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.
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> 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.

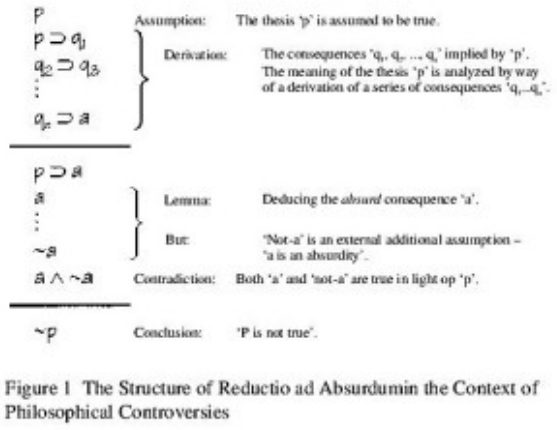

Figure 1 The Structure of Reductio ad Absurdum in the Context of Philosophical Controversies

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

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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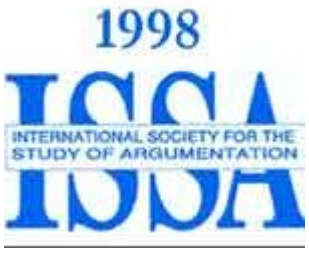
ISSA Proceedings 1998 – A General Theory Of Public Argumentation: Death And

Rebirth?



For some time, coteries of philosophers, rhetoricians, social theorists, and various other students of public reasoning have thought and written about the possibility of resurrecting the presumably dead practice of rational public argumentation. They have sought, in the words of James Crosswhite (1996: 70), "not to expose [public arguments] for the wretched things they are, but to reveal the intrinsic hopes carried by the practice of argument." They have pursued optimistic answers to questions that Michel Foucault (1993:18-19, qted. in Crosswaite 1996:13) asserts have been central to philosophy and critical thought since the eighteenth century: "What is this Reason that we use? What are its historical effects?

What are its limits, and what are its dangers? How can we exist as rational beings, fortunately committed to practicing a rationality that is unfortunately crisscrossed by intrinsic dangers?" More specifically, I have argued (1998) that most western general theories of argumentation have been grounded in understandings of specific relationships between knowers and the known:

* ideas as the contents of minds
* evidence as external to minds
* inference as grounded in both mental and linguistic operations, that is, as reflective of mental activity yet materialized in particular kinds of language use.

Those three epistemological assumptions were the foundations of the philosophy of science and then public argument theory that grew up in the nineteenth century (see Fuller 1993: esp. ch. 1), making argumentative discourse – a kind of logical talk – the link between the knower and the known, and hence the mechanism for reasoned decision making as it ought to occur in the worlds of all knowers from all eras of human existence.

Such assumptions have been under attack at least since Kant sought to collapse the Cartesian dichtomy between knowing and being and since Nietzsche declared the end of philosophy. Following World War I, there were concerted drives to save public, rational argumentation by eliminating fallacious reasoning (Lasswell 1928), by neutralizing and concretizing interpersonal talk**[i]**, and by making the verifiability principle a weapon for distinguishing between sense and non-sense in all arenas of human affairs (e.g., Ayer 1936/1962).

The attacks on general theories of public argumentation took on radically different forms following World War II. If the post-World War I queries tended to emphasize cognitive deficiencies in rational thought, the post-World War II assaults featured social and political, which is to say contextualized, analyses of flawed rationality and discursivity. At the Alta conference last year (Gronbeck 1998), I reviewed five lines of interrogation of general theories:

1. the anti-foundational attack, which asserts that totalized thought systems of any kind have lost their power because human conflicts are localized and grounded in idiosyncratic cultural practices;
2. the moves to segment knowledge and hence reasoning demographically, as Carol Gilligan (1982) did when demonstrating fundamental differences between male and female moral reasoning;
3. the idea that some kinds of knowledge are not accessible to everyone because of variability in life experiences especially by people differently raced, gendered, experienced, and acculturated;
4. arguments concerning all knowledge practices being ultimately political because differentiations in knowledge produce differentiations in power; and
5. the (especially French) postmodern assault on the idea of evidence (from the Latin *e-videre*) as grounded in The Seen in an electronic era when The Seen is unremittingly manipulable and hence falsifiable.

