

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Is “Argument” Subject To The Product/Process Ambiguity?



1. Introduction

In recent work, Ralph Johnson raises several problems for the adequacy of the Logic/Rhetoric/Dialectic trichotomy and for its alleged basis—the argument as product/process/procedure trichotomy. My concern here is not with Johnson’s worries – rather it is with what Johnson leaves unchallenged. While Johnson ultimately has some reservations about argument as procedure, he leaves the product/process distinction untouched. He writes: “The distinction between product and process seems to me fairly secure. It has a longstanding history here and in other disciplines. In logic, for instance, the term ‘inference’ is understood as ambiguous as between the process of drawing an inference and the inference that results from that process.”(Johnson 2009, p. 3)

Despite its longstanding history and foundational role in argumentation theory, I am not so confident about the security of the product/process distinction as it applies to “argument” or even “inference”. I shall first articulate the conditions required for “argument” to be subject to the product/process ambiguity, and then argue that not all of the conditions are met. Finally, I shall show that some arguments for the ontological or intellectual priority of one aspect of argument over another fail given that “argument” is not subject to the process/product ambiguity.

2. The Product/Process Distinction and Argument

In his chapter on ambiguity, just after giving an example of how an argument can go wrong by failing to distinguish the action sense of a word from the result sense of a word, Max Black writes: “A great many words exhibit a similar fluctuation between emphasis upon a process (a doing something) and an associated product (the result of an activity).”(Black 1946, p. 177) I take it that the general consensus, among argumentation theorists at least, is that “argument” is such a word. Indeed, though Black himself does not acknowledge that he thinks

“argument” is such a word, his own discussion of argument evinces at least part of such an ambiguity. On the one hand, in his glossary, he defines an argument as follows: “Argument. A process of reasoning in which the truth of some proposition (the conclusion) is shown, or alleged to be shown, to depend upon the truth of others (the premises).”(Black 1946, p. 379) But in the main body of his text he writes: “We have seen that the elements out of which that complex object which we call an argument is constructed are statements (or more precisely, propositions); and we have noticed that the propositions are arranged or related to one another in a certain way.”(Black 1946, p. 18) On the one hand, Black defines argument as a process of reasoning, but on the other he calls an argument a complex object constructed of statements or propositions.

That there are words subject to the process/product ambiguity I do not dispute. Black’s own examples of “science” and “education” are perfectly legitimate. But does “argument” fall into this category? To say that a word is subject to the process/product ambiguity is to say that (a) there is a sense of the word that refers to an activity; (b) there is a sense of the word that refers to an object or thing; and (c) the object or thing is in some sense the result or outcome of the activity. For example, we could use “science” to describe the activity of doing certain sorts of investigations or we could use “science” to describe the results or outcomes of those investigations. My main worry about “argument” is that while “argument” satisfies conditions (a) and (b) it is not at all clear to me that it satisfies condition (c) as so many seem to suppose.**[i]**

That “argument” satisfies conditions (a) and (b) is not a matter of contention. Just compare – “It is better to engage in argument than in intimidation” and “Peter Unger’s argument for skepticism consists of three propositions.” But merely satisfying conditions (a) and (b) is not enough to warrant talking about arguments as process and arguments as product. Satisfying conditions (a) and (b) merely warrants talking about the activity of arguing on the one hand and arguments as objects on the other. Indeed, no one ought to dispute that there are acts of arguing, as opposed to acts of explaining or prophesying or poetry reading, on the one hand and groups of propositions, sentences, statements or utterances, on the other. But for the product/process ambiguity to obtain, the object must in some sense be the product of the activity – does this hold for “argument”?

Many theorists write as if it does. Here are but a few examples:

“O’ Keefe and other rhetoricians think that argument in the second sense is given

too much importance, especially by logicians and philosophers, and that more emphasis should be placed on the process of arguing, rather than on something produced in that process.”(Levi 2000, p. 59)

“The term ‘argument’ can be used to refer either to the process or to the product of that process.”(Johnson 2000, p. 12)

“Logic helps us to understand and evaluate arguments as products people create when they argue.”(Wenzel 1990, p. 9)

“An argument is produced by the activity of arguing and arguing is something people do.”(Fogelin 1985, p. 2)

Of course, not all theorists are willing to be constrained by the product/process locutions. For example, Alvin Goldman writes:

