ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Root Metaphors And Critical Inquiry Into Social Controversies: Redeeming Stephen Pepper In And For The Study Of Argument

Human communication is an unfinished social and cultural project undertaken anew by each generation. Yet the constellation of controversy on both large and small scales may be discovered when competing understandings of communication come at odds within and across fora. Whatever the particular or local stakes of a controversy, the understandings which ground arguments advancing a particular cause or point of view put at risk by opening up to interest and inspection the modes of communication and styles of thinking which are imbricated in the discussion. This essay examines four root metaphors which ground versions of communication in certain values: mechanism, formism, contextualism, and organicism.

Critical inquiry into controversy takes upon itself the responsibility of engagement, that is of reading what the debate has to say about reason and communication as social practices. Reading a controversy requires a descriptive phase where the world is explicated in its coherence and incoherence, agreements and disagreements, shared assumptions and contested differences by advocates. The reading is an examination of how disagreement and communication rendered possible by the discourses.

One approach taken in recent studies of argument has been to develop the notion of "argument communities, "with overlapping, multiple contextualization of communication conventions, genres and rules. This notion appears to offer a situated view of argument practices compatible with the controversial. But however helpful such work can be in disclosing diversity and combating hidden analytical prejudices, it does not go far enough to assess what is at stake in the communicative engagement. What does the text put at risk?

Critical intervention into controversies is necessary because categories among

reason and communication are themselves put at risk through practice. Root metaphors can open the arc of controversy by offering grounds for the critique of practice inconsistent with the metaphor. Controversies exhibit opposition as a kind of drawing from or occupation of root metaphors. Indeed, the purification of root metaphors, or reduction of argument to a single ground, can itself become an object of controversy. Root metaphors as places for a dynamic of controversy account for institutional arguments insofar as a root metaphor offers a line of argument that can integrate the practices of an institution while leaving open ever greater spaces for opposition. The drawing from alternative groundings gives to controversy its unstable alliances of motives and its combination of "fruitful ambiguity" where people support the same thing but for different reasons. Finally, communication itself is grounded in world hypotheses that employ root metaphors as ways of making acts of discourse for self and others.

The emphasis in this essay upon the relationship between root metaphors and communicative practice differentiates our approach sharply from previous appropriations of Pepper's categories within schemes of interpretation that make the metaphors incommensurable, and thus incapable of intellectual intercourse. White, in particular reduces Pepper's root metaphors from cultural resources to particular forms or notions of historical consciousness that are assumed by, and characterize, the philosophical thinking of particular historians (13). They become tools to classify historiographic specimens

according to their qualities as cognitively responsible discourses. What is at stake for the study of argument practices in the dispute between Pepper's and White's appropriations of root metaphors is the very flexibility of those practices as conceived by the positioning of the metaphors within their theories. White's reduction of the metaphors to mere perspectives of individual historians assumed without further argument makes the metaphors incommensurable in practice. It assumes that the root metaphor explanations in historical narratives can be communicated with no risks of failure. The contextualizing discussions in Pepper's book about the root metaphors opens space for an alternative interpretation of them as sites of production whose ability to shape practice are always in jeopardy because of the interplay of dependence and autonomy in particular institutional disputes.

Root metaphor method explained

To put the method in its most simple form, the root metaphor assumes a connection between a way of talking about the world, a basic metaphor (or master

analogy) and cognitive structures which assist human beings in making informed choices about prudent conduct. Such root metaphors not only inform ordinary discourse but also impart vitality to more refined systems of thought or world hypotheses. How are the most common, half-formed, utterances connected with the most refined, highly structured, enlightened discourses? Moreover, how does one account for what should be said in theory but actually gets said in practice? To explain the answers the method must be explicated in a bit more detail.

In evaluating any particular communication, we may take an extreme attitude, saying that it has no meaning at all, on the one hand, or saying that its meaning is perfectly comprehended, on the other. In the former case, we take the attitude of the skeptic, doubting the meaningfulness of the message. In the extreme case, a skeptic might say communication is not possible. All communication is unreliable, garbled, fickle, untruthful, and so on. But this universal negative assertion against all communication would have to have been communicated, at least to the skeptic herself who wishes to believe nothing. So the skeptic holds all communication in suspension, each message equally good, valid, meaningful, and sensical. Unable to choose what to attend to or how to differentially respond, the skeptic is left to babbling or silence.

The dogmatist maintains that all communication can be understood according to principles which he (and the privileged followers) have special access. Any communication which fits these principles can be understood with certainty. Any part of a communication which does not fit the principles is mere noise. Any elements of a communication which do not conform with the dogmatically asserted elements is an accident or distortion of some kind. Taken to its extreme form, communication is an
epiphenomenon needed only because people have yet to comprehend the truth of the dogmatist’s principles.

Whereas the position of the skeptic defeats itself on its face, the position of the dogmatist is unacceptable, too, but for a different reason. To establish his point, the dogmatist must present a communication process that is self-evident, universally accepted, and unchangeable. Yet until humanity exhausts its future no guarantee can be offered that systems will stay the same. Even logic seems not universal because its basic law of identity is not self-evident to everyone. Moreover, science seems to be a communication system which selects its data in a special structure that does not exhaust the powers of human discovery.

Communication occurs on a middle ground. Skeptical doubt is important because

to communicate we have to test the assertions of others and have our own commitment tested as well. Moreover, it may be the case that some kinds of communication are more suited to the situation than others, or that the one employed is distorted. So doubt is necessary – up to but not including absolute doubt. So, too, is the use of authority. Without mutual recognition of authority it would not be possible to build communication systems which comprise specialized fields like law, literature, and science or social customs like manners, life rituals, and oratorical traditions.
Communication constitutes a sense of complex agreements that permit mutual participation and recognition. Without this authority, language itself would be completely chaotic, rather than enticingly opaque. Utter reliance on authority, of course, vitiates communication by privileging a closed system, one not open to mortals (except, of course, the dogmatist).

The middle ground of communication is comprised of the relationships between ordinary discourse grounded in common sense and refined discourse grounded in specialized fields or forms of life. Common sense is comprised of the ordinary materials and processes of discussion: facts, rules, and values which reflect life experience and folk wisdoms. Communication channels grounded in common sense are developed in personal conversation and in dealing with people as part of a social structure. Like common sense, the channels appear to be solid. I can understand them, and they me. Any problem can be repaired within the communication structure: "I didn't hear you. Let me talk louder. You lied to me. I won't do it again. You promised. No I said I might. Well, it sounded like a promise to me." The principles of repair help the communication system along rather than create a hopeless mess, just as common sense feels it can work itself out of any situation. Ordinary communication channels, too, have a tendency to hold alternatives as either extensions or distortions of the norm. So, for example, television is not viewed as different in kind than people talking. What "intellectuals" say is either reducible to common sense or is just plain silly. Finally, ordinary communication channels are in theory open to anyone but in practice closed to those who vitiate the norms. Like common sense, ordinary communication may be given over to parochialism, provincialism, and restricted interpretation. But what is returned is a certain sense of security or certainty in use. Or is it?

It is well known that however reliable common sense may appear to be at a point

in time, that on reflective thought it is not complete. Common sense seems limited, because it leads to inconsistencies, ambiguities, doubts, and disparities. Just so, ordinary communication channels do not provide sufficient scope or depth for activities that need to be completed through specialization. Sometimes such communication refinements can take the form of manners, permitting such sophisticated speech acts as veiled threats or concealed dislikes. At other times, such specialized activity is subjected to a particular field – its terminology, rule, formats, forums, and tradition. Such specialization can, though it need not, incapacitate an individual from common sense communication. However, the field may make communication more precise, coherent, reliable, complex, as it standardizes the forms and channels of discourse.

As much as a field might try to perfect communication, such a complete rendering is not possible as long as a wide variety of communication values are possible and conflict with one another. Rhetorical analysis studies the way communication values trade off against one another to form specialized communities of discourse, to change them, or to use values to redirect personal and public activity. Well known tradeoffs include saying what is ethical versus that which is effective, flattering an audience versus saying the unpleasant truth, intending to accomplish an end versus adapting to a situation, paying attention to what is openly professed versus privately held, creating inflexible and enduring channels of communication versus creating a domain for change and legitimate expansion or contraction of meanings, equating the real with those parts of messages that can be propositionalized versus assuming the real if just beyond categorical statement, imparting credibility to the standard product of a communication process versus seeking the unique, achieving breadth of coverage in ideas versus architecting depth of commitment, requiring communicators to be authentic versus permitting them to be playful, assuming the sounded to be the message versus paying attention to the unspoken. All communication is constructed out of problems such as these, and the more elaborate a system the more finely balanced will be the tradeoffs. Rhetorical analysis uncovers choices intrinsic to a single discourse or discourse system. Discourse may either be a discussion of the theory of communication or the theory implied by any communication. An implied theory is discovered by asking the question: What does communication look like in order for this particular communication to be comprehended or acted upon (or what is excluded or why)?

Just as the individual refines her understanding of communication, so too society provides fields to refine communication systems pertaining to human forms of life.

But refined systems are not bounded by common sense. Their definition of terms, rules, forums, and formats may be shaped so as to guarantee certain communication values important to specialized functioning. Fields may be stable or unstable, as communication values are altered to redefine the field. Competition between fields may be subjected to common sense and common channels absent any other common ground. And practitioners may engage in hypostatizations, granting to field grounded activity a common-sense like aspect.
What may be embedded in the communication situation is a tension between the alternative grounding of communication practices. On the one side of the ledger, we need common understanding of activity to assure that we can communicate with anyone should the need arise, and as long as we resist perfect segregation by class, age, interest, and belief structure some general rules, language, and habits of communication will be needed. On the other, the very commonality of communication, with its intuited, flexible, changing structures and its habitual uses, seems to afford opportunities for and stand over against specialization, with its promises of precision, reliability, depth, and connection with the traditions surrounding the practices of a form of life. Given temporal, social, and intellectual demands on discourse, one should not expect a perfect, harmonious balance among competing grounds. Given the fertility of human communication systems, it should be expected that the construction, assembly, valuation, and change of grounds for communication ceaselessly take place.

While the root metaphor system acknowledges a plurality of communication systems, it does not fall into the trap of vicious relativism that reduces each practice to the perspective of a person who thinks about communication but can find no grounds supporting participation in a reciprocal, social process. Rather, the root metaphor system suggests basic ways of seeing, feeling about, forming, or processing the world which provide connectives that vitalize communication systems, and suggests a method for appraising the merits of each system emerging from a root metaphor in terms of what it offers and neglects, what it permits us to speak about and where it mandates a margin for silence.
A root metaphor is a shaping analogy. Communication emerges not from brute instrumentality, with a bare depiction of need and object, but from comparison – a grasp of likeness among things, events, and acts imparting general notions of priority, ways to draw attention, and forms of rudimentary communication. Two root metaphors which invite attention but do not create completed means of communicative resolution are animism and mysticism.

Animism emerges from the feeling that there is something more to each particular than meets the eye; the world is alive with possibility as each place is a habitation for the spirit. The problem with animism is that it cannot go beyond the particular to suggest a way of cognitively assimilating the principles informing the dispersion of the animate. One moves from life to life, helped by magic but haunted by demons.

Mysticism emerges from the feeling that there is a unity to all particulars, or rather that all is really a manifestation of one. Seeing one, particularity of principle and conduct is submerged in the hidden but revealed all-embracing, cosmologically unbounded spirit. The problem with mysticism is that it cannot suggest cognitive modes for differentiating among particulars, such as the accuracy of knowledge in the specific case. Seeing the world as self-contained unified whole lends a certain amount of security in
belief even as it makes for a brittle system, unable to respond to the problems raised by other root metaphors.

Cultural resources make available four root metaphors, each of which has informed and continues to inform certain discourse communities and communication practices. Pepper suggests (with a neatness that is somewhat suspicious, and perhaps belied by his later efforts at another metaphor, selectivism) that the four adequate root metaphors are so in number because each represents an defensible tradeoff between scope and precision, analysis and synthesis. Whether these are all of the root metaphors or whether these combine according to yet another principle of construction are questions which need not detain us at this point. Rather let us examine each in turn and suggest relevant implications for communication and reason in argument.

Mechanism.

Pepper identifies mechanism with theories of materialism. The mechanistic root metaphor stems from the intuition that the world and all its activities operate like a machine. In such a world, what is really real is that which is present to the senses and responds to law-like regularity deduced from a reading of the forces of nature. Mechanism suggests that the only reliable means of knowledge is that which can be derived from observation and experimentation and exhorts the knower to strive mightily to suspend belief in favor of strict observation, reporting, and hypothesis.

Note that the assumption of the metaphor is that language is not an essential constituent of human culture, or to be precise, language is merely a

representation that stands for reality and often between precise, reliable, unbiased, and demonstrable data and danda. Language prejudices people and reflects a slipshod way of thinking about the world that can only be ended if a more refined symbol system is developed to handle concepts which predict the necessary methods of controlling material conditions. Note, too, that the use of language may constitute the controlling conditions of society. Hence the mechanist would place a high evaluation on how language influences reality rather than what is said or its asserted content.

When mechanistic outlooks shape perspectives on and performances of argument, they can become controversial. Criticisms have been lodged against Whately's view that "The finding of suitable arguments to prove a given point, and the skilful arrangement of them, may be considered as the immediate and proper province of Rhetoric, and of that alone (39)." The shotgun marriage of Aristotle's Rhetoric and nineteenth century views of faculty psychology produced a notion of how arguments are machined into speeches.
Training regimes for written and oral argument production in American classrooms during the early twentieth century were spawned from this notion. The speaker uses arguments which are found in available materials which work according to the laws of persuasion on the mental conditions of the audience. Rhetorical analysis assists the reconstruction of these means of production, from invention, to arrangement, to stylizing, memorization, and delivery. What is the effect? Note that the communication values assumed in this model suggest that all good communication is intentional, influences multitudes, is a product of training in technique, is historically well received, and so on.

Controversies ensue when certain kinds of argumentative performances seem to be systematically undervalued in social institutions influenced by mechanistic conceptions of practice. As Palczewski notes, "feminists contend that argument as a process has been steeped in adversarial assumptions and gendered expectations" (164). Her survey reveals a hostility to mechanism when its emphasis upon influence and persuasion comes at the expense of other values, such as authenticity and coherence. The mechanistic model has difficulty making room for "ineffective forms of support," such as the sharing of personal experience, that might be good nevertheless in the sense of exhibiting an essential insight into the human condition (162). Moreover, the model cannot account precisely for the effects of an argument because other elements influence

the receptivity, attention, and long-term allegiances of an audience. Palczewski reviews feminist work that interrogates standards of objectivity and credibility as grounded in "metaphors based on masculine experience" that are inappropriate for audiences that may bring different experiences, beliefs, values, and reasoning styles to a site of argument (165-66). These critiques seem to proceed from root metaphors, as we shall discover, more characteristic of immanent formism or organicism, and stimulate further controversy among feminist scholars.

Formism.

Pepper identifies formism with theories of discourse that recognize pattern or similarity as the grounds for acting in and understanding the world. Whereas materialism and mechanism emphasize the fact and controlling law as the really real of the world, formism begins with pattern as the really real and views the particular as accidental or incidental to the grand scheme. Whereas mechanism is integrative insofar as it draws all facts together in a theory of causal relationship between law and phenomena, formism is dispersive insofar as it finds in any particular and unlimited number of forms which it may stand as the exemplar of.

Formism is a particularly productive view of communication, for each encounter is suggestive of principles which help shape another. To this world language is always underdetermined, that is, any person is free to see in communication an invitation to participate in a form as yet undefined by the world. In contrast, mechanism is overdetermined, because any communication has one and only one appropriate set of functions which can be known to a limited degree through precise reconstruction. Mechanism permits us to fashion a communication system that is a durable, reliable, certified workaday tool. Formism permits us to engage in a communication of depth, unity, beauty, and elegance. Standardization, control (in the sense of easy reproduction), causal intent – all are values of a mechanistic system and bete noirés to a formal communication system.

Formism gives rise to a dual view of communication. Immanent formism suggests that patterns emerge from the similarity of argument structures. Rather than account for the particulars of given transactions like a mechanist might to gain data supporting the laws, the formist might look at the similarities characteristic of many arguments across time. Toulmin's theories of argument (1958; 1979) and argument fields (1972) participate in immanent formism. Toulmin examines specimens and processes of argument across a wide range of specialized communities, including law, science, art, politics, and business, as well as in everyday interaction.

He discovers that arguments in these spheres have enough of a family resemblance to form a model of argument structure that has field invariant elements: claims, grounds, warrants, backings, qualifiers, rebuttals, and reservations. Further, these elements provide support in ordinary forms of life for alternatives to strict standards of logical proof on issues engaged by practical reason.