I do not wish to review those arguments, but, rather, examine three sorts of responses that can be given to them, to test the attacks and, then, to see if it still is possible to posit a general theory of argumentation that is adaptable to both public and more technical (academic) sorts of argumentation. I will take us back to three presumably general theories of argumentation – those offered by Stephen Toulmin, Chaïm Perelman and the Belgian School, and Frans van Eemeren and the Amsterdam School – in order to examine these classic visions for possible counter-attacks to those who find no hope for a unitary conception of argumentation. I have selected these three because they represent not only tested visions but, more important, because when taken together they provide us with epistemic, rhetorical , and linguistic responses to assaults, which is to say, responses featuring the very dimensions of the Enlightenment theory that made a serviceable general theory of argumentation possible in the first place. After I've reviewed the three positions, I'll offer a few observations about the adequacy of such thinking as counter-attacks to public argumentation's current detractors.

1. Toulmin: Field-Variant Modes of Rationality

Stephen Toulmin's 1958 publication of *The Uses of Argument* (1958/1964: 1-6) forced students of logic – and hence both technical and everyday argument – to confront explicitly the sources of power underlying inferential thinking: is logic to be understood apodeictically, as a series of inviolable laws controlling assertions about conceptual relationships, or psychologically, as a reflection of the most correct sort of cognitive activity, or sociologically, as a technology groups of people have stipulated as recipes for special kinds of communication? He then neatly sidestepped that overwhelming question by saying that it was too reductionist. We must not ask what logic is in an essentialist way, but, rather, what is the process by which human beings reason together, that is, "the procedures and categories by using which claims-in-general can be argued for and settled" (p. 7)? It was such a focus on process, Toulmin argued, that would allow him to bring together the *apodeixis* (or force-of-proof) with the *episteme* (or science of knowing) in a unitary conception of arguing. The process of arguing, to Toulmin, comprehends both mechanisms of logical force with conceptualizations of substantive arenas for decision making.

Such ideas led Toulmin away from thought about logical theory as such and toward a focus on logical or argumentative practice. And the heart of argumentative practice, he said, was the claim: that which is to be not simply asserted but a series of "grounds (backing, data, facts, evidence, considerations, features) on which the merits of the assertion are to depend" (p. 11). Logical theory or form cannot dictate how we argue; rather, what we are trying to argue dictates the sorts of forms required for sound arguments.

This is not to say, however, that the what-we-are-arguing makes argumentation wholly relative to situation or what Toulmin calls the field of dispute. Rather, he says, the question is, "What things about the form and merits of our arguments are *field-invariant* and what things are *field-dependent*" (15)?

To answer that question, he first examined the little words – modals and adverbs of qualification – that appear often in arguments: words such "can" and "cannot," "may" and "may not," "probably," "unless," and the like. Such words, which express possibilities and impossibilities, proprieties and improprieties, are central to the argumentative process. One of Toulmin's primary claims was that the *force* of such words is more or less invariable; whenever someone says that something is "impossible," the word connotes a strong denial of possibility. Yet, he continued, the *criteria* one uses to define impossibility varies from field to field;

impossibility is measured one way in mechanics (e.g., “A human being cannot lift a ton singlehandedly”), another way in parenting (e.g., “You cannot go visit your friend today”), a third way in linguistics (e.g., “You cannot have a male sister”). It is, then, the search for criteria-of-assessment that marks a key variation in argumentative strategies from field to field.

