ISSA Proceedings 2006 – A Foundational Principle Underlying Philosophy Of Argument

1. *Introduction*

The study of arguments and argumentations – *logic* – whether undertaken traditionally as a study of formal implication relationships among propositions or undertaken non-traditionally to involve the dialogical pragmatics of human argumentative discourse, is a decidedly metasystematic activity (consider, e.g., Barth & Krabbe 1982 on various uses of 'form'). This is not obviated by philosophers of argument considering an argument to be a *social activity* (see, e.g., van Eemeren et al 1996: 5, Johnson 2000: 168, Govier 1988:1, Freeman 1993: 35, Walton 1989: 1, 3, and Tindale 1999: 1). Of course, philosophers of argument distinguish themselves by intentionally broadening their study to include considering the context and situatedness of argumentative discourse as essential to the discipline. In connection with this special approach to studying arguments, philosophers of argument have variously treated epistemic matters, normative matters, pragmatic matters, and a whole host of humanist issues. Indeed, in this latter respect, the philosophy of argument, whatever controversies it might compass, even to include adherents debating whether there is or can be a theory of argument, has sprung from persons motivated by deep humanist convictions to empower ordinary human beings with sufficient critical faculties to become autonomous members of democratic societies.

This discussion aims modestly only to highlight this important humanist underpinning of many contributors to the modern argumentation discussion. We use 'humanism' here in a generalized way to range over various humanisms, such as, secular humanism, religious, scientific, or naturalistic humanism and their individual philosophic expressions, all of which might be traced to their renaissance inspiration and all of which have deep moral predilections. We take humanists, then, to affirm the dignity and worth of human beings and to promote human freedom, especially as expressed by the self-determination of individuals and their communities. Besides promoting freedom, humanists promote a spirit of

tolerance and peaceful coexistence, affirm human equality, and embrace cosmopolitanism. Humanists especially consider human nature perfectible and share an optimistic outlook on the possibility of genuine progress. Humanists express profound confidence in human reason to understand nature and society without external mediation, and they promote cultivating our moral sensibility and our sense of shared responsibility. Below we review the remarks of some important philosophers of argument to indicate their deep-seated humanism. The upshot of our discussion is to identify a foundational principle underlying philosophy of argument.

2. *An initial humanist impulse motivating the modern study of argumentative discourse*

Taking Chaim Perelman, Stephen Toulmin, and Charles Hamblin to have inspired a social movement concerned with the dynamics of human argumentative engagement, many contemporary logicians since the 1970s have taken up the cause of their initial inspiration. Perelman, along with Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, has remarked at various places that he aimed to "combat uncompromising and irreducible philosophical oppositions presented by all kinds of absolutism" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969:1). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca were committed to fight absolutism in all its forms and to resist totalitarianism (1969: 510). Perelman has especially addressed the concerns of justice in various essays (see Perelman 1967, 1980). These philosophers had had first-hand experience with the effects of severe anti-democratic and anti-human practices. Toulmin, in much the same vein, has reflected on the social history of logic to locate a split between the reasonable and the rational in the Peace of Westphalia, out of which came *absolute* sovereignty, *established* religion, and *logical* demonstration, all of which share two common features: "[1] all of them operated top-down, and gave power to oligarchies – political, ecclesiastical, or academic – that supported one another ... [2] they formed a single [ideological] package" (2001: 156). Toulmin also writes that "[t]he Westphalian Settlement was, then, a poisoned chalice: intellectual dogmatism, political chauvinism, and sectarian religion formed a blend whose influence lasted into the twentieth century" (2001: 158). He is optimistic that in the contemporary world "tolerance and democracy are winning out over elitism in methodology, and over imperialism in the philosophy of science. To that extent, the imbalance in European ideas about Rationality and Reasonableness shows healthy signs of correcting itself" (2001: 167; cf. 205).