The term ‘argument’ will be used here for the product, or perhaps content, of argumentation, usually, for a set of sentences, or a set of propositions that might be expressed by means of such sentences. One member of such a set is a conclusion and the other members (possibly null) are premises. The elements of an argument might be printed, uttered, or merely thought. ‘Argumentation’, by contrast, will refer to the process or activity of producing or deploying such a complex object. A process of argumentation can be purely mental, in which case it is ‘inference’, or it can be overt and public.(Goldman 2003, p. 52)

Note that while Goldman does incorporate the possibility that argumentation is the process or activity of producing arguments, he also allows for the possibility that arguments might be the content of argumentation or what is deployed in argumentation. I shall, however, argue in the next sections, that even Goldman’s weaker position concedes too much for arguments are just not the products of the process of arguing.

3. Products as Propositions?

Suppose you hold that arguments as objects are sets of propositions. Should you accept that these sets of propositions are the product of acts of arguing? No. Propositions are abstract objects, either eternal or atemporal, and not the subject of production. Hence, whatever is the product of acts of arguing, if there is such a product, it is not the set of propositions that is an argument.

But perhaps someone might object that while the propositions are not created, perhaps the sets or particular groupings of them are – in other words the argument, i.e., the group of propositions does not exist as an argument until someone groups them that way and that way of grouping happens as a result of

the activity of arguing.

Short reply: If the group that is the argument just is an ordered set of a set of propositions and another proposition, then, since the complex ordered set is itself an abstract object and exists independently of anyone thinking of it or creating it, the group is not produced by the act of arguing.

Longer reply: Suppose one holds that the entity that is the argument is not the ordered set of propositions, but rather the group of propositions that results via the activity of some agent. Now one might wonder whether this group just is the ordered set of propositions even if it is the activity of the agent that has made us become aware of the ordered set (even though one may not think of the entity one is now aware of as an ordered set). But assume for the moment there is a distinct entity that is the result of this grouping activity. The question remains – is the act of arguing the only means of performing this grouping activity? No. Suppose you ask me to give you an example of an argument comprised solely of existential generalizations. I respond with, “Some arguments are composed solely of existential generalizations, so some arguments are composed solely of existential generalizations.” While an act of example giving has occurred, an act of arguing has not and yet the grouping of propositions that makes an argument come into existence, on the current hypothesis, has occurred.

But if arguments can exist without being the product of acts of arguing, then perhaps they are never the product of acts of arguing – perhaps the relationship between acts of arguing and arguments is different than one of production. Indeed, what seems common to the act of arguing case and the giving an example case is that in both situations, the activity of arguing and the activity of giving an example made us aware of a given argument. But being made aware of a particular argument should not be confused with production.

Here is another reason to think that the relationship between acts of arguing and arguments as groups of propositions is not one of production. When I argue verbally that “argument” is not a process/product word, I may be making you aware of various arguments via my speech acts, which in this context, certainly constitute acts of arguing –

but I am certainly not making myself aware of these arguments. I was aware of these arguments well before I presented them or wrote them down. Also, while many acts of reflection, imagination, following through implications, etc.

occurred, as well as considerable reasoning about everything from word choice, sentence order, possible objections and possible consequences, in the production of these arguments, no obvious acts of arguing, even with myself, occurred. If my arguments exist prior to my using them here to argue and if the groupings happened by some means other than arguing with myself, which I am pretty sure they did, then arguments, as groups of propositions, are not the products of acts of arguing.

4. Products as Sentences?

Suppose one takes arguments to be composed of sentences rather than propositions. Presumably there are two choices—sentence types or sentence tokens. Neither option, I strongly suspect, will do as an adequate theory of arguments as objects, but arguing that is a different paper. Regardless, even supposing that one of these options will work as a theory of arguments as objects, neither option supports the view that such objects are the product of the process of arguing. Sentence types, quite straightforwardly, are abstract objects that are not the subject of production, but rather instantiation. Sentence tokens, on the other hand, either exist prior to the acts of arguing or are a component of the act of arguing rather than the product of the act of arguing.

Consider for example the sentence tokens that exist on this very page. Those sentence tokens came in to existence long before being spoken aloud or read here. But the act of arguing that appeals to those sentence tokens is happening now.**[ii]** Hence, the sentence tokens are not the product of the act of arguing. But what of the auditory sentence tokens that come into existence when I present this argument verbally? While those sentence tokens are not prior to the act of arguing, they are not the product of it either, for those auditory sentence tokens are part of the very speech acts that are the act of arguing that is going on now. But if they are part of the act of arguing, then they are not the product of the act of arguing.