His second principal approach to the matter of field-variance is captured in his so-called layout of arguments. While the central terms of that layout – claim, data, warrant, backing, qualifications, and reservations – have been taught in basic communication textbooks since the early 1960s**[ii]**, Toulmin’s rationle for constructing the layout has received little attention. His move to the six-part layout of arguments is predicated on the assumption that jurisprudence rather than traditional logic should be our primary model for argumentation if only because

1. it is most awkward, even extraordinarily difficult, to add qualifications to the universal premises of the syllogism and
2. the great variety of inferences that are needed for multiple kinds of arguments simply cannot be accommodated by traditional deductive machinery. Better still, the six-term layout allows critics to examine far more dimensions of rational decision making than do syllogisms with their narrow grounds for assessing validity. And finally, what the layout can do ultimately is feature backings for warrants – the deep assumptions or rules that govern correct reasoning in various fields. Backings for theological arguments are radically different from backings for statistical or jurisprudential arguments, for example. Field variance is most clearly visible in backing for warrants.

Once again, the notion of backing for warrants, that is, for inferential processes, takes Toulmin beyond the analyticity of formal logical inferences and into inferential processes arising out of particular substances or fields of human operation. He asks that we abandon the “Principle of the Syllogism” (128ff.) because arguments usually should be tested in three ways: not only with the tautology test of traditional logic but also the verification test of its statements and self-evidence test of commonsensical relations between and among its statements (esp. 131). Often in argumentation, for that matter, “proper” warrants are not only used in traditional ways but sometimes even must be established; in some fields, that is, audiences must be taught new ways of inferring conclusions appropriate to the subject matter.

The bottom line in Stephen Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument* is captured in a

single exhortation: "the need for a *rapprochement* between logic and epistemology, which will become not two subjects but one only" (254), which for him involves not only philosophical inquiry but also "the reintroduction of historical, empirical, and even – in a sense – anthropological considerations into the subject which philosophers have prided themselves on purifying, more than all other branches of philosophy, of any but *a priori* arguments" (ibid.). I will comment on such a goal at the end of this paper.

2. The Belgian School: The New Rhetorical Model

Writing about the same time as Stephen Toulmin were the Belgians Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. They were struggling to delegitimate the traditional logicians' incarceration of rationality deduction as tools for reasoning in the post-Freudian age, yet they wished to accomplish these tasks without destroying the rigor and control of those *artis cognescendi*. Thus they launched their attacks on logical formalism, mere facticity as compelling of human action, the belief-opinion gap, and psychologism, all the while avering that "we have no wish to limit the study of argumentation to one adapted to a public of ignoramuses" (1958/1969: 7).

More specifically, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca announce that "The domain of argumentation is that of the credible, the plausible, and the probable" (1). By "the credible" they refer to that which flows from acceptable human sources to perceiving minds; by the plausible, that which conforms to the experience of audiences; and by the probable, that which is likely true. The domain of argumentation thus is depicted as that of human conceptions of the world rather than features of the external world itself.

Yet, they nonetheless warn against treating argumentation "as a branch of psychology" (9). That is, an audience's adherence to knowledge claims is not to be understood as attitudinal alignment or valuative correspondence, in part because the study of such effects cannot explain how or why arguments work, in part because argumentative force varies contextually, i.e., from science to law to philosophy. Adherence is to be grounded, not in psychological surrender, but in understandings of language formations. Language formations govern Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's effort to sort argumentative techniques into classes: quasi-logical arguments rely on linguistically manifest reasoning mechanisms; reality-based arguments, on the correspondence between language use and the outside world; associative arguments, on cognitive mappings of that world via relational concepts reflecting organizational relationships between aspects of interior or

exterior life; and dissociative arguments, representing the disjunctive or dialectical separations of ideas as they are articulated in language. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca argue that thinking occurs through, and not just in, argumentative-linguistic structures. Hence, a mentalist concept such as "idea" is collapsed into or made visible within the languages used to make it capable of being shared with others. Notice the moves that they have made. In seeking to avoid both logical formalisms and psychological subjectivities and in preferring talk about the construction of rather than the rehearsal of facticity in arguments, Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca are closing the gap that John Locke (1695/1975) built into relationships between the knower and the known as well as between language and ideas. As well, like Toulmin, they recognize that the lifeworld is divisible into such varied arenas as the scientific, the legal, and the philosophical, and that human beings inhabit varied psychological and sociological realms. Because audiences can be mixed, arguers must learn to employ "a multiplicity of arguments" (22), except when dealing with "an incompetent mob" (25).