Controversies arise when the application of the immanent forms to argument pedagogy appears to mask the materiality of power and knowledge in communicative relations. Proceeding from an position that draws upon mechanistic conceptions of influence for its possibility, Schroeder's critique looks to influence behind argument:

A person who can argue coherently and cogently commands a considerable amount of authority in our culture, and such a person is considered to be educated, to have power, and to be capable of taking his or her requisite place in society. The fact that these powerful implications may not be as obvious makes the skills of effective persuasion, and their relationship to knowledge and power, more important (95).

For a number of reasons, Toulmin's description of argument forms is said to be ill-equipped to deal with the material realities of practice. First, his field-invariant elements of argument are imprecise in ways that suggest that their selection constitutes an insidious exercise of subjectivity. For example, Toulmin identifies backing as a necessary element, but assumes, rather than considering, social legitimation of the backing (see also Goodnight 1993). This threatens to drag the entire model into a relativistic morass. Toulmin also ignores the rhetorical elements of the argumentative situation, the affective and stylistic considerations. These exclusions are the key to opening up the "wider context in which the actual negotiations of power transpire (Schroeder 103). Second, Toulmin's model has trouble accounting for the exploitation of its elements in actual argumentative practice over time. In Toulmin's model, changing the argument field (relevant sources of warrants and backing) changes the data available to support the claim. Rather than reconsidering their arguments in light of new data, students of Toulmin are encouraged to change their ascribed field and ignore evidence that might disconfirm their arguments. Schroeder claims that the experience of composition teachers with the essays of prejudiced students confirms this practice (101-102). Third, his description hypostasizes certain elements as

communicatively significant categories. These categories carry no communicative weight. They provide no basis for evaluation of the arguments presented. The consensus of logicians is that Toulmin's categories add nothing to what the concepts and forms of formal logic already accomplish. They believe that Toulmin has ignored work that logicians have done in the area of warrants and backing and they dismiss his narrow view of the scope of arguments to which formal logic can speak. Toulmin's text gives us new words for validity that are vague, obscure and confusing (Schroeder 100). These are problems of precisionthat Pepper believes are endemic to world hypotheses grounded in immanent formism.

Transcendent formism represents the other face of formal analysis. Studying argument fields in search of immanent structures is an avenue to investigate the habits of practitioners. The search for norms of superior argument finds patterns transcending mere notions of practice in hidden but puissant development of form. Whether "good reasons" are grounded in some grand entelechial pattern of human re-cognition and linguistic enactment or in half-forgotten origins of self and society, these recurrent designs make manifest human life and meaningful human communication. While the "source" of a conflict may not intend mythic enactment, still the plot plays out in ways grasped by those whose eyes are fixed on the more enduring qualities of discourse.

Brockriede's perspective of arguers as lovers, as well as Fisher's logic of good reasons (1978) and his narrative paradigm of argument (1984, 1987), mingle with the root metaphor of transcendent formism. Brockriede grounds communicative norms in an essential association of attitudes, intents, and consequences with three quintessentially human acts: rape, seduction, and love. He argues, for example, that rape entails an attitude of seeing a human being as an object or inferior, an intent to manipulate or violate the other, and a consequence of harm (2-3). Fisher grounds his communicative norms in a definition of human essence stressing valued values: "Humans as rhetorical beings are as much valuing as they are reasoning animals" (1987, 105). Good reasons are good because they are inextricably bound to a value, to a conception of the good. Fisher's position frees argument from specific structures or situations of influence; argument can be found in nondiscursive modes of communication such as drama or film. The connection to value generates standards of argument evaluation such as fact, relevance, consistency, coherence, and transcendent issue (1987, 110).

Unsurprisingly, controversy ensues when essences are suspected of hiding critical biases and exclusions. Like its immanent counterpart this transcendent version of

form suffers from restrictions of precision. Transcendent views of human communication seem the products of subjective pronouncement, a fitting of the facts together to retell the same stories rather than an attention to the unique qualities of communication. Just as mechanistic theories have difficulty in accounting for nonstandardized products, except as accident or breakdown, so formistic theories have difficulty in accounting for the precise version of enactment and the unique, unrepeatable events that comprise a particular communication.

Blythin reviews Brockriede's definitions and observes that terms such as manipulation, charm, or tricks are ambiguous in ordinary usage, and that differentiating love from rape or seduction according to intent is very difficult because there are no clear descriptive verbs for love (179). Rowland analyzes three argumentative works within Fisher's narrative paradigm and notes numerous difficulties in attempting to apply standards of narrative fidelity and probability to the unique characteristics of these texts (49-51). Transcendent values cannot admit of more precision than the form permits.

Contextualism.

Whereas mechanism examines any situation to determine the particular manifestation of prior laws, contextualism emphasizes the determining qualities of context in defining any given situation. Whereas formism examines the controlling element of pattern in universalizing human experience or at least generalizing the nature of artisanship from artifacts of a culture, contextualism emphasizes the human tendency to enact a form and negate it simultaneously, to solve one problem and create another, to affirm a meaning with one breath and take it away with another. The worlds of mechanism and formism are secured by appeal to prior laws or forms. Contextualism finds communication self-constituting because it continually confronts people with the necessity of addressing audiences created in and through symbolic activity.

Theories of communication grounded in contextualism are more or less subversive. Subversion is rendered possible because the first principle of this paradigm is that communication itself is a process of emphasis and deemphasis, of selection and deflection, of positioning oneself to uphold order and shifting support in case the need arises. There is nothing beyond the process of communication that stands as a court of appeal. So one may either affirm the symbolic order, playing out the roles that are requested with appropriate dignity, or find less reverent expressions of incongruities that somehow are more

comportable to the context at hand.

Farrell's theories of social knowledge (1976, 1978, 1993) and his iscussion of rhetorical constituents of argumentative form (1977) illustrate the operation of a contextual root metaphor. Rhetorical argument presupposes a context in which audiences share knowledge of "conceptions of symbolic relationships among problems, persons, interests, and actions," implying preferable ways of choosing among possible actions. This consensus is attributed to audiences through the decision to participate in argumentation. But this knowledge only actualizes itself "through the decision and action of an audience" (1976, 4), and depends upon intersubjective relationships among arguers and audiences.

This situationally-grounded knowledge opens the concept of validity beyond correspondence between words and things or verified predictions that previous audiences would choose to believe an argument. Social knowledge must be developed within particular sites of choice and avoidance. According to Farrell, nonetheless, rhetorical validity has certain qualities to be located in "the complicity of an audience in argumentative development, the probable relationship between rhetorical argument and judgment, and the normative force of knowledge presumed and created by rhetorical argument" (1977, 142). The arguer may need to generate the materials that make such a consciousness possible for a particular audience (1977, 145).

Contextualism finds its limits at the margins. Controversy arises at the point where contextualist views of communication attempt to articulate differences that separate contexts. It may be the case that scientific research will discover that alleged differences in communicative practices are illusionary and misguided. Carleton criticizes Farrell for constructing differences between social and technical knowledge when, by Carleton's lights, rhetoric is central in all processes of coming-to-know (317). Nor can we be sure that Farrell's effort to preserve the possibility of judgment in rhetorical art can survive advances in the technological capabilities of mass mediated message reproduction. It may be the case that materialist systems of communication produce messages that destroy contextual interpretation, empty content, and keep social groups attentive through prepackaged diversions. The individualized mode of variable response is precisely what is compelled. The modern communication industry has long abandoned standards of common sense, morality, and reasonableness in producing its stimuli. What makes this indictment important is that such powerful, systemic cooption of the production of communication strikes where the model is weakest,

the selection and evaluation of material. In the contextual world, no discourse is really more important than another. All go into the hopper of communication. Without the power to discriminate between authentic, truthful, or valid communication practices and their opposites, contextualism reduces itself to just another perspective by its own principles. What it gains in breadth, in showing the communicative aspects of human activity, it seems to lose in µdepth or durability as a position of critique.

Organicism.

Organicism is like contextualism in that it posits no reality outside that which is unfolding in human activity. Unlike contextualism, it does not emphasize knowledge, indeterminate change, attenuated incongruities, or subversive interpretation of discourse. Rather, it seeks integration of all communication practices into a single congruent totality. Whereas contextualism multiplies conflicting motives and satisfactions, organicism seeks to realize in the motion of the dynamic a moment of convergence where contradictions are unified into a realized whole. In contextualism, society and individuals alter communication patterns much like a ship tacks, going this way and then that, upholding social order, then inveighing against it when the occasion arises. In organicism, communication is more like the recognition of an epiphemic moment where the tendency of what appeared to be contradictory processes or messages converge into a unity which illuminates the horizon of human meaning.

Organicism shares some fundamental assumptions with transcendent formism. Both disparage "common sense" and elevate the "hidden unities" which characterize the communication system or artifact. Both see a unity between discourse and a principle of expression, of shaping discourse into patterns. However, whereas formism permits interpretation of the world and its particular exchanges in a variety of ways, organicism demands apperception of a single, unified, purposeful whole. Of course, such a demand for authentic discourse is antithetical to contextualism. Contextualism democratizes the groundings of discourse by not privileging any basic element (who, what, when, where, or why), organicism seeks to disclose the controlling element in all communication.

Johnstone's vision of argument as a defining feature of the human condition illustrates how the organicist metaphor organizes appearances and makes distinctions. Argument creates the self, which distinguishes argument from nonargument: "Immediate experience makes no claims and raises no questions. It is only when action and belief become subject to argument that an opacity is

introduced into experience – the opacity which is the self. There is no self for immediate experience. There is a self only when there is risk" (6).

Nonargumentative forms of control, including the use of rhetoric, do not treat the other as a person; this distinguishes rhetoric from argumentation (6,7). Philosophical argumentation is an archetype for argument practice, as it deals with issues of knowledge and morality, recognizes the existence of counterarguments and the necessity of taking the risk of responding to them (8,9). Finally, all valid philosophical arguments are necessarily *ad hominem*, or based upon an incompatibility (tautology, obscurity, ambiguity, or inconsistency) of a statement with the intentions or motives of the person who issues it, and therefore can be distinguished for purposes of assessing truth value from the requirements of formally valid propositions (see Pieretti, 134-38).

Organistic theories of human communication are most compatible with phenomenology. In the movement of experience from the ordinary lifeworld to that of refined theoretical explanation to reflective cognition of the relation of practice and theory, the unity of discourse is discovered. This unity is disclosed even when the barriers between such worlds suggest irreconcilable, incommensurable, and permanently secured distinctions.

But the unity is purchased at the expense of excluding behaviors that do not fit within the necessary qualities of the self, and opposition to these restrictions of scope inherent within organistic description fuels controversy. Brutian complains that Johnstone excludes important considerations, such as factual support and the law of noncontradiction, from argumentative validity because he is too eager to separate philosophy from science and politics. This encourages irresponsible communicative practices in these other spheres of activity (84-87). Perelman disagrees with the limitation of philosophical refutation to ad hominem approaches and the exclusion of rhetoric. "We believe in the possibility of external criticism, with reference to generally admitted theses, which are explicitly or implicitly in opposition to those of the philosopher (136)."

Perelman prefers a theory of argumentation that relies upon a transcendental formistic notion of universal audience and finds a place for argument that increases adherence to certain theses. In particular, his approach allows for argumentation in all phases of scientific endeavor outside of measurement and simple observation (137).

Conclusion

Root metaphors provide orientations that help us see unity and difference in our

thinking about argument. Although Pepper talks about the metaphors in terms of tradeoffs among epistemological links between theory and practice, the metaphors also point more broadly to the very practices and repair of communication in which our arguments are invented and interpreted. That these models have some power is testified to their use in otherwise quasi-autonomous and specialized fields of reasoning. That the models cross disciplinary boundaries and specialized fields is rendered evident from parallel development and interfield borrowing. No matter how powerful the metaphor, however, it should be noted contra White that the metaphors offer less a form of consciousness than a place for argument. This paper has found within the purview of each metaphor a field of controversy, and it is with the study of these fields that we learn the limits and capacities of our own makings of communication.

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ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Good Argumentation Without Resolution

1. Introduction

Three lines of inquiry have converged on a single conception of the function, end or aim of argumentation: that argumentation is the rational method for resolving differences of opinion. This conception has of course received its clearest expression in the works of our conference hosts, the Amsterdam school of pragma-dialectics. "Inspired by Karl Popper's critical rationalism" for scientific inquiry (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Henkemans et al. 1996 ("*FAT*"): 274), the pragma-dialecticians have grounded their project in an ideal model of argumentation, the critical discussion. Critical discussions serve to resolve disagreements in a way that is "recognized by both parties as correct, justified, and rational" (van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson & Jacobs 1993 ("*RAD*"): 25). A standpoint is advanced; criticisms are raised against it and responses developed; when the opponent is convinced to accept or the proponent convinced to withdraw the standpoint, the process concludes. In the pragma-dialectical view, argumentation is to be evaluated according to its contribution to the critical discussion, that is, its contribution to resolving the disagreement. Rules of argumentative engagement are justified because they secure this goal and particular argumentative moves excluded as fallacies because they hinder it (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1992 ("*ACF*"): 104).

The same conception has emerged within the tradition of scholarship associated with the teaching and practice of collegiate debate in the United States, and especially in the work of Douglas Ehninger. Ehninger starts from the Deweyian notion that we best solve social problems through group discussion and argues that this ideal encompasses also the more adversarial procedure of debate. Debate too is a critical – that is, reflective, reason-actualizing – and cooperative method for settling differences (Ehninger 1958: 27). "The function of debate,"

Ehninger affirms, “is to enable men to make collective choices and decisions critically when inferential questions become subjects for dispute” (Ehninger & Brockriede 1963: 15). This is a normative, not an empirical, claim. If debate does not always resolve disagreements, it is a result of human failings, not of a weakness in the method; participants in a debate must discipline themselves to meet its strictures, not use it as an instrument to achieve victory (*Ibid*.: 17-9).

A third line of inquiry has been pursued by political theorists swayed by Habermas (cf. Habermas 1996, Cohen, 1989, Manin 1987). Seeking to establish the legitimacy of democratic political institutions, some theorists have shifted from looking for principles to which all rational citizens must consent to looking for procedures through which such a universal and rational consensus can be attained. These, they agree, are procedures of speech, and in particular, the procedures of deliberation. Though other speech acts are involved in deliberation – for example, speech securing the free flow of information throughout society – it is clear that one of the central activities of deliberation is arguing. The deliberation theorists thus implicitly adopt a conception of argumentation in which argumentation ideally performs the function of rationally and therefore legitimately resolving differences of opinion.

One reason these three inquiries have converged toward what I will call the standard view of argumentation is that the standard view is correct. Argumentation can indeed rationally resolve differences of opinion. But we should notice that it is equally correct to say that argumentation does all sorts of other things as well. The U.S. debate tradition, for example, has followed Aristotle (*Rhetoric*, 1.1 1354b) in claiming that argumentation: contributes to “the revelation of truth and the establishment of justice” (Laycock & Scales 1904: 1); “induc[es] people to believe as we do” (Laycock & Spofford 1906: 6); “demonstrate[s] the superior talent of one debater over another” (Shaw 1922: 3-4); “teaches one to think for himself, ... encourages thorough thinking, ... [and] produces broad-mindedness and toleration” (Shurter 1917: 2). Not only that, argumentation can help us to succeed on the job (O’Neill & McBurney 1932: 2).

To pick out disagreement resolution as *the* function is to say that argumentation not only can but must do this; that if it does not, it is either bad argumentation or no argumentation at all. This stronger claim would seem to need a defense. Some argumentation is aimed to rationally resolve differences of opinion, but need all? In this paper I attempt to challenge the standard view by laying out an instance of

argumentation – the 1991 U.S. Congressional debate on the Persian Gulf War – that is both conspicuously good and conspicuously not aimed at resolving disagreement. I suggest, therefore, that there are legitimate goals for argumentation beyond seeking resolution. What might these goals be? In the final pages, I sketch the view of argumentation that seems to emerge from the Gulf War debate itself, and propose a conception of argumentation as showing.

Let me close this introduction with a brief defense of my method of offering "empirical" proof of a "normative" claim. The standard view is properly that argumentation ought to resolve disagreements rationally; this is a statement of an ideal – of a norm, not of the normal. No collection of instances, we might think, should be able to move this norm, even as the frequency of lying is no argument against the principle that lying is wrong. This objection, however, misconceives the relationship between the norms and the practice of argumentation. Argumentation, like any practice – and not like lying – is in part constituted by a more or less articulated sense of the good or goods achievable through that practice (cf. MacIntyre 1984: 187-90, Walzer 1983:
6-10, Taylor 1985a & 1985b). Ordinary arguers, in other words, are of necessity constantly engaged in evaluating their own and others' argumentation. The role of the argumentation theorist is to render the goods aimed at more fully articulate; to catalog and analyze available strategies and techniques; to educate practitioners; and to critique and revise (or "engineer") the practice to ensure it more reliably achieves the good (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.1-2, 1094a-b; *RAD*: 178-83). The practice itself is thus the unavoidable starting point for any inquiry. The evidence of the practice – both the way it is carried out and the self-understanding of the participants – must be presumed to be correct: that is, it must be taken as correct until it is shown to be in error. As the pragma-dialecticians have said:

Empirical research can provide an important basis for evaluating the validity of normative models of argumentation. . . . Problem-solving validity depends on the adequacy of the model as a description of effective practice – its ability to discriminate good argumentation from poor. . . . [T]o the extent that actual argumentative practice departs from the standards [of the normative model] but results in intuitively acceptable procedures, we should be skeptical of the model's problem-solving validity. Conventional validity depends on the fit between the model and accepted notions of reasonableness, rationality, and so on. To the

extent that actual discussants can be shown to reject the standards of the model or to accept other stands, we should be skeptical of the model's conventional validity (*RAD*: 23).