This latter point also reveals the problem if we suppose that arguments are composed of utterances or statements. While, unlike propositions or sentences, the utterances or statements cannot exist prior to the act of arguing, it still makes no sense to say that the utterances or statements are the product of the acts of arguing. The statements or utterances currently being made just are the acts of stating or uttering that constitute the current act of arguing. If I were not to make those statements or utterances in the proper context or order there would be no

act of arguing. Hence, taking arguments to be composed of statements or utterances does not support the claim that arguments are the products of the process of arguing.[iii]

Note that the problems for “argument” with regards to the product/process distinction, also apply to Johnson’s “inference” example. There is no doubt the act of inferring – but what is the thing that is the inference that is allegedly the result of the act of inferring? The inference could just be the thing inferred, i.e., the conclusion, but it is hard to see how the conclusion is the product of the act of inferring rather than just the endpoint reached via the act of inferring. One may be aware of one proposition or sentence and aware of another, and then come to realize that the second can be inferred from the first. But the second proposition or sentence existed prior to the inferring of it from the other, so it cannot be the product of the act of inferring. Alternatively, the inference might be the expression of the form “X, so Y”. But the expression captures part of a description of the act of inferring. But just as a painting is not the product of what it pictures, the expression, “X, so Y” is not a product of the act of inferring, but rather a partial description of the act of inferring (and if Robert Pinto is right a partial description that has the power to invite others to engage in the same act of inferring.) Finally, the inference might just be the event that is the moving from, say, X to Y. But what is this event other than just the activity of inferring X from Y described after it has happened? The event is not the product of the activity – it is the activity. So, like “argument”, “inference” is not subject to the process/product ambiguity, even if it is subject to the act/object ambiguity.

5. The Danger of the Product/Process Distinction for Argumentation Theory

Still, someone might think something is odd about these results. Surely, after acts of arguing we have something we did not have before – surely something was produced. Undoubtedly something was produced, but there is no guarantee that the thing produced was an argument. I have already suggested that the thing produced might be awareness of an argument and if the argument meets sufficient standards we might also produce conviction or belief on the audience’s part.

Surely arguments must be the product of something. Perhaps. If arguments are sets of propositions, then perhaps arguments are better described as being discovered rather than produced. Regardless, even if arguments turn out to be the sort of thing that is produced, there seems little reason right now to say that

they are the product of acts of arguing. They, or the expressions of them, may be the result of various acts of imagination, reflection, etc., but that does not make them the product of acts of arguing.

Perhaps, some will say, that I am merely quibbling. Yes, the attribution of “process” and “product” may have been ultimately unfortunate, but all we really mean is that there are acts of arguing on the one hand and some sort of object on the other. Once we are clear on this we can understand comments such as “I will here focus on argument as process rather than as product” well enough.

If this were the only sort of use made of the process/product distinction, then I agree that much of what I have done here might be rightly construed as quibbling. But as mentioned in the beginning of this paper it is not the only use to which the distinction is put. For example, the distinction is used as part of an attempt to ground the difference between the so-called Logical and Rhetorical perspectives (though perhaps the act/object distinction would be enough to ground that difference). More significantly, however, the distinction is also used to ground claims of priority or importance.

Michael Gilbert, for example takes Ralph Johnson to task for taking written arguments as primary, when Johnson’s own framework seems to indicate that the process should be primary. Gilbert writes:

However, the object of NASTy veneration is not the process, but the product of the process: “At a certain point in the process, the arguer distils elements from what has transpired and encodes them in the form of an argument” (159). This product is the distillate that is the epitome of the practice of argument. But this seems to indicate that the process is ontologically more fundamental than the product, since without the process the product does not come into existence.

It is important to realize that the exclusion of certain factors as arguments seems to rely on the distinction between the process of arguing and the product produced by that process. This is a NASTy distinction that most NICE theorists would not really allow. Rather, the NICE theorist will, at best, see the written argument or speech as a snapshot of the process at a given moment in time, much as the inventory of a grocery store accounts for its contents at some specific moment: as soon as the inventory is complete, it changes with the first customer. I have no problem at all with there being such argument products, though, with Willard, I believe they cannot really be understood independent of the process used in arriving at them. (Gilbert 2003, p 6)

While Gilbert, in the middle of this extended quote, seems to be disavowing the process/product distinction, he clearly uses the distinction to give ontological and intellectual priority to the process since, according to Gilbert, the argument products “cannot really be understood independent of the process used in arriving at them.”