Yet, not every discourse-of-influencing has equal value to all others. They stipulate the following: "We are going to apply the term *persuasive* to argumentation that only claims validity for a particular audience, and the term *convincing* to argumentation that presumes to gain the adherence of every rational being" (28). After making this distinction – a part of rhetorical theory in the form they are offering it at least since Richard Whately (1828/1963) – Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca use it to define three audiences for whom conviction based on argumentation is possible: their famed universal audience, an interlocuter or single hearer, and oneself (30, 31-45). They generally accept the views

1. that arguers deliberating with themselves are able to guarantee their own "value and sincerity" (41);
2. that arguers with opponents, insofar as they engage in discussion rather than self-interested debate, will meet the "duty of dialogue" that is our Platonic inheritance (56); and
3. that the universal audience is the ultimate totalization of reason or argumentative rationality, an article of faith in actual audiences' abilities to elevate their rational and moral sensibilities upon occasion so as to demand the best from a disputant and their commitment to not let argumentation be destroyed by skeptics and fanatics (31-35, 62). All the distinctions that result from separating persuading and convincing, finally, are understood by Perelman and

Olbrechts-Tyteca to be “unprecise and in practice must remain so” (29).
Here, then, is a general theory of argumentation focused on both the rhetoric- and language-using habits of peoples as well as their abilities to make reasoned judgments in particular circumstances. Inferences themselves are to be found in language use, though the actual achievement of audience depends upon rhetorically sound selections of particular arguments as laid out in the classification scheme. The bulk of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s book is description of the various arguments with advice on when and how to use them strategically.

3. The Amsterdam School: The New Dialectical Model
Setting themselves against “The New Rhetoric” model of the Belgians are members of the University of Amsterdam’s program in Discourse and Argumentation Studies (DASA). I will work in this paper primarily from a single source, Frans van Eemeren’s keynote address given to the 1987 Conference on Argumentation at Alta, Utah, entitled “Argumentation Studies’ Five Estates” (1987) because its purview is the broadest I can find from a member of the Amsterdam School and because van Eemeren talked in the first-person plural “we” in the address, giving it the feeling of a collective manifesto.
His central task in this work is to distinguish the so-called “New Dialectic” from Perelman’s rhetorical projects. He identifies the general project as one grounded in “Normal Pragmatics” or “the required integration of normal idealizaion and empirical description perspectives on discourse” (p. 9). He pursues the distinction between the Belgian and the Amsterdam projects through five so-called estates, with each estate “a subject of research in its own right which is a necessary component of a full argumentation school” (10). The five estates include
1. the philosophical estate, where “the fundamentals” of “any scholarly dispute” are subject to “reflection” (11);
2. the theoretical estate, where ideal models of the argumentative process are constructed (13-14);
3. the reconstruction estate, wherein particular viewpoints toward those ideal models are fashioned (14-16);
4. the empirical estate, wherein particular argumentative practices in various arenas are examined (16-17); and
5. the practical estate, or the place where pedagogies for teaching well-grounded argumentative practice are constructed (17-20).

Working with a pair of concepts they loosed from Toulmin, the idea of anthropological and critical approaches to the study of argumentation, the Amsterdamers construct two versions of the five estates comprising the realm of argumentation theory: the Belgian school is depicted as developing from an "*anthropological-relativist* perspective on reasonableness," and the Amsterdam school, from a "*critical-rationalist* perspective" (11, 12). The Belgians' effort to ground their theory of argumentation in audience assent or adherence is sharply contrasted in van Eeemeren's keynote address to the Amsterdamers' desire to ground their theory, not in geometrically inspired logics, but "modern logic," which they find flexible enough to "be made dialogical (which syllogistic logic was explicitly not intended to be)" (12, 13). More explicitly still, he proceeds to center their version of modern logic in speech acts wherein language uses are to be understood in their "contexts, terms and expressions" that are meaningful in "their social function, and at the same time [in] their specific meaning" (13).