An instance of good argumentation without resolution, as evidenced by both the argumentation and the understanding of the arguers, should therefore at least require the proponents of the standard view to come forward and defend it.

2. Good argumentation without resolution

After Iraqi troops overran Kuwait in August, 1990, the international community swiftly deployed forces to block further advance into Saudi Arabia and imposed economic sanctions to prod Iraq to withdraw. By November, with his re-election secured, U.S. President George Bush began moving toward a more aggressive policy. Bush sent more U.S. troops to the Persian Gulf and obtained from the United Nations approval for the use of "all necessary" – that is, military – means if diplomatic efforts did not succeed by January 15, 1991.

When its session opened on January 3, 1991, the new Congress thus found itself faced with a two week deadline. After some preliminary maneuvering, matching resolutions were introduced into the Senate and House of Representatives, one supporting the President's plan, one calling for continued reliance on economic sanctions. A vote was scheduled for around midday on Saturday, January 12. What else did Congress need to do?

2.1 Argumentation

In the first week of the session, the Senators and Representatives – whom I will call promiscuously the Members – spent quite a bit of time talking about the talk they needed to undertake prior to deciding on the resolutions. Throughout, they referred to the task they faced as "debate." This term, sanctioned by both the U.S. Constitution and Senate and House Rules, outstrips all others by several orders of magnitude.

It seems not untoward to identify such debate as what has been called a "species" of the "genus" argumentation (*FAT*: 52, 193). Certainly the U.S. tradition has assumed this since its birth in George Pierce Baker's 1895 debate textbook, *The Principles of Argumentation.* The pragma-dialecticians apparently agree; their ordinary language definitions of "argumentation" list "debate" as a synonym (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984 ("*SAAD*"): 29-30). Debate therefore seems one recognizable procedure for engaging in the process of argumentation, coordinate with the mediation examined in *Reconstructing Argumentative Discourse* or the

philosophical dialogue modelled in Aristotle's *Topics*.

The evidence of Congress' talk itself supports this conclusion; the Gulf War debate is manifestly "reconstructible" as argumentation without distortion (cf. ACF: 36, RAD: 88-9). Members debated the resolutions beginning Thursday, January 10th, through a marathon session on the 11th – with the House meeting from 9 a.m. to 4:08 a.m. the next day, and the Senate from 9:30 a.m. to 2:39 a.m. – and in a final period before a series of votes on the afternoon of Saturday, the 12th. In this debate, each of the stages of argumentation predicted by the pragma-dialectical model is clearly articulated (cf. e.g. FAT: 281-2).

The resolutions themselves were designed to accomplish the "confrontation stage," ensuring that there was an "adequate range of specific policy options to be debated" (U.S. Congress 1991: H142). In addition, many of the Members began their speeches by identifying the points on which all allegedly agreed – primarily, that Iraq must be driven from Kuwait – and then by isolating the points at issue, in a further instantiation of the "confrontation stage."

The "opening stage" was also achieved at the beginning of the debate, when, after some behind-the-scenes maneuvering, the leadership presented what they explained was an "agreement on a procedure which would permit us to debate this issue in a full and open manner that combines both the opportunity for all Senators to fully express themselves on the subject" (S98, H87). This initial agreement had to be renegotiated later, since the traditional method of distributing debate time between the parties did not accommodate a third position: Democrats supporting the Republican President's plan; but after a few missteps, this too was accomplished (H142, H212).

The "argumentation stage" itself occupied most of the three days of debate. Throughout, Members frequently referred to at least some aspect of their talk as "arguing" or "argument." Most prominently, Members took argument to be what others were doing. They would say, for example, that "some have argued," or that "the other side is arguing" (H162, H246, H377, S124, S287, S296, S388, H133); or more strongly that they "do not agree with the arguments," or even "reject categorically the argument" (H273, S231). But occasionally a Member would use a performative formula such as "I argue" to label his or her own speech act (S259, S287). And they were right to do so. Much of what they said has a perfectly recognizable argumentative form, as in the following typical "unit" of discourse:

At most, 5,000 Kuwaitis have died since the August 2 invasion of that country. A war to liberate Kuwait would certainly kill many more Americans than this

number. And it certainly would involve many more Kuwaiti deaths than have occurred so far. Let us not destroy Kuwait or thousands of young American lives in a premature effort to save Kuwait (S62)

Here the first statement is advanced in an attempt to justify the next two, which in turn are advanced in an attempt to justify the last (cf. *SAAD*: 43). Thus at the core of the debate we find, as the Members themselves found, argument.

Finally, a "concluding stage" was arranged in advance in which both Chambers made their decision roughly simultaneously through a series of votes.

In these three days Members engaged in debate, following the predicted stages of argumentation and deploying numerous arguments. It seems safe to conclude, therefore, that what they were doing was indeed argumentation. But how should this argumentation be evaluated?

2.2 Good argumentation

The Members approached their debate with care. One by one as they stood to speak they averred that this was the most important, most significant, most difficult, solemn, grave, profound, serious, momentous, sober, somber, consequential, tough, historic, thought-provoking and heavy issue, debate, decision and vote they would ever encounter in their careers. The venerable Senator Byrd termed it "the most important vote" of the 12,823 he had cast in 39 years of Congressional service (S357). Senator Wellstone, delivering his maiden speech, concurred: this was "the most momentous decision that any political leader would ever have to make" (S107).

By quantitative measures, the debate lived up to the significance of the occasion. 93 of the 99 Senators present, 268 of the 433 Representatives participated; the more than 30 hours of speeches set a modern record for the House. The qualitative conclusion must be the same. Consider first the assessments of the participants in the debate. Only two Members in three long days of debate offered significant criticisms of other arguers or their arguing (H214, H261, H364). Otherwise, the Members were unanimous in their self-congratulation. The debate had been thoughtful, powerful, eloquent, serious, solemn and mature, with little rancor or party spirit but great civility (H154, H227, H329, H374, H394, S237, S305, S391, S392). It demonstrated that "reasonable men can differ . . . and do it reasonably" (H154). It continued the high tradition of Congressional debate and was a fine example of democracy in action (H223, H278, H406, S391). Participating in it, the Members felt proud (H174, H313, H361, H379, H399, H443, H466, S259, S287). As one commented: "These have been proud days for

this House. The debate has been high caliber, it has been formative, dignified, and made us in my opinion healthier as a nation and as a body" (H362).

Those looking on agreed. In the days following the final vote, newspapers around the country (23 in my collection) editorialized on the high quality of the debate, commenting as the Members themselves had on its seriousness, thoughtfulness, thoroughness, honesty, eloquence, depth of feeling, civility and lack of partisanship. In a widely syndicated column, David Broder wrote:

One thing on which everyone could agree in the tense hours leading up to the deadline for war in the Persian Gulf was that Congress – that familiar whipping boy – had dealt with the issue of authorizing the use of force in a manner befitting the gravity of the subject. The weekend debate was civil and somber. Senators and representatives dealt respectfully with each others' arguments and showed compassion for the anguish even their opponents felt. . . . From freshmen casting their first votes to the most senior members, there was – for all the anguish over the consequences – a real sense of pride that their Congress had met the responsibility the Constitution laid at its door (Broder 1991).

E.J. Dionne expressed the same sentiment in another national column, seconding Kathleen Hall Jamieson's assessment that the debate was "'extraordinary'" (Dionne 1991). "Americans got the most comprehensive and balanced discussion of all the issues that we could have at the most timely moment," concurred veteran Congress-watcher Norman Ornstein (Ornstein 1991).

I will refrain from extending this list to pick up the endorsements of more local commentators. Although there were negative voices, especially among those who deeply disagreed with the outcome (Bennet 1991, Ireland 1991, *The Progressive* 1991), the consensus among the participants and onlookers was that the congressional debate on the Gulf War was a good one. Whatever argumentation is supposed to do, Congress did that conspicuously well. Was that to resolve a disagreement?

2.3 Without resolution

In planning for the debate, the Members indeed looked forward to resolving the issue of whether to use force in the Persian Gulf; "the time for decision is now," they tell themselves (S40). How was this resolution to be achieved? Through voting.

It is not that the Members lacked other ways of reaching a collective decision. On procedural matters, for example, they operate as if it were necessary or proper to achieve consensus (cf. H86-7, S98). But not for the substantive question itself;

there, a vote is required. The issues, as one Member insisted, “need not only to be debated but resolved, voted upon” (H41). The Senate, says its majority leader, should “debate [the resolutions] thoroughly and then vote” (S99; cf. H41, H86, S64, S99, S139, S164).

A vote, however, while it settles the dispute does not resolve the disagreement (cf. *RAD*: 34 n. 2). Although they may now be equally committed to the decision taken, the outvoted minority need not and probably does not accept the decision as right. Since the Members understood that their debate would close not with consensus but with a vote, they could not have been expecting their argumentation to resolve their differences of opinion.

This objection to the standard model is of some generality, for deliberative assemblies since those of ancient Greece have characteristically taken decisions by voting. The theorist holding the standard model might respond by portraying voting as a sort of necessary, if not entirely happy, adaptation of argumentation to the environment of policy decision-making. In this view, an assembly would try to get as far toward agreement as possible through argumentation, and then submit to a vote in order to resolve the issue in a timely fashion. One’s vote, after all, is supposed to be based on one’s standpoint; voting because of pecuniary interest, party affiliation and so on is supposed to be an abuse. So debate may contribute directly to informing the standpoints accepted by members of the assembly, and thus indirectly to the resolution of the issue accomplished by the vote.

This slightly revised model does not, however, match the Member’s own conception of the function of their debate.**[i]** In their very frequent explicit descriptions of the process they had used in making their decisions, Members recited the factors which informed their votes. The Congressional debate stood as only one among these influences, and not the most prominent. In rough order of salience, the Members claimed to have made up their minds by talking with constituents (H214, H307, H332, S116, S245, S288, S327, S331, S334, S377); visiting the troops or the region (H214, H313, H341, H408, S245, S285, S331, S377); listening to debate, now and over the last few months (H214, H305, H307, H408, S42, S334, S385); attending to testimony at Congressional hearings (H341, H408, S124, S333, S334, S377); praying (H332, H339, S146, S376); talking or listening to the President and his aides (H214, H307, S331); reading, especially accounts in the media (H366, H371, S334); discussing the matter with staff (H366, S116), or with fellow Members (S245, S331), or with experts (S123, S245), or with friends and families (H366). But all these sources served at best to

educate or inform; the real locus of decision was not without but within. The Members relied, they said, on their internal organs: heart (H118, H148, H222, H331, H341, H421, H474, H476, S146, S334, S376), gut (H341, S108). They searched their souls (H 214, H339, S122, S146, S168). Their decision was an exercise of judgment (H118, H331, H341, H332, H347, H371, S137, S150, S167, S275, S285, S309, S327, S334) or – to stress its independence from partisan considerations – an exercise of conscience (H142, H144, H148, H149, H217, H255, H270, H331, H341, H364, H449, H475, S42, S138, S168, S169, S245, S308, S313, S332, S334, S392).**[ii]** Judgment in turn was conditioned by "history, philosophy, and cultural ties, . . . religious and patriotic convictions" (S137), and by experience, especially experience in prior wars (H217, H249, H345, S245, S275, S285, S327, S334). What we have here is a conception in which the dispute is resolved through voting and vote is decided by each voter, autonomously. This is a decision-making process the pragma-dialectician would call "internalized" and "unsocialized" – "a process whereby a single individual privately draws a conclusion" (*RAD*, 12; cf. *FAT* 276-7) – a process at least partially decoupling dispute resolution from the "externalized" and "socialized" practice of argumentation. To put it simply, in the Members' own view the argumentation of the debate did not extensively contribute to the commitments on which they based their votes.

The evidence of the debate itself confirms that the Members' self-understanding was substantially accurate. The debate could have done little to inform the participants' standpoints because these standpoints were manifestly formed before the debate began. Members – even those speaking early in the debate – were able to announce the votes they would make; none declared themselves undecided, and none altered their decision between speaking and voting. The Members were also sufficiently aware of each others' views to foresee the eventual outcome. As early as January 4th, there were prophecies "that almost to a certainty the President will be granted . . . authority" to make war (S48; cf. H154, H199, H230, H269, H474, S144, S237, S248, S266, S328, S334, S336, S360). By the start of the second day of debate a leading opponent of the President's plan admitted "I expect I will not be on the prevailing side" (S191). Commentators agreed; the result, they thought, had been a foregone conclusion" (Bennet 1991; cf. Isaacs 1991, Ireland 1991). The debate seems to have changed no minds.

The dispute in this case was resolved by voting; the votes were determined

largely apart from and in advance of the argumentation. What we have in the Gulf War debate is thus an instance of argumentation which was good although it could not have had the function of resolving disagreement and was not understood by the participants to do so. The standard view of argumentation – the view that the function of argumentation is to resolve differences of opinion – cannot account for this. But if this good argumentation was not necessarily aimed at resolving disagreement, what was it for?

3. The function of argumentation in the Gulf War debate

The Members understood why they were debating: they were debating because it was their responsibility to debate. Some cited the U.S. Constitution as the source of this duty, although others admitted that under the Constitution debate was more accurately a privilege or right than a responsibility (H131, H331). Instead, many Members held themselves responsible for the debate because they would be held responsible for their votes. "We have a personal responsibility," one explained. "We are decisionmakers in the most powerful country in the world. We have a personal responsibility in this particular conflict, for each death and each casualty" (H255; cf. H166, H181, H204, H243, H250, S332.). Because of this responsibility, each Member would have to account for his or her vote to those whom that vote would affect. In a common *topos*, the Members pictured to themselves what this would be like; for example:

My colleagues, I am haunted by one thought about what will happen if we vote to endorse immediate war today. I am haunted by the calls I will receive – calls that you will receive – from bereaved grief stricken parents asking us to explain just why their son or their daughter died in the sands of the Arabian desert (H354).

But even as the Members would be responsible in the future to give an account of why they had taken the decisions they did, they were, they recognized, also responsible now – at least in the face of apparent doubts and objections.

This was for them the function of the debate: it allowed Members to fulfill their responsibility to account for their decision by making their private decision-making process accessible to others – or in the eloquent phrase they sometimes used, by speaking their minds (H128, H302). The goal was not to induce others to accept the same conclusion; indeed, one Member explicitly disavowed any effort "to convince." Instead, he was only "trying to explain how [he] came to [his] own decision" in the "privacy" of his "heart" (S389; cf. H441, S259, S309, S332, S334, S373). Debate was thus essentially a fulfillment of "a responsibility to express" – that is, make evident – one's "convictions," one's views, one's opinions or even

oneself (S183; cf. H118, H190, H200, S98, S99). Or in another common way of speaking, in debate one satisfied one's responsibility not only to take a stand, but to stand *up* where one could be seen and *counted*. For example:
Every Senator should stand up and say clearly where he or she stands, and then we must vote so that we be accountable to the American people, together with the President, for what happens in the Persian Gulf (S105; cf. H154).

I do not think that any Senator believes we have been elected, and are being paid, just to make speeches. We are here to do a job; when necessary, to stand up and be counted; to take responsibility (S64; cf. H39, H40, H124).**[iii]**

Members speak in order to render their reasoning noticeable; argumentation in this conception seems primarily a matter of showing. This should not be surprising, since it is essentially the conception of argumentation embedded in our ordinary way of speaking. In concluding an argument, we might not unusually say "I have shown…"; the felicitous reply would be, "I see." And the Latin and Greek logical terminologies have the same drift: both *demonstrare* and *apodeixis* refer to the act of showing. If we want to hypothesize a general function for argumentation, therefore, it might be to *show* something.
To show what? – for now, adopting the pragma-dialectical terminology, perhaps *to show that a standpoint is acceptable*. A standpoint, we might say, is acceptable if a person can accept it without facing criticism for having done so hastily, without sufficient evidence, through bias, from emotion and so on; i.e., to put the matter more generally, that a person can accept it without facing criticism for having by that acted irrationally. Although one ought not accept contradictory standpoints, it is possible to find them both acceptable; indeed, in our ordinary deliberations we often find ourselves in this situation. Argumentation as showing acceptability allows the arguer to ensure that a standpoint not only is acceptable, but even seems so; to render a standpoint conspicuously acceptable; to put the acceptability of a standpoint in such a condition that it can be noticed by her fellows. Or as Ralph Johnson has put it, argumentation is "manifest rationality" (Johnson 1996, Johnson 1995).**[iv]**

But what use could such manifest rationality be? It seems clear, for one thing, that manifest rationality may indeed be used to resolve differences of opinion, in that showing that a standpoint is acceptable can be a step towards getting it accepted. But it is equally clear that there are other uses. For example: as Fred Kauffeld has argued, undertaking a responsibility to make the acceptability of a

standpoint conspicuous is an important constituent of a general strategy to get others not to accept, but just to tentatively consider accepting that standpoint (Kauffeld, forthcoming). Or again, as in the Gulf War debate, argumentation can be used to satisfy a responsibility to make clear where one stands. Or again, argumentation can be used to show that some standpoint is not acceptable, thus showing up the person who held it. Or again, argumentation can be used to address someone as a rational being, thus conspicuously showing respect. Or again, argumentation can be used to show a difficult position to be acceptable, thus showing off one's argumentative abilities. Argumentation can even become an art in the modern sense – a matter of producing an object conspicuously fine; as it has in the hands of some U.S. collegiate debaters.