Hamblin also contributed to this discussion against social totalitarianism, although his contribution in this connection joins the remarks of Perelman and Toulmin against Cartesian rationalism with its putative aim to eclipse deliberation. Hamblin has written that "truth and validity are onlookers' concepts and presuppose a God's eye-view of the arena. ... [an onlooker might intervene and thus] become simply another participant in an enlarged dialectical situation and that the words 'true' and 'valid' have become, for [the participant] too, empty stylistic excrescences" (1993: 242-243). Toulmin had earlier stated, in criticizing a formal logician's neglecting context, that "looking down from his Olympian throne, he then sets himself to pronounce about the unchangeable relations between them. But taking this kind of God's-eye-view distracts one completely from the practical problems out of which the question of validity itself springs" (1958: 184-185). Perelman emphatically rejected the rationalistic posture of formal logic to obviate deliberation. The new rhetoric "constitutes *a break with a concept of reason and reasoning due to Descartes* which has set its mark on Western philosophy for the last three centuries. ... The very nature of deliberation and argumentation is opposed to necessity and self-evidence, since no one deliberates where the solution is necessary or argues what is self-evident" (1969: 1). And connecting an affirmation of deliberation with a rejection of self-evident truths, Perelman remarks that if we "take away the guarantee which God gives to self-evidence ... suddenly, *all thought becomes human and fallible, and no longer sheltered from controversy*" (Perelman 1982: 159; cf. 24; emphasis added). Without an imposing self-evidence human beings are left to work with hypotheses that they support with good reasons. Consequently, knowledge becomes personal and human, fallible and situated, and subject to *deliberative controversy.* We can understand Hamblin's call to dethrone formal logic in this context. We can also understand, then, an important trend among argumentation philosophers to abandon concern with truth – 'whose truth?' after all – and to move toward treating arguments normatively by assessing the acceptability of premises and inferential links between various claims. Perelman's reintroducing and ennobling rhetorical considerations relating to human discourse continues to deeply affect the nature of argumentation studies.

Informal logicians, and argumentationists generally (here including pragma-dialecticians, dialogue logicians, critical thinking theorists), had been uneasy about the inefficacy of formal logic in respect of treating matters of everyday life. They had encountered various classroom frustrations during the 1950s and 1960s

particularly in the United States. They quickly became dissatisfied with formal logic textbooks because they seemed out of touch with everyday matters, preoccupied as they were with formal languages and recursive systems, and inventing exercises unrelated to practical applications of logic lessons. Many younger logic instructors became increasingly critical about consumer society, especially with the techniques and damaging effects of advertising. In addition, these instructors matured intellectually as they confronted the rhetoric of disingenuous political figures proffering the failing American foreign policy of the Viet Nam War and the domestic policies relating to civil rights. Traditional formal logicians could not answer these persons who then declared formal logic to be irrelevant and exercises in lunacy. If logic were to be resuscitated, it had to be transformed in a foundational manner *to embrace humanist concerns*. Christopher Tindale, a contemporary logician in the Perelman tradition of infusing informal logic with new rhetoric, has proposed that an

'[a]rgumentation' is the site of an activity, where reasons are given and appraised, where *beliefs are recognized* and justified, and where *personal development is encouraged* … The argumentation at stake here is not, exclusively, the argumentation of academics but the broader domain of persuasive and investigative discourse that arises in the marketplace, in the media, on the internet, and in the everyday conversations of citizens, and that thence may find its way into the academy. (1999: 1; emphasis added)

We now turn to some reflections on philosophy of argument by other contemporary logicians who nobly follow in the train of their humanist predecessors.

3. *Contemporary humanist philosophers of argument*
Among the numerous philosophers of argument who have specifically taken up or embrace pragmatic and dialogical aspects of argumentation, we cite only four among them who exemplify promoting humanist ideals in their treatments of argumentation and whose efforts have encouraged richer developments in philosophy of argument – Christopher Tindale, Trudy Govier, Ralph Johnson, and David Hitchcock. In this section we only re-present some philosophical reflections on argumentation and do not cite any of the many pragma-dialectical or dialogical rules for managing disputational discourse; however, these treatments lie in the background of our remarks (see, e.g., F. van Eemeren & R. Grootendorst 1992, esp. 208-209; Walton 1991; Walton and Krabbe 1995; R. Johnson 2000; D.

Hitchcock 2002).