Such a distinction, in turn, leads them to contrast the Belgians' ultimate court of argumentative appeal, "agreement with the standards prevailing among the people in whose cultural community the argumentation takes place," with theirs, "agreement with discussion rules which are instrumental in resolving a dispute and which are acceptable to the parties concerned" (*ibid*.). Such rules, of course, are to be found articulated in speech acts committed by particular disputants in particular situations. From there, the fundamental philosophical differences they see between themselves and followers of Perelman, they move through the other estates making similar contrasts that I can only suggest in a short paper:

1. Arguers working within the rhetorical school must understand particular audience's "stock of knowledge about [its] systems of beliefs" vis-à-vis those working within the dialectical school, who work from "an ideal model of a critical discussion and a code of conduct for the performance of speech acts" (19).
2. So far as modeling particular arguments is concerned, the rhetorical school examines past performances to discover the habitual rhetorical patterns used in a society, while the dialectical school examines the dialectical tensions existing in disagreements, looking for reconstructions of discourses that will resolve the dispute.
3. Empirically, rhetorical disputants examine past disputes to see which sorts of rhetorical patterns worked with particular sorts of audiences, i.e., persuasiveness, while dialectical disputants try to understand language usage well enough to realistically assess what reflective interlocuters will demand in argumentative

exchanges, i.e., convincingness.**[iii]**

4. Practically, rhetorically oriented arguers work from models of previous argumentative successes to see what has worked in a society, while dialectically oriented arguers are more reflective, studying "the dispute-resolving capacity of argumentation and the need for dialogue in order to be really convincing" (18).

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DASA's attitudes toward the rhetorical school are laid out clearly under this heading: The discussion rules, however, do not provide a simple trick that merely has to be learned by heart to be applied successfully in practice.… Argumentation is not an abstract nor a mechanical process, but a verbal and social activity aimed at convincing another person of one's points of view by systematically conquering his doubts (19).

The "discussion rules" and "a code of conduct" are the foundational commitments of the pragma-dialecticians of Amsterdam. Similar to the various so-called felicity conditions discussed by American students of speech acts, the ideas of discussion rules and codes of conduct construct a sociolinguistic basis for argumentation, that is, a series of socially sanctioned rules for interpersonal language use. The rules are not to be found in language per se, as in, for example, Toulmin's examination of the force of certain modal verbs and qualifying adverbs. Rather, they are to be found in social agreements about how members of some collectivity wish to conduct their business. And thus, van Eemeren argues, "argumentation should be studied and taught as a specimen of normal communication and interaction between language users" (19).

4. The Rebirth of Public Argumentation?

It now is time to return to the post-World War II assaults upon general theories of especially public argumentation. Recall the Enlightenment's projects that urge us to understand that external facts are used to validate the internal lifeworld, that truth is to be understood empirically but in terms of universal generalizations, that language is capable of being studied independent of the human ideas to which it supposedly gives expression and can ground generally valid forms of reasoning, and that the visual is the dominant sense by which human beings access the external world and hence truth. These tenets of modernism in general produced a theory of public argumentation whereby validity was assessed formally and truth was determined with empirically testable relationships between premises and conclusions. The post-World War II assault upon such a model of argumentation, in contrast, challenged the idea of formal validity,

replacing it with an experientially based concept of reasoning, and the idea of a reality separable from our experience of the lifeworld, replacing the notion of so-called brute reality with an emphasis upon so-called social reality. Thus, the anti-modernist attacks came as a firestorm, grounding validity and truth in life experience – but life experience understood within dominating social categories, that is, life as constructed on the basis of gender, race, social economic status, age, disability, and any other category by which groups of a society's citizens might classify themselves and find significance in their experiences. Can a general theory of public argumentation be saved after such a conflagaration?

Toulmin, the Belgians, and the DASA scholars share some tactics when attempting to defend a positive answer to that question. All three become situationists to one degree or another; Toulmin talks of field variance, Perelman and Olbrects-Tyteca (1958/1969: 19), of "*the ensemble of those whom the speaker wishes to influence by his argumentation*," and van Eemeren, of contexts. To be sure, they see situations in quite different ways: Toulmin, as arenas-of-talk governed by expectations, Perelman, as places where particular sets of auditors reside, and van Eemeren, as social agreements wherein discussion rules and codes of conduct are specified.