This multiplicity of uses also should not be particularly surprising, since we already knew that argumentation can be used to do all these things. It is a common and frustrating experience which gives argument a bad name: to be defeated by the clever arguer though one knows one is right. The clever argumentation may be good argumentation, argumentation which succeeds in showing the acceptability of a standpoint – that is, after all, what makes the experience so frustrating. So we should not modify the theory of argumentation to rid ourselves of sophistry. Instead, as Aristotle suggested, using argument in this way is a moral choice, criticizable not as bad argument but as an abuse on ethical principles of greater generality (*Rhetoric*, 1.1, 1355b.).

4. Conclusion

Well, perhaps such uses of argumentation should be criticized as abuses on ethical principles of greater generality. But I would like to close with rhetorician's plea. An incorrect understanding of argumentation may hinder us from "engineering" a more effective practice; equally, it may hinder us from appreciating the goods the unreconstructed practice already reliably achieves. Kenneth Burke, American rogue intellectual, once said that the proper venue of rhetoric is the "Human Barnyard," a cacophonous and crowded, an unruly and fecund place (Burke 1962: 442). Argumentation in such a setting might turn out likewise a bit unruly and fecund. It would be like the story I once heard of the decorous farmer. Each evening he'd come back to the farmhouse kitchen and first thing wash his hands, for it was improper to take the dirt of his work in doors. Each morning as he left the house, though, he would stoop and scrub his hands in soil. In the barnyard, dirt is appropriate.

NOTES

i. I omit a more general objection to the revised view: that it errs in taking time constraints as a sort of imposition essentially external to the practice of argument, instead of one of the internal regulative ideals of that practice. I would argue that argumentation is valuable not in spite of, but because of the ordinary circumstances of practical decision-making, including the circumstance of timeliness; but I leave that for another place.

ii. Onlookers (Sperling 1991) and later investigators (Burgin 1994) agree with the Member's own assessment that their decisions were primarily shaped by their personal views, conscience or "ideology."

iii. The occasionally noted opposite of standing up and being counted was hiding or running for political "cover"; see H115, H124, H143, H144.

iv. See also the most recent definition of "argument" offered by Govier (1997: 2): "a set of claims that a person puts forward in an attempt to show that some further claim is rationally acceptable."

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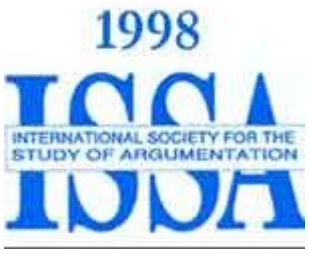
ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Argument, Adversariality, And Controversy



In this paper I wish to explore the relationship between *adversariality* and *controversy*. My interest in this subject stems from two sources: first from those feminist critics who have claimed the fact that arguing, and thus derivatively, arguments, have an unduly adversarial caste; second, from my conviction that controversy is in many respects necessary and healthy.

For those not familiar with the feminist allegations, the following choice passage may offer a sense of their charges: “Without batting an eye the ancient rhetors, the men of the church, and scholars of argument from Bacon, Blair and Whately to Toulmin, Perelman and McLuhan, have taken as a given that it is proper and even necessary human function to attempt to change others.” According to this author, argument is the essential part of a belligerent context in which

contestants seek *mastery* of each other. To argue is to adopt a male centered verbal means of exercising power over others (Gearhart in Hynes, 1995: 464).
Respondents to such allegations have tended to agree with the feminist assumption that adversariality is negative, while contending that adversariality is nevertheless not an intrinsic and inevitable feature of argument (Ayim in Govier, 1988; Ayim, 1991; Nye 1991; Govier, 1995; Cohen 1995). Such respondents – present author included – have pointed out that despite the prevalence of militaristic metaphors for describing argument, non-militaristic metaphors do exist. And people may offer arguments in recognition of difference and out of respect for those who do not share their views.
Reflecting on adversariality, which like many others I had assumed to be of negative value, and controversy, which like some others, I had assumed to have important positive value, I came to ask myself whether adversariality was a necessary element of controversy – whether, in effect, my views on adversariality and controversy were consistent.

In the fall of 1997 Stephen Toulmin gave a lecture in Amsterdam. He called his lecture "The Importance of Dissent," but it had been advertised under the title "The Importance of Controversy." Toulmin's lecture dealt with political dissent, and the importance for societies of allowing that dissent. Toulmin mentioned the many intellectuals, including Canada's Charles Taylor, who are currently stressing the importance of community and cultural identity. He noted that the quest for community and roots may go too far in the direction of exclusivism, cultural conformity, and even virulent nationalism. Toulmin noted that leaders may take on power and seek to insulate people from alternative currents of thought. In his lecture, he argued that dissent and dissenters are especially important for avoiding conformity and exclusivism, and for the building of bridges and establishment of common ground between different communities and groups. In short, Toulmin defended the political and ethical value of dissent.
I had expected Toulmin to address a rather different range of questions. While contemplating the advertised title, I had come to wonder about the value of intellectual controversy and the relationship between controversy and adversariality. But Toulmin had his own ideas and did not do my work for me. Thus I must face the task myself.

1. Adversariality and Argument
What does it mean for a practice to be adversarial? It means that in this practice

people occupy roles which set them against each others, as adversaries or opponents. Law, in western societies is adversarial in the sense that the prosecution and the defense play distinct, and opposed, roles. Politics is adversarial: it is the role of the governing party to govern and of the opposition to criticize the government. Debates are organized adversarially: one side proposing a claim, the other opposing it. In these institutions, roles have been organized in a bipolar fashion and people occupying them are, for institutional reasons, set against each other.

Pointing to basic war-like metaphors such as "winning an argument," "attacking a claim", "defending one's position against criticism," "a battle of wits," "the war of words," "strategy and tactics of argument," "intellectual artillery," "making a charge against the opponent," "the other side," and so on, many have claimed that *argument* is deeply adversarial. People often argue back and forth, one seeking to defend a point while another seeks to rebut it. To be sure, there are non-adversarial metaphors for argument: arguments offer support, provide foundations, serve as tools for exploration and inquiry, and so on. However the existence of non-adversarial metaphors leaves open the deeper question of whether there is something implicitly and intrinsically adversarial about argument as such. One argues for one position and thereby, it would seem, against another. The pervasiveness of the militaristic metaphors suggests that adversariality in the practice of argument is more than superficial.

The following account indicates why argument might seem to be deeply and necessarily adversarial. An arguer seeks to defend a claim that is contested or in doubt, or that could be contested or in doubt, seeking to defend it by putting forward premises that will show it true or at least render it rationally acceptable. The explicit or implicit context in which an arguer offers an argument may be said to be dialectical, in that the argument is necessary and appropriate only insofar as the conclusion is a matter of controversy or doubt, or possible controversy or doubt. To understand the point of an argument, we have to know in what ways the conclusion is contested or is doubtful or could come to seem to be contested or doubtful. Who needs the argument? Those who do not already accept or believe the conclusion; those who do, or could, differ from the arguer in this regard. In constructing the argument, the arguer envisages the person he or she is trying to persuade of the truth or acceptability of the conclusion. To the extent that that person needs to be persuaded, he or she holds a different *view* and may come in conflict with the arguer should he express that view in a context when one or both of them thinks that agreement between them is important. Because there is this

conflict of belief, this hypothetical person is regarded as the opponent, or antagonist, of the arguer. Thus, it would appear, argument is at its very roots adversarial. When we argue for a claim we at the same time, and necessarily, argue against an envisaged opponent, one who does not accept that claim.

In her well-known book *The Skills of Argument* Deanna Kuhn maintains that thought itself is implicitly argumentative (D. Kuhn, 1991: 2 – 3). She says that much thinking involves arguing within ourselves – formulating and weighing arguments for and against a course of action, a point of view, or a solution to a problem: "thinking as argument is implicated in all of the beliefs people hold, the judgments they make, and the conclusions they come to. It arises every time a significant decision must be made." When we think something through, we do so by considering arguments for and against it. For example, if I am wondering whether to take a trip to Africa, I will consider – perhaps when talking with friends, perhaps in my own mind – various reasons, or arguments, for going and various counters to those arguments. I will also consider arguments against going, and counters to those arguments. When I do a good job of thinking something through in this way, there is a sense in which I have different persona in myself, struggling with the issue.
It is as though the protagonist and antagonist are manifested in my own thinking, perhaps as diametrically opposed homunculi battling it out in my head. If the above account of argument, dialectical context, and opposition is right and if Deanna Kuhn is right too, then thought itself is in some sense adversarial. To think whether a claim is true or whether some action is the right one, I think through arguments "for and against." I work through supporting arguments, then criticize those reasons to test my initial tentative argument, then reflect further to see whether I can rebut my own criticisms and so on. At this point, the bipolarity of "for and against" seems to be inherent in thought itself. Insofar as I in this for/against style, the so-called adversary or opponent is not another person, but a kind of representative or Devil's Advocate in myself. One might think of this critical role as that of an 'adversary' or opponent within. But the term is misleading in at least one crucial way: this adversary is helping me.

The adversariality implicit in argument, and perhaps even in thought itself, would seem to arise as follows.
1. I hold X.
2. I think that X is correct. (Follows from (1))

3. I think that not-X is not correct. (Follows from (2))
4. I think that those who hold not-X are wrong, or are making a mistake. (Follows from (3))
5. Should I need to argue *for* X, I will thereby be arguing against not-X. (?)
6. Those who hold not-X, are, with regard to the correctness of X and my argument for X, my opponents. (?)
Let us call this argument The Argument for Deep Adversariality. The questionable steps here are those from (4) to (5) and from (5) to (6).

We may call the adversariality alleged in The Argument for Deep Adversariality minimal adversariality. Note that, apparently, nothing negative has been said about adversariality to this point. Minimal adversariality is alleged to arise from the holding of a definite belief or opinion. In holding a belief, one thinks it true and is thereby committed to thinking that those who disagree with it hold a false belief and are in this respect in error. In believing something, or holding an opinion, one necessarily differs from those who do not believe it, who do not hold this opinion. Should the occasion and need arise to address those differences by arguing in favour of one's view, the differences will be reflected in the content and process of argumentation. According to this argument, when one seeks to argue in favour of a view, X, one is thereby in effect arguing against the contradictory of that view, not-X, and the structure of this situation means that those who subscribe to not-X are put in the role of opposition. There are, in the logical sense, one's opponents or antagonists.

On the face of it, minimal adversariality may seem to be neutral. This apparent neutrality might make us wonder why some feminists have been so concerned about adversariality and so inclined to see it as negative – and why even those who have responded to feminist critique have often granted the feminist assumption that adversariality is, in general negative. The answer lies, I think, in the ancillary aspects of adversariality so commonly accompanying it and so readily confused with it. When people are adversaries, even when they are adversaries only in virtue of roles they occupy temporarily, their dealings are so often characterized by lack of respect, rudeness, lack of empathy, name-calling, animosity, hostility, failure to listen and attend carefully, misinterpretation, inefficiency, dogmatism, intolerance, irritability, quarrelsomeness, and other undesirable aspects. Feminists and others are have expressed concern about adversariality and have tended to assume that it has negative values because they

value such things as co-operation, politeness, good communication, understanding, empathy, respect, inter-personal trust, and open-mindedness. And they have observed that when people are set against each other and argue against each other in such contexts as law courts, parliaments, debates, or academic discussion, those valuable aspects of civil human exchange are seriously threatened or disappear altogether.

Evidence of this negative ancillary adversariality are all too familiar and should need no illustration. However, since it may be useful to have an example before us, I cite the following piece, written by a professor of government at Harvard University. The context is a discussion of multi-cultural identities on the part of whites, African-Americans, and Latinos in the United States. I cite this passage not to comment on any aspect of the substantive debate, but merely to illustrate the patronizing, polarizing, and hostile aspects of the language used.

And from badly misconstruing the difference between sharing "culture artifacts" and sharing "culture meanings" (lived and mutually respect culture patterns), K.A. Appiah almost belittles what can only be called living cultural clusters among non-White American communities. "Hispanic" is not a kind of trick-bag label or category, as K.A. Appiah would have us believe. If one reads and/or undertakes fieldwork among the units of nationalities that comprise "Hispanic" or "Latino"-Americans, the Appiah trick-bag dissolves in its own wrong-headedness. And the same holds for Appiah's historically ill-informed view of "Black culture" as another trick-bag category. The notion propagated by Appiah that the self-chosen nomenclature of multimillions of Latino citizens and African-Americans citizens is a kind of game on the part of poor-reasoning non-whites seeking "authenticized identities" is absurd. It is also a put-down notion, close to an insult if you will (Kilson, 1998: 48-9).

This author, Martin Kilson, disagrees with Appiah and writes to express his disagreement and try to show that Appiah's view is wrong (There is no argument in the passage quoted, only denial). In a mere six sentences, Kilson manages to accuse Appiah of misconstruing a central difference, of being historically ill-informed, and of seeking to propagate a view which is absurd. Somewhat ironically, he also accuses Appiah of insulting and trying to put down other people. This is not adversariality at its best.

Conceptualizing another person as my opponent or antagonist may lead me to conceive that person as someone who is against me, someone whom, in the course of argument, I *oppose*. And this conceptualization seems to imply that I

regard that person as a kind of threat, not as someone I will be disposed to like, respect, and co-operate with. Almost by definition, it would seem, one does not naturally trust or befriend, or seek to co-operate with, one's opponents or antagonists. In the actual practice of arguing back and forth people often set themselves against each other, descending into rudeness, name-calling, misinterpretation, and other displays of animosity.

2. Controversy

Relatively few authors appear to have explored the topic of controversy as such, as opposed to some particular controversy. One exception is Thomas Goodnight, who reported in 1991 that he had not found "controversy" as a key term in either the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* or the *Encyclopedia of Social Science* (Goodnight, 1991). Goodnight claims that a controversy is more than a mere failure to reach agreement. There is a controversy when there is a sustained and mindful opposition to a claim. Controversies may be about discussion rules and norms of language and proof, as well as substantive matters. Goodnight suggested that controversy has valuable features insofar as it exposes different perspectives and beliefs, but also negative features in attendant disharmony, and irrationality and quarrelsomeness in disputes.

Responding to Goodnight, Charles Kauffman noted that controversy has long been explained through metaphors of contest. He says controversy is a test, a trial, a verbal combat by which disputes are resolved and disagreements banished. The contest metaphor has informed both argumentation theory and pedagogy: for over two thousand years, argument skills have been developed through training in debate (Kauffman, 1991).

Kauffman traces to legal practice in Athens this tradition in which argument is a back-and-forth process which is bipolar, zero sum, and has a winner and a loser. He believes that advocacy in such contests has negative aspects and tends to result in a lack of perspective, when one identifies too closely with the views one is defending and becomes hostile towards the other. Kauffman claims that the conception of a contest between two sides is not appropriate for public policy issues where "controversies are many-sided, subtle, and pose consequences for society that are both significant and unavoidable."

In another response to Goodnight, Robert L. Scott raised the question of whether ideal discourse would be free of controversy. He laid out three common evaluations: that controversy is bad and needs to be settled; that controversy is of mixed value; and that controversy is good, being the very "stuff of life" (Scott,

1991). Scott suggests that in our culture the first two views predominate: either controversy is bad, or it is of mixed value.

