public choice. It involves a willingness to include all interested parties. It requires a respect for the autonomy of individuals, allowing them the right to self-determination. Openness in this sense involves a tolerance of social differences, a non-parochial attitude that accepts and even welcomes social diversity. Moves that discourage active representation of parties' interests and viewpoints, that coerce compliance, or otherwise restrict participation in processes of mutual influence are moves that violate this sense of openness. Openness in this second sense, then, amounts to a call for *freedom of participation*.

These two senses of openness are best thought of as solutions to two different kinds of problems that arise in argument design. The call for freedom of inquiry is a particular kind of solution to the problem of how to maximize the discovery of true belief and to minimize adherence to false belief. The call for freedom of participation is a particular kind of solution to the problem of how to maximize freedom of choice and to minimize imposition of choice on others.

Consider first the epistemic problem. This is the problem of how do we know when our claims are true (or false), or at least, when should we accept a claim as true (or false)? The dominant answer in argumentation theory has gone something like this: We should accept a claim as true (or false) when it has been supported (or refuted) by good arguments. And then argumentation theory gives some general account of what a good argument is or provides specific types of good arguments. Johnson and Blair's (1994) well-known standards of premise acceptability, strength, and relevance illustrate the former sort of account.

Models of syllogistic reasoning or tests of argument from expert opinion or authority (e.g., Walton, 1996) are examples of the latter sort of account. So, if an argument meets these standards or conforms to these models, it is a good one and we should accept its conclusion. If it doesn't meet these standards, we punt.

Now, the problem with this kind of answer has always been that application of these standards or model forms of reasoning is notoriously difficult. How, exactly, do we decide that an argument is a strong one or that the premises are acceptable? How do we decide that the critical tests for argument from expert opinion have been satisfied? Or how can we be sure that the model form applies to this particular case? And what do we do if no clear model seems to apply? Even more importantly, how do people involved in the argumentation decide this? When can they be said to have made a reasonable judgment?

If we cannot easily answer the question of how to assess the quality of an argument or a case as a whole or cannot give an altogether clear answer to the question as to when it is reasonable to accept or reject a position, one thing to do is to ask a different question. Ask instead, are the procedures reasonable by which these judgments are made? To what degree do we have reason to trust the decision-making process?

And here is where the epistemic value of openness comes into play in dialectical models of argumentation. In a sense, dialectical models kick epistemic problems upstairs to the meta-level. They try to finesse the issue by appealing to the openness of the decision-making process. On this account, the best arguments and most secure standpoints are those that have been subjected to the most critical scrutiny, that have taken into account the most comprehensive body of information, that have been considered against the broadest range of alternatives, that have answered the most determined objections, that have faced and overcome the most skeptical resistance (Jacobs, 2000). In other words, we can best trust decision-making that best encourages free inquiry. So, that's the rationale for valuing openness in an epistemic sense.

Openness in the sense of free participation addresses a quite different problem. The socio-political problem is the problem of how do we cultivate individual autonomy (freedom of choice) under conditions of social interdependence? The traditional answer has been to appeal to democratic deliberation, systems of engagement that are tempered by mutual civility and respect. Such systems must

manage the following paradox of human social life: To the extent that persons are recognized as autonomous agents who know their own best interests (or at least have a right to decide for themselves what they want to do), people should be given the power to exercise control over their own lives. But in pursuing self-interests, people inevitably risk exercising control over others. Directly or indirectly the pursuit of personal wants has consequences for other people and their power to pursue what they want. Thus, there is the need to coordinate individual interests, but to do so in a way that provides for voluntary, informed consent. There is a need to find a way to give people personal power over themselves without giving them power over others. How is that to be done?

At least one way to do this is by providing deliberative forums that deploy argumentation. Argumentation, on this account, can provide the impartial, balanced procedures that allow interested parties to enter into a process of mutual influence and consensus decision-making. This is the kind of idea behind much of the contemporary discussion of Habermas's notion of the public sphere (Goodnight, 1982; Goodnight & Hingstman, 1997; Habermas, 1989) or Rorty's appeal to conversation (Schudson, 1997; Willard, 1989: 233). But it is also a motivating concern behind more practical and concrete models of deliberation having to do with democratic procedure, legal adjudication, or dispute mediation. Free and voluntary submission to a system of public accountability creates the mutual opportunity for a kind of social influence that preserves free choice.