Addressing the putative violence of imperial rationality, Tindale invokes Perelman to reveal a deep-running sentiment among many argumentationists. He writes, in connection with audience adherence, that:

Adherence is sought *through understanding*, and this is pursued through the creation of an argumentative environment in which the arguer and audience *complete the argument as equal partners*. On this model, an audience is not aggressively persuaded by the arguer, but is persuaded by its own understanding of the reasoning. (1999: 206; emphases added)

Tindale immediately adds that manipulation conflicts with the notion of reasonableness and suggests that an audience's susceptibility to vagueness is allayed by the underlying reasonableness of the universal audience. He continues:

If argumentation as an activity is to have credence, then there must be a *sense of reasonableness at work.* All audiences have such a sense. The exercise of audience construction is important as an exercise even if it is not always successful. We attempt to uncover that working notion of reasonableness alive in any audience and to speak to it. As such, *the primary attitude with which audiences are approached is one of respect.* (1999: 206; emphases added)

Tindale seems to have a special mission to express concern about promoting human well-being, which, we believe, derives from his being a student of Perelman's new rhetoric besides his own deep-seated humanist convictions.

Govier, motivated, it seems, from much the same humanist impulse, treats rational discussion as having a "socio-personal element" (1987: 277) – and this means that she considers credibility and honesty, trust and sincerity, to be foundational hallmarks of the ideal practice of argument. The express purpose of persons engaged in argumentative exchanges is "to communicate information, beliefs, and opinions both in order to persuade others by reasons that their beliefs and opinions are true or acceptable and in order to check and possibly revise their own beliefs and opinions as a result of rational criticism and evaluation" (1987: 278).

Govier in another place addresses a challenge about the 'uselessness' of logic because of its putative confrontational character and remarks that rational persuasion is "persuasion by considerations that affect the assent of another person by supplying evidence or grounds that make a claim seem more believable because of a cogent connection between the claim and the claims cited as its

support" (1999: 45-46). She also remarks that "[r]ational persuasion is not coercive" (1999: 46) and that an argument should not be manipulative, tricky, or deceptive (1999: 48, 50). Her thinking is especially poignant in the following passage.

To offer an argument for a claim is to *show sensitivity* to the thinking of other people and a *respect for the minds and intellectual autonomy* of those addressed in the actual or potential audience. To argue well, one must consider the beliefs, values, and interests of the audience when constructing the argument. An arguer, in actually or potentially addressing those who differ, is committed *to the recognition* that people may think differently and that what they think and why they think it matters. *In this way, to offer arguments may be deemed to show respect for other minds.* (1999: 50; emphasis added)

Govier challenges a notion that argument must necessarily be confrontational, but embraces difference and controversy as inescapable aspects of lived-experience in a pluralistic society.

Govier's humanist thinking resonates throughout argumentation literature, and this is evident also in the numerous contributions of Ralph Johnson and David Hitchcock. Johnson devotes an entire treatise to develop his notion of rational persuasion – *manifest rationality* – a notion deeply rooted in a moral tradition concerned to restrict someone's imposing an arbitrary will on another. In this sense, then, an arguer subscribing to rational persuasion "wishes to persuade the Other to accept the conclusion on the basis of the reasons and considerations cited, and those alone. In entering the realm of argumentation, *the arguer agrees to forswear all other methods* that might be used to achieve this: force, flattery, trickery, and so forth" (2000: 150; emphasis added). Johnson also notes that "[m]anifest rationality is why the arguer *is obligated to respond* to objections and criticisms from others and not ignore them or sweep them under the carpet" (2000: 163-164; emphasis added). He later adds that "[a]n absolute precondition of this practice is the assumption of good will: that people giving children treats would do just that" (2000: 212; emphasis added). David Hitchcock has maintained a dialogue with Johnson and, making a friendly adjustment to Johnson's thinking, shifts a focus from characterizing the function of the practice to the purpose of participants, and thus he emphasizes the purpose as reaching a shared rationally supported position on some issue rather than rational persuasion *per se*. Notwithstanding his revisions of Johnson's concern with manifest rationality,