I shall adopt Goodnight's insight that more than disagreement is required in order for controversy to exist. There is a controversy about an issue, Z, when people who reflect on Z disagree about it, there are two or more views held about Z, and those views are discussed and debated. Within this debate some hold views that are denied by others, and people argue to each other and with each other, about matters pertaining to Z. Controversy, then, is a social thing. There are controversies in this sense about thousands or millions of matters – unemployment, abortion, affirmative action, evolution, free will, the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the pragma-dialectical theory of argumentation, formalism in argument analysis, Quebec nationalism, the existence of God, the HIV virus, the interpretation of the Bible, the causes of the first World War. . . Controversy exists when people hold, argue for, discuss, and debate different, or contending views, about an issue. A claim is controversial when there is a controversy about it, when, in the circles in which the question of its truth arises, there is disagreement rather than agreement about that claim. Controversy is not by definition bi-polar; there may be more than two views about the issue in question. Since controversy presupposes expressed and argued disagreement, if we accept The Argument for Deep Adversariality, inferring adversariality from argued disagreement, we are led to the conclusion that minimal adversariality, at least, is a necessary feature of controversy. It would appear that in any controversy there must be proponents and opponents of various views. Insofar as we are engaged in a controversy, we will be arguing with others who disagree with us and are, in that sense at least, our opponents or antagonists. This is not to say that controversy must be construed in bipolar terms, such that there is a dispute over one claim, with some thinking it is true and others thinking it is false. If we consider free will, for example, one who seeks to defend a libertarian view according to which free will exists in the strong sense that human agency exerts itself without being determined by antecedent causes, is opposed by several different varieties of determinism, by fatalism, by indeterminism, and so on. Obviously, there are more than two alternatives for most public policy issues – and failure to observe these fact in media coverage impoverishes many debates (Govier, 1988 and Condit, 1994). And to take a matter closer to home, the issue of formalism in argument analysis, there are at least three views that are held: formalism is everything, formalism is something, and formalism is nothing. And of

course, refinements and variations will exist among these views.
As is the case with adversariality, there are ancillary aspects to controversy which are clearly of negative value. Controversies often involve rudeness, disrespect, hostility, animosity, name-calling, put-down, insults, *ad hominem* attacks, misinterpretation, diversions into unnecessary and irrelevant themes, intolerance, dogmatism, wasted energy, failures of communication, and unwise expenditures of time and talent. I take it to be quite obvious, and not to be controversial, that these ancillary features accompany many controversies and are of negative value. There is no need to belabor the matter. And it is surely these negative ancillary features of conflict which would support the judgment that controversy is of negative
value.

But there are in addition deeper non-ancillary aspects of controversy which would seem to imply that controversy constitutes a problem. The first aspect has to do with decision and action. When we need to act and we do not agree about what to do, our capacity for action may be inhibited. Insofar as controversy inhibits necessary decision-making, or results in resentment or lack of cooperation in implementing contested decisions, it will seem to be a nuisance or obstacle. When we have to act and think we know what to do, controversy is something we would rather do without – though it could be argued that insofar as disagreement may make us think more carefully, it can result in better decisions. In his philosophy of science, Thomas Kuhn contrasts "normal science," a period when researchers accept a common paradigm and proceed cooperatively and routinely to explore problems and solve puzzles, with "revolutionary science," when issues of methodology and fundamental theory are in flux (T. Kuhn, 1970). If there is no controversy about problems, theories, and methodology, researchers can pool resources and explore topics in depth instead of expending energy repeatedly debating fundamentals. It is agreement on a paradigm that makes scientific research possible. This view would seem to imply that controversy about fundamentals will be of negative intellectual value because it will block progress of research.
The second matter concerns the inverse relationship between controversy and certainty. If there is a controversy about some matter, then there is no certainty about that matter. If, for instance, there is controversy about whether God exists, then no one knows for certain that God exists. If there is controversy about whether human beings can survive their physical death and go to heaven, then no

one knows for certain that she is going to go to heaven after death. If there is a controversy about the significance of so-called bad cholesterol for the health of one's heart, then no one knows for certain that limiting such cholesterol in his diet will reduce the likelihood of his suffering a heart attack. One thing that makes controversy unwelcome is that we so often feel certain about such matters, thinking that we know. We may organize our lives around our beliefs, or stake our lives on them, or sacrifice our lives for them. Some Islamic groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas, believe that those who lose their lives making suicide attacks on an enemy are guaranteed a place in heaven: death in a holy war or *jihad* ensures passage through the heavenly gates. Parents who hold this belief may regard themselves as honored and as fortunate if their children die in the course of carrying out terrorist attacks (Tamir in McKim and McMahan, 1997). In such contexts people want certainty, and controversy will carry with it a most unwelcome and unpleasant reminder that they do not have it. A society with a strong stake in vulnerable 'certainties' of such overwhelming personal importance is likely to stifle controversy and dissent.

The desire for certainty is strong, by no means irrational and by no means restricted to irrational individuals or fanatical groups. It was in a quest for certainty that Plato came to conceive the timeless forms, that Descartes invented his method of doubt, and that Kant bemoaned the sad state of metaphysics, in which contention and dispute had dethroned the Queen of the Sciences. It is because of the possibility of rigorous proof, absence of controversy, and the achievement of certainty that philosophers have – literally for millennia – envied mathematicians. The desire for certainty has been fundamental in the history of Western philosophy.

And this desire is by no means purely philosophical. The yearning for certainty is one philosophers share with ordinary people living ordinary lives. Most of us, when we believe something, would like to know for certain that it is true, and because this is the case we typically do not greet with pleasure controversy about our beliefs. When there is controversy, others argue against our beliefs, presenting evidence and reasons suggesting that those beliefs may be incorrect, that there are serious alternatives to them. These others show by their arguments and by their very existence that alternatives to our beliefs are contemplated, accepted, and defended by people who are taken seriously and who take themselves seriously. The phenomena of controversy place us in a poor position – epistemically, psychologically, and socially – to claim the certainty we would like to have. If we succeed in isolating ourselves from controversy, refuse to

participate in it, avoid all evidence of it, and refuse even to acknowledge its existence, we may preserve feelings of certainty. But such isolation has its costs, and will be hard to achieve in a modern pluralistic society.

Feeling certain, or believing that one knows for certain, is not the same thing as knowing for certain. Controversy is a reminder that we do not know for certain some of the things that we thought we knew for certain. That reminder is likely to be unwelcome, which is a factor explaining the tendency on the part of many people to dislike and disvalue controversy. Many of us have beliefs we live by, some have beliefs we would die for, and we often do not wish to acknowledge evidence that those beliefs are open to objection. Other people – some of them apparently sensible and faring well in this world – hold different beliefs and organize their lives in different ways. This is not good news: hence the temptations of exclusivism and isolationism – and the timeliness of Toulmin's message that dissent is something to be treasured.

As noted, we find in Western philosophy a strong tradition of searching for certainty, a tradition which would suggest that controversy has negative value. Of course we also find such philosophers as Aristotle, who have qualified and contextualized his quest for certainty, arguing for different norms for different areas of knowledge. And there are still others – such as Sextus Empiricus, Hume, Voltaire, Mill, Karl Popper, Paul Feyerabend, and Chaim Perelman who have claimed or implied that controversy has positive value. Mill's valuing of controversy is implied in the following well-known statement:

The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is that it is robbing the human race: posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion still more than those who hold it. If the opinion is right they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth. If wrong, they have lost, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error (Mill, *On Liberty*). On this view, if one of our beliefs becomes the object of controversy, we should be grateful – whether those who disagree with us are right or wrong. Perelman said "I shall grant the status of knowledge to a tested opinion, to an opinion, that is, which has survived all we have a certain confidence, though no certainty, that it will resist all such future attacks" (Perelman, 1989). For Perelman, as for Popper, controversy has positive value, because in its absence opinions cannot be tested through exposure to objections and criticisms.

It is obviously impossible here to offer a complete survey on the topic. In the present audience, few are likely to dispute the undesirability of political conformity: I suspect that virtually all of us, like Toulmin, will value dissent. Less often explored is the matter of the intellectual value of controversy. And it seems to me that there are a number of reasons to think that controversy has *intellectual* value, as is implied by such philosophers as Empiricus, Hume, Mill, Popper, and Perelman. I propose the following preliminary list.

1. Controversy can serve to expose errors and omissions. This role of controversy is of obvious intellectual value in leading us away from false views and, through such correctiveness, in helping us to approach the truth.
2. Controversy will also expose integral assumptions that have not been questioned, alternate interpretations of data or cases, and objections to views held. Such exposure may amount to the exposure of error or may lead to recognition of the need for further argument or revision in our views.
3. Through controversy, we may come to better understand our own beliefs, insofar as we are exposed to objections to them, see how those objections may be answered, and come to set our beliefs in the context of alternatives to them. If, in the wake of controversy, we retain our beliefs, we nevertheless understand better because, as a result of controversy, we come to understand how our view compares and contrasts with others.
4. For many issues of complexity and depth, involving norms and other claims of a non-observational and non-empirical nature, there is ample reason to suspect that certainty should not be possible and that the absence of controversy reveals lack of critical thinking or a failure in social processes of discussion and debate. For such issues, if there is no controversy, we should be worried. In a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*, the following criticism is raised against George Frederickson, who had in a previous issue reviewed two books about race relations in the United States.

> In a quite amazing footnote, he (Frederickson) expresses pride that the Stanford Faculty Senate in 1996 "voted unanimously to continue affirmative action." That is indeed quite telling, but it may not indicate quite what he thinks it does. The Stanford Faculty Senate, we may be sure, did not agree unanimously on the desirability of American intervention in Europe before Pearl Harbor. It did not agree unanimously on the Marshall Plan or the Truman Doctrine. It surely does not agree unanimously on welfare reform, tax policy, or what is to be done about Bosnia. It does not even agree unanimously on whether all Stanford students

should be required to enroll in a science course or be familiar with Plato or Shakespeare.

These are all important and complicated matters on which disagreement is regarded as legitimate. But evidently racial preferences in admission and faculty hiring are something altogether different – a matter of religious faith. There may be agnostics on the faculty, even a few atheists, but they are obviously well-advised to maintain silence. Those who march behind the banner of diversity regard diversity of opinion on this subject as heretical" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 1997).

Whether these authors are right about the Stanford Faculty Senate's views on World War II, the Marshall Plan, Bosnia, Plato, or Shakespeare, I cannot say. The point here is that they clearly find the absence of controversy about affirmative action in the Stanford Faculty Senate positively suspicious, because they see affirmative action as an intrinsically complex issue on which one would not expect a group of well-educated and reflective people to achieve unanimity. For such an issue, the absence of controversy is not to be applauded. Rather, it provides evidence that people hold their beliefs as matters of faith or that the political atmosphere makes sceptics afraid to speak out.

Due to the pervasive role that many of our beliefs play in our lives, and given our desire for certainty, we all too easily pretend to ourselves that we know and do not only believe. We human beings have a tremendous capacity for selective attention, for ignoring information and arguments that count against our beliefs, and for self-deception. If we do not suppress it or ignore it, but rather, carefully and open-mindedly participate in it, controversy can protect us from our own self-deceptive tendencies, revealing that there are well-articulated and defended alternatives to our views. Controversy can protect and sustain our intellectual honesty.

5. If we do it with the right attitude, participating in controversy can make us more flexible, careful, reflective, and open-minded thinkers.

6. Controversy can be a stimulus to thought, imagination, and new ideas insofar as it may point to hitherto unrecognized implications and assumptions of our views, fresh analogies, and through such aspects, offer a new basis for synthesis. It may constructively arouse us from complacency as Kant claimed the empirical and sceptical Hume had done in awakening him from his "dogmatic slumbers."

7. From the perspective of particular philosophical theories of knowledge such as scepticism, fallibilism, falsificationism, and coherentism, controversy may be deemed to be of positive theoretical value in illustrating the pluralism of human

belief and constituting the testing grounds which is necessary to render beliefs more accurate and reliable.

Controversy seems to be of negative value when it is accompanied, as it so often is, with animosity, dogmatism, intolerance, and inefficiency. It seems to be of negative value when it prevents us from taking necessary decisions or deprives us of the certainty we would dearly like to have. However, there are also reasons to positively value controversy. Politically and ethically, we should value dissent, as helping to protect us from exclusivism and ethnocentrism. And intellectually, there are many respects in which conflict can be beneficial – as have just been shown. On the basis of these various considerations, I conclude that controversy is of mixed value.

3. Returning to the Dilemma

My original dilemma was that adversariality seemed to be bad, controversy seemed to be good, and yet adversariality seemed to be a necessary feature of controversy. I am not so inclined now to see this as a real dilemma. Minimal adversariality is neutral or, at worst, mildly negative; many ancillary aspects of adversariality are negative. And controversy is of mixed value. Unless one believes that nothing can be of mixed value, there is no problem of consistency with these judgments.

What problems there are would seem to be practical ones. Grant that we would not want to eliminate controversy even if we could, because of its many positively valuable effects. Grant that insofar as adversariality is integral to controversy, we would not want to eliminate adversariality either. But grant in addition that controversy often brings with it dogmatism, intolerance, lack of empathy, hostility, inefficiency, and many other bad things. The question then is how we can mitigate these negative effects – how we can participate in controversies politely, constructively and effectively, without such degeneration. Part of the answer lies in learning to express our arguments carefully and with respect, while avoiding ad hominems, loaded language, irrelevance, straw man interpretations and so on, and keeping adversariality within careful bounds, remembering that the so-called opponent or protagonist is in a deeper sense working to help us. If we accept that there is positive value in controversy, that through controversy, we may be saved from error, careless argument, or ignorance of alternatives, that we can through controversy exercise our imaginations, become more flexible thinkers, save ourselves from dogmatism, and acquire new ideas, then there

should be little reason to regard those who participate with us in these controversy as persons with whom we are in a full-blown sense in conflict. Given all the positive aspects of controversy, there is an important sense in which these people are helping us by disagreeing with us. Thus we might wish to regard them as partners, not opponents. If I hold X and another holds not-X, and I argue for X while he objects to my argument, and argues for not-X, we openly disagree. I am committed to regarding him as mistaken, and he to regarding me as mistaken. When I argue back and forth with him, we say I argue "against" him, and he argues "against" me. If I am the proponent, he is the opponent. If I am the protagonist, he is the antagonist. If I am "pro," he is "con." But the oppositional terminology, though in one sense essential, is in another sense regrettable insofar as it suggests and invites the negative ancillary aspects of adversariality and controversy. Perhaps a reconceptualization at this point, a better way of describing argument at this very basic level, would facilitate our appreciation of the positive value of controversy. Perhaps bipolarity itself requires further thought.

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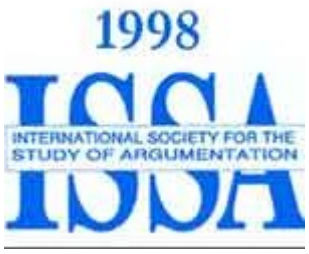
ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Normative Argumentation In A Pluralist World



In this paper I discuss a problem for normative reasoning which arises from the particular circumstances of a pluralist world. I attempt to clarify the nature of the problem and consider possible responses to it. I then make suggestions about the form and content which a solution to the problem must possess.

In section 1 I introduce three simple thought experiments as an aid to fixing the nature of the problem. In section 2 I distinguish universalist responses from those of a more extreme form, and indicate why universalist responses are preferable. In section 3 I suggest that the problem is a strictly normative one rather than a strictly moral one. In section 4 I point out the difficulties in some recent universalist theories. In section 5 I propose a universalist theory based on the materiality of human beings.

1. The pluralist context

In order to see why normative argumentation becomes problematic in a pluralist world, it is useful to conduct the following three thought experiments.

1. Imagine that the world contains only two human communities. They are geographically separated and their members never come into contact or even know of one another's existence. Community A is deeply religious, and its members observe a strict sabbatarianism. They also believe that it is natural for women to be the subordinates of men, so that obedience is regarded as an appropriate relation between a woman and her husband, and women are barred from the same kind of participation in public life as men. Finally, they regard abortion as one form of murder, and treat it as such. Community B is wholly secular. Its members believe that they have a right to dispose of their leisure time as they see fit as long as they do not infringe the right of others to act similarly. They believe that women and men are equal and strive to ensure that women are represented in public office in just the same way as men. They believe that a woman has a right to control over her own body, and regard the choice of abortion at will as one manifestation of that right.

2. Imagine now that members of A and B do come into contact, but in a peripheral way. Perhaps they have occasion to trade and in that way they come to learn about their differing views about the world, but otherwise they continue to live their lives separately from one another.

3. Imagine finally that there continue to be A persons and B persons but that there are no longer two separated communities. There is just one geographical

area, and A persons may live next door to B persons.

In example (1) there is, in one clear sense, disagreement between communities A and B. Their respective members hold beliefs which are the contradictories of one another. In another clear sense there is no disagreement. Since they do not even know of one another's existence, there is no occasion when an A person makes a claim which a B person then goes on to deny.
In example (2) there is liable to be disagreement in the second sense as well as the first. A persons and B persons may well take issue with one another where they differ, so that one will deny what the other asserts. But if we imagine that contact between the communities is minimal, the disagreement may not issue in conflict of any further kind.
In example (3) there will not merely be disagreement in the two senses distinguished. There will be practical difficulties directly connected with the beliefs of A persons and B persons. In acting on the respective beliefs they hold, A persons and B persons will come into conflict. They will be respectively committed to realising states of their world which cannot jointly be realised, and those commitments will arise directly from their beliefs.