But if arguments are just not the products of acts of arguing, then such an argument cannot be used to ground claims of either ontological or intellectual primacy to the acts or process of arguing.

The debate about the primacy of various aspects of argument is not new. David Zarefsky, three decades ago, suspected, that “our disputes over definition turn on the question of whether argument₁ or argument₂ should be the primary notion informing our research.”(Zarefsky 1980, p. 229). Indeed, at this time, argument₁ was tied with argument as product and argument₂ with argument as process. But even Daniel O’Keefe, who originally introduced argument₁ and argument₂ resisted this identification. (O’Keefe 1982, p. 23)[iv]

Zarefsky worried that progress in argumentation theory is being thwarted by “definitional concerns [which] may distract us from the substantive issues we wish to investigate.”(Zarefsky 1980, p. 228) But the flipside is that failure to make progress on the definitional concerns may mean that worse than failing to make progress, we are actually producing false theories about the phenomena in question since we have failed to articulate clearly what the various phenomena in question are. This appears to be what is in danger of happening if we insist on talking about arguments as processes and the products of those processes, for it prejudices the relationship between the acts of arguing and the things that are arguments in a way that, I hope I have shown, is likely to distort the real relationship between the acts and the objects.

At the same time, I am certainly not claiming that the arguments as objects are somehow primary. For example, if arguments are groups of speech acts, then acts of arguing and arguments have the same constituents and you cannot have the one without the other. Also, while I have given cases where the arguments are temporally prior to the acts of arguing with which they are associated, in no way does this generate ontological or intellectual priority. After all, the arguments may only become a matter of intellectual interest after they have been made evident by an act of arguing. In addition, I suspect we, as theorists, want to have room to say that acts of arguing can go so awry, that the argument presented via

the act of arguing is not the argument the author had hoped to convey. But even with some appeal to charity, it is clearly incumbent upon the presenter of arguments to argue in a way that aids rather than hinders in the presentation of the desired argument. Regardless, the upshot of my comments so far is that restricting ourselves to talk of arguments as acts on the one hand and objects on the other in no way supports the intellectual or ontological priority of one aspect of argument over the other.

6. Conclusion

Despite the longstanding history of treating “argument” as if the arguments-as-objects are the product of the process of arguments-as-acts, the facts do not support this treatment. Regardless of one’s chosen ontology of arguments (propositions, sentences, utterances, statements, speech acts, or sets or groups thereof) either the arguments exist prior to the relevant acts of arguing or are constituents of those acts of arguing – they are not the products of those acts of arguing. If, as part of organizing the domain of argumentation theory, we merely want to distinguish acts of arguing from arguments-as-objects, we should not use the misleading process/product labels to do so. At the very least such labels imply a relationship that does not exist and so distort our perceptions of the domain of study. At worst they ground false claims about the ontological or intellectual priority of one perspective of argument and argument theory over another. Without the distorting lens of these labels, we will be in a much better position to provide accurate answers to some of the fundamental questions of argumentation theory – what exactly are arguments-as-objects and how exactly are they related to acts of arguing?

NOTES

[i] Perhaps “argumentation” as some people use it does satisfy the three conditions. But then, if I am correct in what follows, that just shows that “argument” and “argumentation” are not interchangeable, and even more care must be taken when trying to understand what someone means when they say, “This argumentation is not sound.”

[ii] This sentence refers to the instances when this paper was presented to an audience. For those of you reading this paper, imagine that this paper was never verbally presented. So where exactly is the act of arguing of mine that allegedly produced these arguments you are reading now?

[iii] Of course “statement” or “utterance” also turn out to be ambiguous, since

they could refer not to the act of uttering or stating, but to the sentence (or proposition) uttered or stated, in which case the arguments deployed in the first two cases come into play again.

[iv] Some might suggest however that O’Keefe’s act of making an argument¹ and argument¹ are the correlates for argument as process and argument as product. Reply: Though O’Keefe does sometimes use the unfortunate locution – the argument made by the act of making an argument, he also talks about the argument conveyed by the act of making an argument. Indeed, I suspect that what O’Keefe wants to capture by the act of making an argument could just as easily be described as the act of presenting or giving an argument. While the act of presenting or making or giving an argument to you may present or convey an argument to you, it is not the act of producing that argument since it is quite likely the producer of the argument had the argument in mind before it was given or presented to you.

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