But any such system only works to the extent that all parties are allowed access and given full and equal opportunity to participate in a process of mutual influence. Exclusion of parties and restriction of their means of participation creates undemocratic decision-making. And here is where the value of openness in the socio-political sense comes into play in dialectical models of argumentation. People – not just ideas – must be given free and full opportunity to influence a decision, and the autonomy of their personal decision-making must be respected. Notice here that a concern for power in argumentative discourse and the distortions it brings to social relations is not primarily a concern for its epistemic consequences (though there may also be such consequences). Nor is this concern extrinsic to argumentative analysis; the social quality of argumentation is an intrinsic quality. Deliberation must be conducted in a way that neither closes off entry into the influence process nor coerces acceptance of any particular decision.

### *3. Tensions Between the Values of Openness.*

Under ideal circumstances these two values of openness converge and complement one another. It is pretty easy to see that opening deliberation and debate to the broadest circle of people also increases the diversity of viewpoints, elicits a broader range of objections, criticisms, rebuttals, and refutations, and in general improves the chances of uncovering error and discovering the best case. So politically open systems enable epistemically open decisions. Also, it should be clear that being maximally open to different ideas and opinions makes it less likely that interested parties will be overlooked or excluded and makes it more likely that interested parties will be given the fullest opportunity to make their case, to influence the opinions of others, and to have their own interests respected. So epistemically open systems enhances politically open decision-making.

But that is under ideal circumstances. Under less than ideal circumstances these two values may conflict and compete, especially as arguers deploy argumentative procedures to correct or get around defects in the circumstances for deliberation. For example, a precondition for epistemic openness is participant competence. A precondition for socio-political openness is participant interest. It is quite possible to have politically interested parties who are not epistemically competent. And it is quite possible to have epistemically competent parties who can make no clear claim to a social interest. So, in the first case, it is common enough to find deliberations in which opinions are downplayed or dismissed or participation is closed off altogether on grounds of incompetence. Any time that we test sources for expertise or rely on argument from authority we in effect do this. Likewise, for the second case, it is common enough to find deliberations in which participation is limited to parties with a direct interest in the case at hand. Third party dispute mediation, bargaining and negotiation processes, and various kinds of political and personal conflicts are often restricted in just this way. When we award special weight or respect to personal narratives or subjective experiences, we often do so on the basis of personal interest and not special expertise.

Or again, consider the way in which temporal constraints on deliberative processes may lead to trade-offs between epistemic and socio-political openness. As Jean Goodwin (personal communication) has pointed out, the use of “town hall meeting” formats for talk shows on radio and television must make decisions between opening the show to the broadest range of participants or exploring in-

depth any particular viewpoint. Allowing minimal time for any audience or call-in participant to present their views, maximizes participation. But it minimizes the chance to critically scrutinize any participant's position. Maximizing the time a host spends interrogating a participant allows for more careful understanding and assessment of the participant's standpoint, but limits the range of people who have access to the floor. A similar trade-off can be seen in the allocation of time to the studio or viewing/listening audience and to experts who are also frequently present on such shows. Presumably, expert contributions improve the quality of the critical questioning while audience contributions expand public participation.

Finally, consider the way in which epistemic and socio-political openness interact in the following concrete case. This is an advertisement from the December, 1990 issue of *Reader's Digest*. It appeared at a time when the United States Congress was debating funding of NASA's request for a permanent space station. The text of the advertisement is reproduced below.

(1)

Innovation

A WALK ON THE MOON

LET HIM PLAY IN THE SUN.

For years, Stevie Roper didn't have hope for a normal life. He was born without sweat glands, a disease called hypohidrotic ectodermal dysplasia, or HED. Without a natural cooling system, Stevie is susceptible to heat exhaustion or stroke; so activities most children take for granted are life-threatening.