I refer subsequently to the state of affairs outlined in (3) as *the third possibility*. It is this third possibility which most closely mirrors the circumstances of much of the contemporary world. There is not just the abstract fact of unwitting attachment to contradictory propositions, nor just the fact of witting denial of the propositions asserted by someone else. There is, in addition, the fact of manifest doxastic dissension issuing in practical dissension. The content of the beliefs in imagined communities A and B was chosen to reflect the content of beliefs which, in the actual world, result in practical conflict between people.
The circumstance of the third possibility has no doubt been responsible for producing recent interest in the problem of divergent normative reasoning in a pluralist world, and that is what I wish to explore. We live in a *de facto* pluralist world, a world in which incompatible systems of thought as a matter of fact coexist, systems conflicting courses of action in virtue of their espousal of those systems. What intellectual resources are there for dealing with conflicts arising in that way? I leave aside here any adjudication on the question of the *normative* pluralism expressed by Isaiah Berlin, according to which there is a plurality of genuine and objective values which may simply come into conflict with one another, what he describes as 'the permanent possibility of inescapable conflict

between values' (Berlin 1991: 80. See also Larmore 1994: 62-3).
Berlin's conclusion is a drastic one. My concern is with how far we might deal with conflicting values and people's attachment to them, how far we might proceed in some kind of neutral and objective evaluation of them, before reaching the point where we are forced to conclude that no further resolution is possible.

2. Responses to de facto pluralism
We live in a world where people begin from differing assumptions, employ differing forms of reasoning and end up with differing conclusions. And all of this matters at the practical level. A range of responses to this dilemma is possible. At one extreme, we might long for a world in which people's reasoning converges, where they all agree on what is of value and what not. At the other extreme, we might abandon any attempt to measure the diverging views against one another by retreating into some form of relativism. In the latter spirit, consider the pragmatist attempt to distinguish between fanaticism and a conscience worthy of respect. The criterion for this, according to Richard Rorty, 'can only be something relatively local and ethnocentric -the tradition of a particular community, the consensus of a particular culture. According to this view, what counts as rational or as fanatical is relative to the group to which we think it necessary to justify ourselves – to the body of shared belief that determines the reference of the word "we" ' (Rorty 1991: 176-7).
We might well feel that such responses are best fitted to some other circumstances than the ones we actually face: the former to a world where either community A or community B never existed; the latter to the lost world where community A and community B were entirely separate from each other. Neither really promises to *negotiate* the problem outlined in the third possibility of section 1 in a way which will produce an intellectually satisfying solution to conflict of values. For that, the former response would need to convince us that, from where we are now, there is some reasonable prospect or achieving consensus on currently disputed fundamentals. The second response, in its turn, would need to convince us either that no progress could be made on those disputes or that the very idea of progress in this context is a myth.
A distinct response consists in the Rawlsian view that a diversity of reasonable comprehensive doctrines is 'not a mere historical condition that may soon pass away; it is a permanent feature of the public culture of democracy. Under the political and social conditions secured by the basic rights and liberties of free institutions, a diversity of conflicting and irreconcilable – and what's more,

reasonable – comprehensive doctrines will come about and persist if such diversity does not already obtain' (Rawls 1993: 36). The burdens of judgement in a modern society, including the fact that people's total experiences are very diverse, allow them to reach different views even when exercising their reason. 'Different conceptions of the world can reasonably be elaborated from different standpoints and diversity arises in part from our distinct perspectives. It is unrealistic – or worse, it arouses mutual suspicion and hostility – to suppose that all our differences are rooted solely in ignorance and perversity, or else in the rivalries for power, status, or economic gain' (Rawls 1993: 58). The major project then becomes that of determining at least a set of political arrangements which people can agree to from their conflicting comprehensive standpoints. But the standpoints themselves, as long as they are reasonable, are left untouched.

However, there is a prior question about which Rawls avowedly says little, and that is what conditions a doctrine must meet in order to qualify as reasonable. He tells us that reasonable comprehensive doctrines involve the exercise of theoretical reason to produce something consistent and the exercise of practical reason in determining priorities; and he claims that no tighter criterion is needed for the purposes of political liberalism (Rawls 1993: 59-60; cf. Rawls 1993: 37 n.38). This last claim may well be true, but there is then an unresolved question of whether the number of comprehensive doctrines for which an accommodation must be found can be reduced at all, whether it is possible to judge that some such doctrines are unreasonable and therefore open to criticism. No doubt a certain humility is appropriate when faced with a set of values which have held the allegiance of a large number of people over a significant period of time, but the possibility cannot be ruled out that some values, even if deeply and widely held, may be in some way deficient or wrong-headed (And it goes without saying that if we countenance that possibility, then we must countenance it in relation to our own values as well as other people's).

In order to open up the possibility of judging some such doctrines to be unreasonable, it is necessary to establish the prior possibility of a standpoint from which that criticism could be made without seeming to favour any particular culture in its very operation. A number of theories respond to the problem of de facto pluralism by, in effect, attempting to define such a standpoint. They are *universalist* in that they attempt to escape the limitations of a particular set of values by focusing on what is universal in human life. If, in all circumstances,

there are certain things which we must value whatever else we value, this will provide us with a compelling starting point which is not local to any particular culture. It will also give us a criterion, relatively free from cultural bias, by which to judge the views of particular communities.

The Rawlsian theory of primary goods is itself the most obvious example of such a theory (Rawls 1972: 62, 92-3, 434; Rawls 1993: 75, 180-1, 298). Others are provided by Gewirth (1994); Kekes (1994); and Doyal and Gough (1991). Gewirth, for example, argues that freedom and well-being are prerequisites of all human action; that any agent must conclude that they have a right to them and that other agents have similar rights; and that the universal requirement of freedom and well-being can then be used to judge particular cultures, in terms of how far they make these provisions for everyone (Gewirth 1994: 22-43). Kekes argues in similar terms. He draws up a longer list of 'primary values', physical, psychological and social, the satisfaction of which is a prerequisite for a good life, and argues that these primary values 'constitute a context-independent ground for settling some conflicts among values' (Kekes 1994: 50). Doyal and Gough claim that 'since physical survival and personal autonomy are the preconditions for any individual action in any culture, they constitute the most basic human needs – those which must be satisfied to some degree before actors can effectively participate in their form of life to achieve other valued goals' (Doyal and Gough 1991: 54).**[i]**

Such universalist theories must pass two tests if they are to avoid cloaking cultural parochialism in merely apparent universality. They must avoid parochialism both in *content* and in *form*. That is to say, they must take a wide enough view of human behaviour to ensure that what they pick out as a universal feature of human life really is so, rather than being confined to our own or some other culture;**[ii]** and they must take care that, having found such a genuinely universal feature, they do not describe it in a way which is itself prejudicial from the standpoint of particular cultures. I take up the issues of form and content respectively in the following two sections.

3. The form of universalism

As an example of the need to avoid parochialism in form, consider Gewirth's claim that all human agents have a right to freedom and well-being. He acknowledges the objection that the concept of rights is a local one and is particularly suited to a culture where there is great emphasis on the individual in contrast to the group.

He dismisses the objection on the grounds that 'most moral and other practical precepts are addressed, directly or indirectly, to individuals' (Gewirth 1994: 34). The argument from rights proceeds from that common assumption and so is held not to be of merely local or ethnographic validity. He argues further, and in a more explicitly moral way, that 'the primary point of human rights is to protect individuals from unjustified threats to their freedom and well-being on the part of communities or cultures to which they may belong' (Gewirth 1994: 35).

I leave aside here the contentious claim about most practical precepts being addressed to individuals.**[iii]** Suppose indeed that it is a universal truth that all human beings have rights of the kind specified by Gewirth. Even then, it would not follow that this was the appropriate form in which to couch a consideration which was to function as a criterion for assessing the rival claims of different cultures. Precisely because the concept of rights is so highly culture-specific and contested, it does not provide a sufficiently independent starting point for such assessment. We should have to argue to a proposition about rights rather than arguing *from* one, and that makes such a proposition unsuitable for the task in hand.

If this criticism of the form taken by Gewirth's criterion is justified, someone might infer from it that we simply need a more universally acceptable form in which to couch the moral consideration which is to function as our criterion. But I want to argue for a stronger conclusion than that. I want to suggest a shift away from any specifically moral consideration as providing the required criterion. Moreover, I make this suggestion not because of the contentious nature of morality but because of the nature of the problem to which the criterion is meant to provide a solution.

Consider again the situation which gives rise to the problem. People hold varying and conflicting views about how they ought to behave; and where they live in juxtaposition, this issues in practical conflict which is itself an expression of the conflicting views. The problem then arises from a clash of practical attitudes and beliefs rather than from morality as such. That is an important difference, and it makes the problem both wider and narrower than a purely moral problem since not all practical thinking is moral and not all morality is practical.

The problem is wider, because it is replicated wherever people hold varying views about how to behave, whether those views are specifically moral or not. For example, they may hold varying views about their own or other people's interests, about what it would be *prudent* to do rather than what it would be *moral* to do,

and they may attempt to act to realise those interests in ways which issue in practical conflict. The problem is narrower, because not all of morality is concerned in a direct way with practical conclusions. Some moral thinking is concerned with assessment, for example of character or disposition, in ways which stop short of any immediate connection with action. In those circumstances, there can be disagreements, but they more closely resemble the circumstances of example (2) in section 1 rather than the circumstances of the third possibility.

Accordingly, I suggest that we cease to see the problem as one about conflict in moral reasoning and instead see it as a problem about conflict in *normative* reasoning, where that term is used to denote any reasoning connected with decisions about what to do, in contrast to theoretical reasoning which is connected only with what is true. Normative reasoning therefore includes moral reasoning but also, for example, reasoning about what is in one's own or someone else's interests. That shift in the way of seeing the problem dictates a similar shift in the search for a solution. We should cease to ask: Is there some universal feature of human life which provides material for a culturally independent moral criterion by which to judge the rival claims of different cultures? Instead, we should ask: Is there some universal feature of human life which carries a culturally independent relevance to *reasons for acting*?

The concept of a reason for acting is a much better candidate for possessing the required neutrality of form for some universal consideration to take. It is already possessed by any deliberative agent as a necessary part of their conceptual equipment, and it is not in itself contentious or contestable. Of course, deliberative agents disagree about *what* reasons for acting there are, as well as what *kind* of reasons there are. But they do not and could not disagree in using the idea of a reason for acting. This different starting point is therefore preferable for dealing with the problem set by the third possibility in section 1: it is independent of particular cultures and it is of universal application.

4. The content of universalism

It is another and more complicated question whether anything in human life possesses the required universality to provide a reason for acting for all human agents. Is there anything which, regardless of cultural context, is necessarily germane to all human agents? Is there any universal prerequisite of human agency, irrespective of the particular goals which a human agent has? It will be plain that *freedom* or *autonomy* are favoured candidates for that role. There is a

problem, however. Freedom and autonomy are themselves morally saturated notions, and the danger is that as soon as we begin to fill out their content we find that we are once again using a concept in a way which will not be universally assented to in all cultures.

The point is illustrated by Philip Pettit's recent sponsorship of freedom as being 'capable of commanding the allegiance of the citizens of developed, multicultural societies, regardless of their more particular conceptions of the good' (Pettit 1997: 96). But it is the ideal of freedom specifically as nondomination which Pettit believes can play this role, and he has to face the objection that such an ideal is not neutral and will not command universal allegiance. His response is that traditions which reject that ideal and display a tendency to subject oneself to, for example, those with a priestly role, involve 'the suppression of a deep and universal human desire for standing and dignity.…Embrace the life of a sect who abase themselves before some self-appointed guru and you will see little in the idea of freedom as nondomination. Embrace the life of a contemporary, pluralistic society and you will see much' (Pettit 1997: 96-7).

The sponsorship of freedom or autonomy specifically in the form of nondomination looks like a clear departure not just from neutrality but also from a universal starting point. Freedom or autonomy in that form is certainly not a necessary condition of all human agency. Separately from whether such a state of affairs is desirable, it is plain that even a slave is capable of many instances of human agency. Moreover, Pettit's response ignores the fact that sects which worship gurus often *exist within* a contemporary pluralistic society, and that is precisely what gives rise to the problem in the third possibility of section 1. We are not given here a reason for embracing the ideal of nondomination, only the assertion that for anyone who *has* embraced it a certain kind of problem will not arise.

If we wish to retain freedom or autonomy as the culturally-neutral and genuinely universal consideration then we must avoid any contentious or merely local conceptualisation. It is possible to do this, but doing so carries a price. Thus, Doyal and Gough begin with a minimal definition according to which to be autonomous 'is to have the ability to make informed choices about what should be done and how to go about doing it' (Doyal and Gough 1991: 53). But as they themselves acknowledge, this description of autonomy is tantamount to a description of agency itself. If that is correct, then it cannot at the same time be treated as a separate prerequisite of agency. The danger in looking for something

which is genuinely universal and genuinely tied to agency itself, in all forms and in all circumstances, is the danger of disappointment: that all we can unearth is a tautology.

The consideration of *health* suffers from some of the same drawbacks as freedom or autonomy. Doyal and Gough tell us, for example, that 'physical health can be thought of transculturally in a negative way. If you wish to lead an active and successful life in your own terms, it is in your objective interest to satisfy your basic need to optimise your life expectancy and to avoid serious physical disease and illness conceptualised in biomedical terms. This applies to everyone, everywhere' (Doyal and Gough 1991: 59). One difficulty which this claim in its universalised form has to meet is dramatised in the case of the philosopher Brentano, who said that he welcomed his blindness since it enabled him to concentrate on his philosophy. That suggests that placing a priority on health does not have the universal reach which they might think. Their reply is that 'Such arguments ignore the fact that Brentano had to possess enough physical health to acquire the conceptual tools necessary to respond to his disablement in the enhanced way he claimed' (Doyal and Gough 1991: 316 n6).

The tensions between avoiding lack of universality and avoiding lapse into tautology are once again apparent. There are people whose aspirations are not for anything which they or their own culture would really call an active and successful life: they might, for example, aspire to achieve a certain contemplative state. There are people who want to achieve particular goals even at the cost of the loss of longevity or of risking falling prey to disease. The needs specified by Doyal and Gough will not apply in such cases. At that point the temptation is therefore to move in the direction of tautology: at least such people need a sufficient degree of health for their particular aspirations to be met. That is correct, but it has the consequence that their needs will be different from those originally specified and may in fact be extremely minimal in the relevant respects. They may in fact amount to no more than this: that if there is something you aspire to do, you need not to be dead, you need to be alive long enough to do it and in a fit state to do it.

5. Materiality

I now want to suggest that the connection between agency and *materiality* does not suffer the same defects as those suffered by the considerations linked with agency in section 4.**[iv]** We can take the idea of agency in its most general and uncontentious sense, the idea simply of human beings doing things in the world,

and truthfully assert that agency in that uncontentious sense always has material prerequisites. It is a consequence of our being the kind of creatures we are that our survival from one moment to the next depends on the satisfaction of a range of material needs, a range which expands as we conceive of more extended forms of action whose execution takes more than a moment. Thus, my scratching my nose in a moment depends on an uninterrupted supply of oxygen to my brain; my posting a letter tomorrow depends on my receiving sustenance sufficient to support my continued biological functioning; my completing a philosophy paper in the next month depends on my having shelter and clothing to protect me from the elements. In addition, the latter two actions also depend on the availability of a range of material objects which I can employ in various ways, and that will be typical of most actions above a low level of triviality. But the fact of material prerequisites for my own existence as an agent is absolutely exceptionless.

This consideration, then, is universal in content. All human agents must satisfy certain material needs as a precondition of exercising their agency in any matter whatsoever. We are not speaking here of a local truth which might fail to hold in some other place. We can be entirely confident that we shall not come across a culture where people can carry out their plans of action without needing to meet material requirements. If we came across creatures of whom that was true, it would be no mere verbal matter to refuse to apply the term ‘human being’ to them. They would be so fundamentally different from us that there would be substantive reasons for such a refusal.

Has this material consideration been stated in a culture-neutral form, that is, in terms which do not covertly and illicitly favour one culture over another? It is tempting to think so, on the grounds that no culture can or does deny these obvious facts or dispute the way in which they are expressed. In discussing Bruno Snell’s account of Homeric images of the person Bernard Williams says: ‘We do indeed have a concept of the body, and we agree that each of us has a body. We do not, *pace* Plato, Descartes, Christianity, and Snell, all agree that we each have a soul. Soul is, in a sense, a more speculative or theoretical conception than body’ (Williams 1993: 26). Of course, one could imagine someone resisting these claims, but they would have to adopt an extreme position in order to do so in a form which challenged the cultural neutrality of the claim that satisfaction of material need is a precondition of all action. For example, it would not be sufficient to object that we are essentially souls and are merely temporarily trapped in our bodies. For as long as we are so trapped, the claims of the previous paragraph stand. It might instead be said that we merely have the illusion of being embodied

and that what is real is our souls. But then while we suffer from such an illusion we have no alternative but to accompany it with the further illusion that we have to act so as to meet our illusory bodily needs. The objection then begins to look less like a rejection of the terms in which the claimed universality is expressed and more like an objection to its presumed philosophical status. But even a whole culture which took this position would have to feed and clothe itself in order to advocate it or to do anything else.