Yet, all three recognize that the universalism that seemed to echo through so many discussions of rhetoric and logic in the Enlightenment must be sacrificed if a general theory of public argumentation is to stand.

But, one might ask, if a sense of universalism is gone, what's "general" or generalizable about the resulting theory of argumentation? To this question we get three quite different answers from the three schools. Toulmin provides two answers: a general language of reasoning that suggests the rational force of certain kinds of discourses and a series of required types of discourse captured in his layout of argument (even if the content of those discourses vary from field to field). Thus, to Toulmin, thinking itself and the language of thought are generalizable within a collectivity; thus, a general theory of argumentation can be found in epistemic and linguistic principles. Perelman provides a patently rhetorical answer to the question, suggesting that general principles for testing argumentative reasoning lie within the idea of the universal audience. In fact what is constant in all argumentative practice is the need to create adherence in situated human beings; again, adherence is not simply a matter of psychological assent, but, rather, a matter of constructing discourses within the domain of the credible, the plausible, and the probable – but as those notions are understood by

particular audiences. Perelman's generalizable theory is tied, as he says by the end of *The New Rhetoric* (1958/1969: 513), to "the language of a community, be this a community bound by biological ties, or by the practice of a common discipline or technique." A version of communitarianism is what Perelman offers as a base for a general theory of argumentation. To van Eemeren, such a ground moves too close to a kind of relativism, so the DASA scholars expand their understanding of the social to includes rules for both language use and social expectations. That is, they find adherence to sociolinguistic concepts of speech acts the true foundation for a general theory of dialogic conversational engagement of others. Pragma-dialectics or normative pragmatics is grounded a generalizable theory of "the institutions of social life" (1987: 20).

In eschewing universalism yet seeking a version of generalizability, therefore, all three schools reviewed in this paper return us to the fundamental requirements of any large-scale theory of human community: the epistemic-linguistic study one finds in Toulmin, Perelman's emphasis upon shared, intersubjectively validated relationships between individuals, and van Eemeren's dialogical-linguistic study of speech acts. In spite of their differences, all three schools reaffirm the centrality of epistemic, social, and linguistic dimensions to argumentation.

No one of the post-World War II schools of argumentation reviewed here, however, is adequate to the challenge of post-positivist, anti-totalizing, culturally radical, postmodernist, ideological thought. The Amsterdam school's adherence to the five estates as realms or areas within which any argument theory must have commitments to be complete is innovative and potentially powerful, yet the relatively little time and space devoted to serious epistemological justification means that the assaults upon totalizing concepts, masculinist understandings of reasoning, and apolitical conceptions of convincingness can stand. What is needed within the school is the strong attention to epistemology that came through in Toulmin's early (1958/1964) and later (1972) work on epistemic communities, as well as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's work on understanding the power of socially situated experience as conditioning of argumentation's force.

Additionally, argumentation needs to be become sensitive to what is now called medium theory (e.g., Deibert 1977) to pursue the varied forms in which argumentas can be presented, not only linguistically but also acoustically and visually; only then will the postmodern assault on visuality and evidence be met head-on. Work on a general theory of public argumentation in the face of post-World War II attacks on it must continue, though it assuredly can build upon the

strong bases provided by Toulmin, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, and the Amsterdam school, whose pioneering work deserves our continued attention.

NOTES

i. I am thinking here of the rise of the General Semantics movement, inspired by Alfred Korzybski's Science and Sanity (1933) and I. A. Richards' The Philosophy of Rhetoric (1936/1964, p. 7), where he defined rhetoric as "the study of misunderstanding and its remedies." Training in the neutral, concrete, overwhelmingly descriptive use of language and reasoning spread across the U.S. in the form of General Semantics workshops, and scholarship proporting to validate that training appeared in two journals, General Semantics Bulletin and the more scholarly Etc.

ii. So far as I know, the first textbook to teach the Toulmin layout was a debate book, Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, Decision by Debate (1963).

iii. Cf. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca on the distinction between persuasion and conviction being suggested here. While van Eemeren does not evoke the universal audience in offering the distinction, his discussion of "reflection" comes close to suggesting it.