Hitchcock strongly supports the notion that argumentative discussion is "an extremely powerful and valuable cultural practice" (2000: 11). He then adds that [F]ew other practices, *to change ignorance into knowledge and prejudice into reasoned judgement ... [have such] an impact for good*. Human well-being (and the well-being of animals, species, the biosphere and our planet) is served best by positions and policies which reason would support. ... *Free and open rational discussion*, welcoming criticism and willing to change in the light of that criticism, is the most secure route to correct views and wise policies. (2002: 20; emphasis added)

Hitchcock has identified 17 theorems (2002:12), all of which address an argumentative participant's responsibilities to recognize and respect the other member of an argumentative discussion. All 17 of Hitchcock's theses are informed by contemporary humanist concerns within the argumentation movement to empower ordinary human beings in everyday contexts and by his moral convictions about the personhood of an individual reasonable human being.

4. *The underpinning principle of philosophy of argument*
Among the more obvious themes that we can identify running through a great deal of the argumentation literature are the following.
– Argumentation is ideally *egalitarian* and anti-absolutist – argumentationists promote free and open rational deliberation appropriate to democratic, pluralistic societies.
– Argumentation, operating in an arena of the free exchange of ideas, expects participants to regulate their own wills from *a duty to respect* the other persons – exercising good will is a precondition of good argumentative practice.
– Argumentation promotes the values of *acting fairly*, justly, and honestly – taking unfair advantage of a situation at the expense of others is unacceptable. Participants eschew the use of force, flattery, trickery, deception, and using fallacies and making illicit dialogue shifts.
– Argumentation participants embrace a notion of *reasonableness* in an arena of deliberation – argumentationists eschew the use of prejudice and thoughtlessness.
– Argumentationists maintain that all thought is human thought, that knowledge is personal. Moreover, argumentative discussion especially aims *to change ignorance to knowledge*, prejudice into reasoned judgment.

This list, perhaps incomplete, is sufficiently compassing to establish what

philosophers of argument, or non-formalists in counter-distinction to traditional formalists, consider to be *the* essential purpose of argument – namely, the promotion of *the idea of the human* and encouraging *personal development* for the betterment of the human community.

From the start argumentationists have resolutely affirmed that argumentation is an especially human activity, indeed, a social activity, involving real persons with real interests. They have rather universally affirmed an abiding humanist concern with justice and moral sensibility. This being so, we might easily recognize an *axiom* to lie at the foundation of modern argumentation philosophy — namely, that *human, rational beings exist as ends in themselves*. This principle, finding a modern expression in the ethics of Kant, distinguishes *person* from *thing* as existing for itself, having all its value in-itself, while a thing strictly speaking has only instrumental value, a value relative to something other than itself. It is an easy step to deduce the practical imperative from this axiom, which imperative we recognize as more commonly expressed in the *Golden Rule*. Moreover, it is just as easy to deduce the various principles of good argumentative practices from this moral imperative. Informal logic, then, or any of the non-formal currents within the argumentation movement, might better be considered a part of *applied ethics* rather than strictly speaking applied epistemology or logic *per se*.

5. *Concluding remarks*
By considering how argumentation logicians metasystematically discuss argument, particularly in respect of their characterizing *good argumentative practices,* we have extracted some of their tenets that bear on the interpersonal dynamic and dialogical dimension of argumentation as a social activity. We have identified a number of salient *humanist imperatives* to underlie good acts of arguing, and we have especially identified one foundational moral principle to underlie those imperatives, indeed, to underlie the philosophy of argument. Christopher Tindale in particular seems to exemplify this humanist spirit when he promotes Perelman's notion that "[a]rguers address the *whole person*, not the isolated intellect or emotion, and they consider as a natural course the circumstances and differences involved" (1999: 201; emphasis added). He notes, moreover, that

a theory of argumentation and its associated notion of reasonableness should contribute to the development of the *idea of the human*, facilitate an environment in which it can flourish, and promote ends that connect the threads of that

project. (1999: 202; emphasis added)

That human well-being is the end of modern argumentationist reflection – that contemporary argumentationists construe themselves as serving that end – attests to their profound humanist sensibility and might reassure their predecessors of their continuing progress toward realizing that end.

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