A related point reinforces the claim that the materiality consideration can be posited in a culture-neutral way. An obvious distinction can be made between things which are important to us because we *invest* them with importance and things which are important to us *whether we think they are or not.* An example of the former would be the pain of social opprobrium arising from having children out of wedlock. That is something dependent on social attitudes. An example of the latter would be the pain associated with falling off a cliff. Our materiality is of the latter kind. It is important whatever we think about it, and whether we think about it or not. But that makes it, in itself, an objective consideration, and to that extent beyond the reach of any particular culture (though of course there can be crucial cultural variation in the way that objective fact is perceived and theorised).

Consider now how this universality of form and content extends the reach, as it were, of the claim that any agents must concern themselves with the meeting of their material needs. We have examined theories which attempt to establish what things agents must concern themselves with for living a good life or furthering their rational plan of life. Even leaving aside the clear contentiousness of the contents of a good life and the arguable contentiousness of the contents of a rational plan of life, the materiality consideration extends well beyond these theories. It picks out what is a prerequisite of *any life at all*. Indeed, it goes beyond what any *agents* must concern themselves with and speaks to what any human *beings* must concern themselves with. Imagine, for example, someone who has no interest in acting at all but aspires simply to experience certain states. Then exactly the same considerations will apply: they must concern themselves with the meeting of their material needs for this aspiration too to have any chance of success. As well as being able to speak to these outer reaches of human life, as it were, the material consideration can also do all of the work of the other and more contentious favoured considerations, and in a way it subsumes them. Thus,

suppose that your primary value is autonomy, the living of your life with the shape you have chosen to give it, rather than that allotted by someone else or by inanimate circumstances. Then you have strong grounds for being concerned with your materiality, because the securing of your material survival is itself a precondition of achieving such autonomy. But if your primary value is something quite different from autonomy, for example a life of service and dedication to the wishes of your master, then exactly the same will be true. That is, *whatever* your goals, you have a reason to concern yourself with your material circumstances.

Some caveats should be entered about what is established in this paper. We began by asking whether it was possible to arrive at some starting point for judging different cultures which was itself universal and not biased at the outset in favour of or against particular cultures. The suggestion now is that the materiality of human beings is such a starting point, since it is necessarily relevant to the practical reasoning, moral or otherwise, of all agents in all circumstances. It is no more than a starting point. I have suggested that it meets the formal conditions which any candidate for this role must meet, but it is another matter altogether actually to put it to work in the assessment of the values of different cultures. For that, we should have to construct a theory similar in nature to Gewirth's, which arrived at some metric for judging the adequacy of different societies' arrangements for meeting the material needs of its members. That would be a colossal and complex task.

The fact that it is a *further* task might allay fears which would otherwise arise about the stress here on materiality. For example, it might be felt that such a stress must betoken subscription to the Promethean character of both liberalism and Marxism in their inappropriate perception of the relation between human beings and external nature as one of mastery and control (cf. Benhabib 1992: 69). Or it might even be felt that it must betoken subscription to a *crass* materialism which simply judges cultures according to the extent of their theoretical or practical commitment to maximising material consumption.

Subscription to either of these positions would be incompatible with the use of the material consideration as a neutral and universal arbiter among different cultures' values. So far, the only information which can be legitimately used for that task are the facts that human beings are material creatures; that the satisfaction of their material needs is a precondition of their acting; and that they themselves must act so as to secure the satisfaction of those needs. There may be many objectionable beliefs and values which come to be associated with those facts, including an insensitive and unduly utilitarian attitude towards the natural

world, but the facts themselves are not in dispute. It is therefore a matter for further negotiation what follows from them.

That said, such negotiation is precisely what should occur. If the point of the exercise is to enable us to make comparative judgements about differing values, then an impartiality which is appropriate at the outset would be entirely inappropriate at the end of the process. Judgements have to be made and criticisms levelled. But that will be possible when we have a much fuller theory of materiality. The material considerations do not just pass the minimal test of possessing the rather abstract properties required of a consideration which is to serve in adjudication of rival views. They impinge on our lives in a series of complicated ways which touch on our vital interests in a pervasive way, whatever those interests are taken to be. (I attempt to set out some arguments to establish that point in Graham 1998.) Indeed, it is precisely because we have *other* aims, beyond the mere maintenance of material existence, that we need to take account of the relations we must enter into in order to maintain ourselves in a condition where we can pursue those other aims. That is why we have to take our materiality so seriously, whatever our values.

NOTES

i. Elsewhere, Gough says that physical health and autonomy are 'universal rerequisites for any person 'successful participation in whatever form of life she finds herself in, or chooses to live in' (Gough 1996: 82).

ii. Rawls's list of primary goods is an uneasy combination of universal and culture-specific features of human life. For discussion of that aspect of his theory, see Graham 1996: 141-3.

iii. I argue for the existence and practical importance of irreducibly collective actions in Graham (forthcoming).

iv. The attempt to connect freedom with materiality has a long history. James Harrington, for example, argues the need for a person to have material resources if they are to be free: 'The man that cannot live upon his own must be a servant; but he that can live upon his own may be a freeman' (Harrington 1992: 269, cited in Pettit 1997: 32). But that attempt suffers from the disadvantage which I have discussed above, that freedom is a morally saturated notion, and the required neutrality is lost as soon as it becomes clear that it is being interpreted in a particular way which favours one understanding of freedom rather than some other. For a related and contemporary connection between autonomy and materiality, see Christman 1994.

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ISSA Proceedings 1998 – What Makes The Reductio Ad Absurdum An Important Tool For Rationality?

This paper presents a summarized chapter from a study on the Reductio ad Absurdum, in which its logical, semantical and epistemological aspects are analyzed. I here focus on the neo-rationalistic motivation behind this research. The following analysis is only a partial report, in need of further study.

Traditional rationality is the quest for certainty and knowledge. It characterizes specific beliefs which are derived on the basis of appropriate reason and specific appropriate principles of assessment. The story of its failure is the story of the success of skepticism. One of the answers to the skeptical challenge on rationality is the conceptual shift from the notion of 'verification' to that of 'refutation'. However, if refutation is understood as certainty regarding the falsity of the refuted, then this shift is only superficial, and does not solve the basic challenge. Certainty regarding a falsity is no less subject to the skeptical challenge than certainty regarding truth. My proposal to a solution to this problem is based on a modification to the common epistemological understanding of the Reductio ad Absurdum mode of argumentation. The key idea is to see refutation as conditional reasoning instead of absolute or certain, and to see rationality as focusing on the process of reasoning instead of its outcome.

The intense criticism on the notion of verification and the shift to that of refutation is best known through the work of Karl Popper. The paradigmatic examples of this shift, elaborated by Popper and his followers, pertain to science. The notion of refutation is, however, by far more problematic when it comes to philosophical controversies. There aren't notions of crucial experiment and of fact of the matter in the non-empirical contexts of philosophical controversies, even in principle.

The Reductio ad Absurdum mode of argumentation is a basic logical tool in the procedure of refutation. The application of refutations to philosophical controversies must, therefore, account for the structure and function of the Reductio ad Absurdum. In a Reductio ad Absurdum, one starts by assuming the

truth of a thesis ‘p’ (see first below). The meaning of the thesis ‘p’ is analyzed by way of deriving a series of consequences ‘q1’ to ‘qn’ implied by the assumed thesis. This clarification of the meaning of the thesis ‘p’ ends in the derivation of the consequence ‘a’. The consequence ‘a’ becomes an absurdity, however, in light of an external additional assumption regarding the truth of its negation ‘not-a’. The ensuing contradiction ‘a and not-a’ leads to the conclusion that the thesis ‘p’ is not true, namely that ‘not-p’.

I want to begin my suggestion with the following problem: From a logical point of view, every indirect argument scheme of inferring a conclusion from a given set of premises, such as the Reductio ad Absurdum, can be rephrased as a direct and constructive one. In what sense, then, is the Reductio ad Absurdum preferable to a direct proof that ‘not-p’ ? The Reductio ad Absurdum can be interpreted or understood in at least three ways, of which only one makes it preferable to a direct proof.

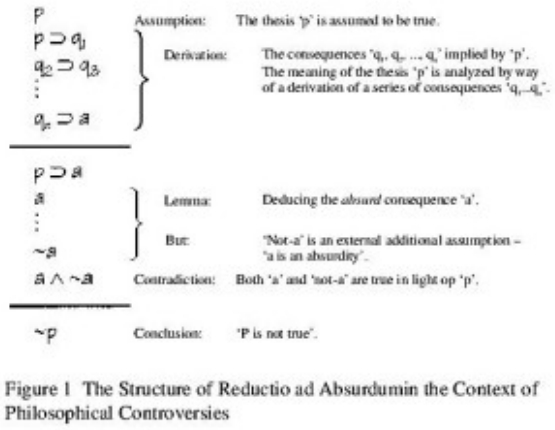

Figure 1 The Structure of Reductio ad Absurdumin the Context of Philosophical Controversies

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The first is used in mathematics. In it, the absurd consequence ‘a’, implied by the thesis ‘p’, is supposed to be necessarily false. Furthermore, its negation ‘not-a’ is also implied by the thesis ‘p’, and thus internal to it. The ensuing contradiction ‘a’ and ‘not-a’ is, therefore, a conclusion of the thesis ‘p’. Consequently, the negation of the given thesis ‘not-p’ is deemed necessarily true. This kind of Reductio ad Absurdum must assume the Law of the Excluded Middle.
The second mode of Reductio ad Absurdum differs from the first with regard to

the nature of the absurd consequence ‘a’. In this mode, the absurd consequence is not necessarily false, but its falseness or improbability can be established to at least some degree of certainty. The variety of possible justifications for rejecting the absurd ‘a’, or accepting ‘not-a as true, will not be discussed here; for the present purpose, any theory of statement evaluation will do. This mode of Reductio ad Absurdum, like the first one, assumes the Law of the Excluded Middle on the way to proving the truth of the thesis ‘not-p’. The degree of certainty regarding the truthfulness of the thesis ‘not-p’ is based on the degree of certainty attached to the falseness of the absurd consequence ‘a’. This mode of argumentation is also known in the Stoic logic as Reductio ad Impossibile. There are two crucial presuppositions common to the mathematical usage of Reductio ad Absurdum and to its weakened version as Reductio ad Impossibile: one is the ability to establish the falseness of the absurd consequence ‘a’; the second is the Law of the Excluded Middle. These two presuppositions are susceptible to skeptical criticism, regarding the vulnerability of any knowledge claim, and regarding the heavy metaphysical and epistemological background attached to the Law of the Excluded Middle.

The third mode of Reductio ad Absurdum is a further weakening, since it does not necessarily satisfy these two presuppositions. The reason is that this mode of Reductio ad Absurdum deals with philosophical theses. First, the negation of the absurd consequence ‘not-a’ is not necessarily a consequence of the thesis ‘p’, nor can its truthfulness be established with certainty. Second, the Law of the Excluded Middle is not presupposed. The falseness attributed to the absurd consequence ‘a’ shows nothing but that the thesis ‘p’ cannot hold. Without the metaphysical and epistemological background of the Law of the Excluded Middle, the proved proposition is, therefore, ‘p is disproved’. This mode can disprove a given thesis ‘p’ but cannot prove the truth of its negation ‘not-p’. The false or absurd consequence ‘a’ of the thesis ‘p’ shows that ‘p’ cannot hold and the conclusion that ‘not-p’ expresses just that. This logical characteristic makes the Reductio ad Absurdum fundamental to the possibility of rational reasoning, since various logical and metaphysical criticisms on classical logic and its presuppositions, such as Intuitionism, do not hold in this case. In the following I will concentrate only on this weakened version of the Reductio argument.

Given the above logical distinction, it is clear that the stage in which the absurd consequence a is negated, is a crucial element in the logical operation of the Reductio ad Absurdum. This negation leads to the contradiction ‘a’ and ‘not-a’,

whereby the thesis ‘p’ is disproved. ‘Not-a’ is, however, an additional assumption, external to the thesis ‘p’, that can come either from the same theory, to which ‘p’ belongs, or from some other theses or facts.
The epistemic meaning of negating the absurd consequence ‘a’ is crucial to the understanding of the Reductio ad Absurdum as a rationalistic tool. What is the meaning of the negation operation in general? It is not, to be sure, its meta-linguistic truth table. The truth-table is only the schema for performing a negation with regard to a specific statement. But what does ‘not-a’ mean? The clue is that the sense of ‘not-a’ is the semantical and epistemological complement of the sense of ‘a’.
The epistemic aspect of the use of the Reductio ad Absurdum is the conviction that either the absurd ‘a’ or its negation ‘not-a’ is false, namely, that they are complementary. Since we are not assuming the Law of the Excluded Middle, ‘a’ and ‘not-a’ can both be false, though can not both be true. This is part of the more general conviction not to accept contradictions, which is itself a matter of philosophical and epistemological dispute. Contradictions induce the changing of philosophical theories only if this conviction is given. This conviction is not trivial nor necessary. But adopting it is essential if we insist upon rational grounds for changing theories.

In what sense is the Reductio ad Absurdum rational? The core of traditional rationality is the quest for a specific sort of certainty, an humanistic certainty as opposed to a divine one. This trend is subject to the skeptical criticism on the possibility of demonstrating infallible propositions. According to my suggestion, there are some characteristics of Reductio ad Absurdum which are definitely rationalist:
First, Reductio ad Absurdum arguments point to the unacceptability of theses rather than the truth of their negation. In principle, every philosophical thesis is debatable and there are no clear cut proofs or disproofs. But the rationalist intent requires that there be a way to elucidate the controversies in a way that will eventually lead to eliminating unacceptable theories by way of refutation, even if this refutation is only conditional and not absolute. The notion of intellectual progress, so important to traditional rationality, is, therefore, retained in the weakened form of conditional refutation and a proof up-to-a-point.
Second, the use of Reductio ad Absurdum circumscribes the skeptic criticism of deduction as a tool for attaining new knowledge. By bringing in the ‘external’ assumption that the negation of the absurd ‘not-a’ is true, in order to evaluate the

thesis ‘p’, the Reductio argument makes us aware of connections between remote areas of knowledge, hitherto hidden. Since ‘not-a’ was previously deemed irrelevant or external to the theory to which the thesis ‘p’ belongs, evaluating ‘p’ in light of ‘not-a’ amounts to a kind of new knowledge. This way, the use of Reductio ad Absurdum reestablishes the traditional rationalist role of logic in clarifying disputes and attaining new knowledge.
Third, in eliminating the more implausible theses, the Reductio ad Absurdum retains a weakened form of the distinction between the correct and the incorrect. Rationality does not necessarily assume that any dispute must end in isolating all and only the true and evident theses. It does, however, say that there is a crucial difference between acceptable and unacceptable theses. The Reductio ad Absurdum opens a way to circumscribe the skeptical obstacle and retain a core of traditional rationality.

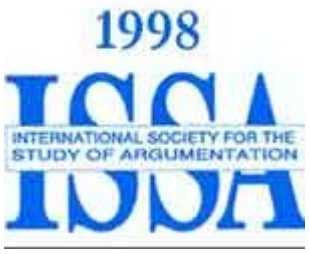
This analysis of Reductio ad Absurdum equates rationality with the use of logic as a tool for criticism. No better certainty can be reestablished in light of skepticism than a conditional one. The Reductio ad Absurdum does not reestablish rational certainty, but offers a last resort in the form of conditional certainty. It can be seen as a partial answer to skepticism, that preserves the substance of rationality.
It is ironic that the Reductio ad Absurdum mode of argumentation joins forces with an important trend in skepticism. Using the paradox of entailment, namely that contradictions entail any statement, the Reductio argument forces opponents to admit contradictions, and to abandon their stands or amend them. That way, Reductio ad Absurdum and skepticism both discuss philosophical theses with the aim of eliminating the more implausible and dubious ones. The coincident use of Reductio ad Absurdum and skepticism lasts, however, only as long as the goal is to block the way to nihilistic conclusions implied by epistemological skepticism.

Traditional rationalist philosophy states that there are justified knowledge claims of a specific sort, mainly in formal logic, mathematics and science. These specific statements must succumb to skeptical criticism. If anything of this tradition is to be retained, it must undergo a profound change. The change suggested here is the identification of rationality with the process of logical disproof instead of identifying it with some set of knowledge claims. The weight is transferred from the proved statements to the process of disproving.
The shift in the essence of rationality is best exemplified with regard to the question of choosing a logical system. Traditional rationality is identified with

classical logic, and would, therefore, break down in light of the different and not-equivalent systems of logic. The change suggested here alters the status that classical logic enjoys in traditional rationality and thus circumscribes this fatal obstacle. Instead of identifying rationality with the results of some specific process of reasoning, it is suggested here that rationality is to be identified with the process itself. The emphasis is shifted from some set of justified statements and a privileged way of proving them to an undetermined process of eliminating unreasonable ones. Not any process of reasoning is characteristically rationalist, however, but only processes which serve the aim of critical debate. This enlargement in scope is restricted only by one condition, namely, the imperative to eliminate contradictions. In this way, rationality, as a process of refutation, can and should accept various non-classical logical systems.