Today though, Stevie has a "cool suit" that circulates chilled fluid over his body. It was originally designed in a 1968 NASA program to protect astronauts on the moon. Now it enable Stevie and other HED children to live like normal kids again. The cool suit story is a classic example of space technology's tangible impact on our lives. And it's one reason Space Station Freedom is so crucial. As the next step in America's space program, Freedom will be a permanently occupied laboratory for medical, scientific and industrial research not possible on Earth. But the space station needs your support. Without it, other life-saving innovations may go undiscovered. Write Congress. Tell them you want Freedom launched.

Beneath the text is the logo for Lockheed along with the phrase "Giving shape to imagination." The text is set down the left side of the page, alongside a picture of

a cute, somewhat pudgy young boy (presumably Stevie Roper). He is dressed in a Little League baseball uniform and is standing in what could be outfield grass. In his left hand is a baseball glove, raised head high, containing the baseball he has just caught. His eyes are closed, which may be because he is not very practiced in playing catch or it may be from the bright sunlight that shines all down the left side of his body. There is no sign of a “cool suit,” though presumably he is wearing it .

While Lockheed clearly has a financial interest in whether or not to fund “Space Station Freedom,” we can also notice that the ad represents the standpoint of another interested party. This is the group of potential future Stevie Ropers - people who might benefit from Space Station Freedom technology in a way similar to how Stevie Roper benefited from the Apollo Space Program technology. Regardless of whether or not Lockheed is being cynical or opportunistic here in their representation of potential Stevie Ropers, their argument does provide a way for a group of people to have a voice who might otherwise be ignored. After all, this group of people may not even yet exist. And even if they do now exist they have no way of knowing who they are (since they will be defined by as-yet-undiscovered technologies that may help their conditions). So, Lockheed is making more than just an updated argument for domestic space technology spin-offs like Tang, Teflon, or microwave ovens. This is a clear appeal to include in the decision-making an otherwise disenfranchised group, a group who surely has a legitimate interest in the question of whether or not to fund Space Station Freedom. In terms of the socio-political sense of openness, this advertising strategy ought to be seen as a good move that improves the quality of the deliberative process.

But how does this means of inclusion affect the openness of deliberation in an epistemic sense? Here a more equivocal assessment is probably called for. On the one hand, representing the interests of these parties introduces for consideration an issues that might be otherwise overlooked or too easily dismissed - the issue of domestic benefits from space technology. This is not a topic that comes readily to mind when imagining the reasons for launching space stations into orbit around the Earth. On the other hand, the way in which these interests are represented may have some decidedly deadening consequences in terms of critical scrutiny. The very way in which this otherwise disenfranchised group of potential future Stevie Ropers is injected into the deliberations may discourage doubt or healthy



skepticism. The personal story of Stevie Roper may deserve special weight in the social sense of highlighting a claim to participation in the decision-making, but it does not necessarily establish special privilege in any epistemic sense. Yet the one dimensions easily bleeds into the other.

This story is an emotional appeal of sorts – embodied in the form of a story of a boy who just wants to go out and play baseball like all the other kids. By aligning Stevie Roper with Space Station Freedom, any critic of the project may well be reluctant to appear to be opposing Stevie Roper’s happiness. Or at least a reader might not carefully consider alternative ways of discovering Stevie Roper’s cool suit. The problem with this argumentative strategy is that a potential critic is easily projected to be callous and insensitive. This ad has lurking behind it a subtle message: Would you have let Stevie Roper die? Would you have denied him this small happiness? As a result anyone considering the issues may be less likely to raise a question like the following: If we took the more than \$100 billion that will go into developing and building Space Station Freedom and spent it directly on domestic technology development would we maybe get Tang, Teflon, microwave ovens, and cool suits – and then some? Now, maybe that question can be asked anyway, but this ad surely makes it less likely that the question will be asked or pressed.

In any case, the point should be clear: socio-political openness and epistemic openness are not the same thing and they need not be complementary. Particularly under less-than-ideal conditions, where strategic tactics may need to be employed to manage defects in the circumstances of argumentation, a tension may arise between these two kinds of openness. How argumentative tactics and procedures manage that tension may be one of the important issues to consider when evaluating real-life arguments or when designing argumentative discourse to function in the real world.

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