The proposed analysis reveals the conclusion, that Reductio ad Absurdum can not lead to consensus. Disagreement and divergence of views is a perpetual state. Rationality changes its nature and becomes basically partial; a never ending process of arguing. It can, however, circumscribe the threat of unreasoned relativism and nihilism. It can place disagreement and divergence of views in the constraints of reason and justifiability.

ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Viciousness And Actual Infinity In Aristotle’s Infinite Regress Arguments



Aristotle sometimes presents an infinite regress argument without showing us how its infinite regress is derived, or why its infinite regress is vicious. An infinite regress is vicious if it entails either a false statement or an unacceptable consequence. Given his omissions, we sometimes hastily grant that there is an infinite regress, and that it is somehow vicious. In this paper I will not address the derivation of his infinite regresses, but simply assume that they are entailed, and focus my attention on their viciousness.

Aristotle's notion of the infinite can appear to be involved in establishing the viciousness of an infinite regress in an infinite regress argument in the following way. An infinite regress entails the statement that (1) there are actually infinitely many entities. Given the extent to which he argues against the existence of actual infinities in his philosophical works**[i]** (especially in Book 3 of the *Physics*)**[ii]**, it is reasonable to suspect that Aristotle tacitly uses the statement, (2) actual infinities do not exist, in the infinite regress arguments where he does not explicitly discuss the viciousness. The conjunction of these two statements shows that an infinite regress entails a false statement, and consequently shows that the infinite regress is vicious.

My goal is to suggest a different interpretation: we can establish the viciousness of most infinite regresses in Aristotle's works without assuming that he tacitly uses the claim that actual infinities do not exist. The evidence that I will advance will not prove that my interpretation is the only one, but it will show that in some cases a closer fidelity to the texts obliges us to see that Aristotle's objections against infinite regresses need not follow from his notion of the infinite.

I have a number of reasons supporting this interpretation. First, in the cases where Aristotle explicitly discusses the viciousness of infinite regress, he does not make use of that claim. These are found in the *On Interpretation* 20b32-21a7, *Physics* 225b34-226a6 and 242b43-53, *On Generation and Corruption* 332a26-333a15, *Metaphysics* 1006a 6-10 and1007a33-b3, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a18-22.

Secondly, in some cases where Aristotle doe not explicitly discuss the viciousness of an infinite regress, one can establish the viciousness without making use of his claim that actual infinities do not exist. I will describe different ways in which one can discover these alternative interpretations.

In some cases the infinite regress entails an easily identifiable implicit statement

that is obviously false, and that is unrelated to Aristotle's belief that actual infinities do not exist. Consider the following. Some hold that the soul is divisible, and that we think with one part and desire with another. If, then, its nature admits of its being divided, what can it be that holds the parts together? Surely not the body; on the contrary it seems rather to be the soul that holds the body together; at any rate when the soul departs the body disintegrates and decays. If, then, there is something else which makes the soul one, this would have the best right to the name of soul, and we shall have to repeat for it the question: Is *it* one or multipartite? If it is one, why not at once admit that the soul is one? If it has parts, once more the question must be put: What holds its parts together, and so *ad infinitum* (*On the Soul* 411b5-13).

The goal of this infinite regress argument is to reject the claim that the soul is divisible. If an infinite regress were entailed, it would consist of an infinite succession of unifying parts of a soul. A necessary condition for something to "have the best right to the name of 'soul'" (411b10) is that it unify all the parts of a soul. Though each one of the infinitely many parts of the soul contributes to the unification of the soul, no single part by itself makes the soul unified. Hence, none of those part satisfies the sufficient condition. So, the regress entails the false (for Aristotle) statement that there is no soul.

A further infinite regress argument occurs later in the same book.

Since it is through sense that we are aware that we are seeing or hearing, it must be either by sight that we are aware of seeing, or by some sense other than sight. But the sense that gives us this new sensation must perceive both sight and its object, viz. color: so that either there will be two senses both percipient of the same sensible object, or the sense must be percipient of itself. Further, even if the sense which perceives sight were different from sight, we must either fall into an infinite regress, or we must somewhere assume a sense which is aware of itself. If so, we ought to do this in the first case (*On the Soul* 425b11-17).

We are presented with a disjunctive syllogism one disjunct of which is supposed to imply an infinite regress. Nothing in the context of the argument addresses the viciousness of its regress. However, the infinite regress entails the false statement that there are infinitely many senses.

In *Metaphysics* 1033a24-b4 Aristotle investigates the relation between matter and form. He uses an infinite regress argument to argue that "form also, or whatever we ought to call the shape in a sensible thing, is not produced" (1033b5-6). Whatever we make is made from something else which has form. Every form is

made from a prior form. Hence, the construction of any form would entail the construction of infinitely many prior forms. But this is obviously false.

In Chapter 4 of Book 3 in *On the Heavens* Aristotle argues that the number of elements in nature must be finite. He uses an infinite regress argument in Chapter 5 in a context where he is objecting against those who believe that there exists a single element: And those whose ground of distinction [among bodies] is size will have to recognize an element prior to the element, a regress which continues infinitely, since every body is divisible and that which has the smallest parts is the element (304b6-9).

The infinite regress consists of gradually smaller "elements", and so it entails that there is no smallest element. Since that which has the smallest parts is supposed to be the element, then the implicit consequence of the infinite regress is that there is no element, and this is clearly false for Aristotle.

The identification of the false statements entailed by the infinite regresses in the preceding examples are fairly easy to see, but in some cases it does require a closer examination of the context of an infinite regress argument. For example, in *Metaphysics* 1060a27-37 Aristotle explores the nature of principles (e.g. of being, unity) used to understand the world. If they are all destructible, and if every destructible thing requires a principle in order to be understood, then the attempt to understand any principle leads to an infinite regress of principles of principles of principles, etc.. Since whatever we use to understand something must itself be understood, and we understand only by means of principles, then an understanding of any thing by means of a principle requires the use of infinitely many principles. Hence an understanding of any event would be humanly impossible. But Aristotle believes that we can explain or understand some things (Aristotle presents a similar infinite regress argument at 1000b22-28).

Consider a further challenging example. In Chapter 6 of Book Z of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle inquires "whether each thing and its essence are the same or distinct" (1031a15-16). He is concerned with this problem because the answer might help him to determine whether universals exist apart from individual things (1039a24-b19). The reason for the interest in this problem is that if a thing and its essence are one, then the thing can be known without any recourse to Platonic Forms. He arrives at the conclusion that "each thing and its essence are one and the same but not by accident, and that to know each thing is to know its essence, and so even by exhibiting particular instances, it is clear that a thing and its essence must be one" (1031b19-21). Aristotle presents an infinite regress

argument to defend this position.

The absurdity of the separation [of a thing from its essence] would appear if one were to assign a name to each of the essences; for there would be another essence besides the original one, e.g. to the essence of horse there will belong a second essence. Yet why should not some things be their essences from the start, since essence is substance? (1031b29-1032a3).

Though he does not address the viciousness of the regress, the context of the argument offers a clue. Since "to know each thing is to know its essence" (1031b20-21), and essences are treated as distinct things, then to know anything entails that one knows infinitely many distinct essences. As this is impossible to realize, knowledge of anything is impossible. But of course for Aristotle this is false. A third plausible way of establishing the viciousness of an infinite regress independently of his claim that actual infinities do not exist can be found by comparing similar infinite regress arguments. In some cases Aristotle seems to appeal to his claim that infinitely many actualities do not exist, but he also presents very similar arguments without using that claim. Of course this does not prove that he does not tacitly use it in the former cases, but it does show that there is another plausible alternative justification of the viciousness. For instance, compare the next two arguments.

Next we must observe that neither the matter nor the form comes to be – i.e. the proximate matter and form. For everything that changes is something and is changed by something and into something. That by which it is changed is the primary mover; that which is changed the matter; that into which it is changed, the form. The process, then, will go on to infinity, if not only the bronze comes to be round but also the round or the bronze comes to be; therefore there must be a stop at some point (1069b35-1070a4).

Further, the process will go on to infinity, if there is to be change of change and generation of generation. For if the later is, so too must the earlier be – e.g. if the simple coming to be was once coming to be, that which was coming to be it was also once coming to be; therefore that which was simply coming to be it was not yet in existence, but something which was coming to be coming to be it was already in existence. And this was once coming to be, so that then it was not yet coming to be. Now since of an infinite number of terms there is not a first, the first in this series will not exist, and therefore no following term will exist (1068a33-b4).

I am definitely not saying or suggesting that these arguments are analogous in

form, but that they are sufficiently similar that the reason used to support the viciousness in the latter argument could also be used to support that of the former.

Further comparisons suggest that the reason that supports the viciousness of the second example can also be used in other cases where Aristotle appears to use tacitly his claim about the impossibility of infinitely many actualities. In *Heavens*, 300a27-b1, Aristotle simply asserts that the regress that is supposed to follow from the claim, for any resting object, there is some other resting object that constrains it, is "impossible" (300b2). In the *Generation of Animals*, 715b3-15, Aristotle explores the consequences where offsprings are different in kind from their parents and are able to procreate: they would procreate a different kind of creature, who would similarly procreate another different kind of creature, and so on endlessly. The resulting regress is supposed to be vicious because "nature flies from the infinite, for the infinite is imperfect, and nature always seeks an end" (715b15). In both examples Aristotle could be implicitly arguing that the regressive process must come to an end, otherwise there would be no beginning to the either process of constraining or procreating, and this is inconsistent with their actual existence.

One can discover further ways of establishing the viciousness of Aristotle's infinite regresses without appealing to his claim that actual infinities do not exist by attending to what is suggested by his incomplete evidence advanced in support of the viciousness of an infinite regress. Consider the case in the *Posterior Analytics* 72b5-14 where Aristotle rejects the claim "that there is no way of knowing other than by demonstration" because the knowledge of anything entails a vicious regress of successive demonstrations.

The only reason he gives to show that regress is vicious is that "one cannot traverse an infinite series" (75b10). But this is by itself insufficient to establish the viciousness. However, it suggests the other reason: we must or are obliged to go through the regress of demonstrations in order to know. The conjunction of these two reasons and the statement entailed by the regress of demonstrations that there are infinitely many demonstrations entails that we do not know anything. This consequence is false for Aristotle.

My third reason why it is not always necessary to appeal to Aristotle's claim that actual infinities do not exist is that many infinite regresses are logically superfluous. For some regresses entail false statements or unacceptable

consequences even if they are neither actually or potentially infinite. Consider the following examples.
(1) Person x is a man.
(2) Person x is white.
(3) Person x is a white man.
(4) Person x is a white white man.
(5) Person x is a white white white man (*On Interpretation* 20b32-21a7).

It should be noted that this regress is superfluous beyond the derivation of the first syntactic absurdity, from (4) onwards. If the infinite regress of attributes (1007a33-b3) is vicious because "not even more than two terms can be combined" (1007b2), then any extension of the regress beyond two combinations is unnecessary in order to entail an unacceptable consequence. If an essence of an essence is unacceptable, then an infinite regress of essences (1031b29-1032a3) is superfluous beyond the essence of an essence. The regress in which everything is desired for the sake of something else (1094a18-22) need not be infinite in order to entail the unacceptable consequence that all our desires are vain and empty; it just needs to extend throughout our lives (which of course are finite). The regress of senses (425b11-17) is shown to entail a false statement at the finite extension where it entails that we have six senses.
None of regresses entailing the impossibility of knowledge, understanding, or demonstration need to be infinite (72b5-14, 1006a6-10, 1031b29-1032a4, 1033a24-b4, 1038b35-1039a4, 1060a27-37, 1068a33-b4, 1069b35-1070a4). Consider a regress of successive demonstrations that are necessary in order to know anything. It need only extend a few finite steps beyond our lives, or beyond any irremediable mental exhaustion, in order to show that knowledge is humanly unattainable. Such infinite regresses are superfluous because either false statements or unacceptable consequences follow after only a finite number of steps.
Even some causal regresses or some regresses that can be interpreted as being causal need not be infinite in order to entail a false statement or an unacceptable consequence (225b34-226a6, 242b43-53, 300a27-b1, 1033a24-b4, 1068a33-b4,1069b35-1070a4). They are typically considered vicious because they entail the nonexistence of a first term that is necessary for the existence of any current term of the regress, and this in turn entails that there is no present or current term of the regress. In order to argue my point I will first apply a standard approach to an analogous example, and then show that there are different ways of

establishing the viciousness of the regress even when it is only finite. Assume an infinite regress of prior steps of a walk. According to one standard approach, the infinite regress entails the impossible task that I have walked infinitely many steps in order to reach any point on the walk. The falsity of the conclusion entails that the infinite regress is vicious. According to another standard approach, this infinite regress entails that there is no beginning, but a beginning is necessary in order to reach any point on the walk, and hence, there is no infinite regress. This contradiction entails that the regress is vicious.

However, even a finite regress of prior steps entails false statements. If the walk is extended far enough in the past, and if we assume a uniform pace, it will follow that I began walking before I was able to walk, or before I was born, or even before the universe can into existence. In each one of these cases the regress is finite and entails a false statement. Consequently, a finite regress of prior steps can be vicious.

Analogous reasoning applies to most causal regresses. Here is one way of showing this. Assuming that the universe came into existence at some finite point in the past, then prior to that point in time all physical objects at the macroscopic level did not exist. Thus, if there were a finite causal regress that extended beyond that point, it would follow that such objects existed before the universe came into being. Given the logical absurdities entailed by these finite causal regresses, they are vicious. If one is troubled by the assumption about the beginning of the universe, one could proceed in a similar way without that assumption. For example, many things as we know them today did not exist at some finite time in the past (e.g. plants, humans, insects, etc.). Any finite causal regress whose terms consist of such things can be extended far enough into a past where such things did not exist as we know them to day. For instance, humans did not exist in some remote past, but a finite causal regress of humans, entailed by a regress formula such as “Every parent has a prior parent”, can be extended to a time when there were no humans. Since this regress entails that there were humans at such a time, the finite regress is vicious.

Given my defense of the three reasons in support of my belief that Aristotle’s notion of the infinite is not necessarily involved in establishing the viciousness of his infinite regresses, why is it so tempting to appeal to that notion? I suspect that there are a number of reasons that work together.

First, Aristotle does discuss extensively his notion of infinity, and it does seem reasonable that it would be in the background of most arguments involving

infinite regresses.
Secondly, some of his infinite regress arguments are not easy to analyze, and so it is much easier just to appeal to his notion of infinity in order to justify the viciousness of infinite regresses.
Thirdly, given these difficulties and the fact that not all infinite regress arguments are important, it is not clear whether it would be worth the time and effort to find alternative justifications of the viciousness.
Fourthly, the usual reading of Aristotle's works does not require a comparison of infinite regress arguments, and the arguments tend to be far apart; so it is not easy to recall the arguments in which the viciousness of their infinite regresses can be justified on a reason other than the impossibility of actual infinities.

It is in part due to this failure to compare the infinite regress arguments in his philosophical corpus that one can be disposed to overgeneralize from the few cases (e.g. 1012b19-22, 715b3-15) where the viciousness of an infinite regress can appear to be justified by the claim actual infinities are impossible. This mistake illustrates that, when seeking to theorize on a particular kind of argument, we need to compare many instances of that argument type while paying careful attention to the context of their presentation. Such a comparison can help us to see more clearly the variations that can arise, and to prevent us from squeezing all the arguments into a same mold.

In summary, I have defended three reasons in support of the conclusion that Aristotle's notion of the infinite is not necessarily involved in establishing the viciousness of infinite regresses. For in the cases where the discussions of viciousness is explicit, he does not make use of his notion; in the cases where it is implicit, I have proposed alternative ways of establishing their viciousness while retaining fidelity to the context of the infinite regress arguments and to Aristotle's philosophical corpus; and finally, I have shown that some regresses need not be infinite in order to be vicious.

NOTES
i. At 208a5-24 he refutes arguments for an actual infinite; at 318a21 he argues that things are only potentially infinite. He gives five reasons for the existence of the infinite at 203b15-24, and discusses problems of asserting or denying the existence of the infinite at 203b30-207a31. He believes that his "account does not rob the mathematicians of their science, by disproving the actual existence of the infinite in the direction of increase, in the sense of the untraversable. In point of

fact they do not need the infinite and do not use it" (207b28-30). Numbers are not actually infinite for Aristotle (1083b37-1085a2).

ii. All references and quotations are from Barnes (1985).

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