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ISSA Proceedings 1998 – Innocence By Dissociation. A Pragma-Dialectical Analysis Of The Fallacy Of Incorrect

Dissociation In The Vatican Document 'We Remember: A Reflection On The Shoah'

1. Introduction

The Vatican document '*We remember: A reflection on the Shoah*', (issued on March 16, 1998) has led to many critical reactions throughout the world. The main reason for this is that it did not contain the generally expected apology to the Jewish people for the Roman Catholic Church's complicity in the Holocaust but, instead, turned out to be an apologia in which the Church pleads not guilty. The apologia is based on a twofold distinction:
(1) between the Church as an institution and its individual members, and
(2) between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism.

In this paper, I argue that these distinctions both constitute the fallacy of incorrect dissociation. The concept of dissociation was introduced by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. It is one of the two main principles of argumentation they discuss – the other one being association. In pragma-dialectical terms, dissociation aims at changing one of the the protagonist and the antagonist's common starting points. If this is not done properly, the dissociation constitutes a violation of one of the rules for critical discussion. In this case, I contend that Rule 6 has been broken because the document presents the distinctions as self-evident and is therefore guilty of begging the question.
In Section 2, I describe the historical background of the document and sketch its outlines. In Section 3, I summarize the main reactions to it. In Section 4, I explain why the two distinctions made in the document can be analysed as dissociations in the Perelmanian sense. In Section 5, I argue that these dissociations violate Rule 6 of pragma-dialectics and constitute the fallacy of 'innocence by dissociation', being a special case of the fallacy of incorrect dissociation. Finally, in Section 6, I conclude that this fallacy is the terminological counterpart of the well-known fallacy of 'guilt by association'.

2. Background and outline of 'We remember: A reflection on the Shoah'

'We Remember: A reflection on the Shoah' is a 14-page document issued by the

Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews on March 16, 1998.**[i]** It is a long-awaited document because it addresses the role of the Roman Catholic Church in the Holocaust during the Second World War. The document acknowledges that individual Catholics did things that were wrong or even sinful in their support of anti-Semitism and of Nazi persecution of Jews, and it repents for this – using the Hebrew word teshuvah. But it also absolves the Church as such from complicity in the Holocaust. It even warmly praises the controversial wartime Pope Pius XII (who has long been accused of remaining silent in the face of Nazi genocide and even of pro-German tendencies) for saving hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives 'personally or through his representatives'.

The Vatican commission took up the task of creating this document at Pope John Paul II's request eleven years ago, in 1987 – a year after the pope had a historic meeting with Rome Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff in Rome's central synagogue. It is the third formal document prepared by the commission, following the landmark Nostra Aetate declaration of 1965, which marked the first official gesture of reconciliation by the Church to the Jews by repudiating the concept of Jewish guilt for Jesus' death and by calling for mutual respect and dialogue between Catholics and Jews. By the way, it was not until 1965 that the Vatican eliminated the phrase 'perfidious Jews' from the liturgy of the Holy Week service.

The Vatican statement takes pains to distinguish anti-Judaism from anti-Semitism, suggesting that only the Nazis were guilty of anti-Semitism. It also stops far short of taking responsiblity as a religious institution from promulgating the tenets of anti-Judaism, in particular the teaching that the Jews killed Jesus. The widely accepted view is that this central Christian teaching provided the theological foundation for the anti-Semitism of the Nazi years that culminated in the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis. Instead, the Vatican's document distances Christianity from the Holocaust. 'The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime,' it says.

3. Reactions to the Vatican document

It is an understatement to say that the document did not meet with general approval. Though Cardinal Edward Cassidy, the Head of the Vatican Commission, said that the Vatican's statement amounts to an act of repentance as well as an apology, most of the reactions to the document clearly indicate that it does not live up to its expectations. The Vatican's apology to the Jewish people still refuses, it is said, to accept full responsibility for the Catholic Church's failure to take action to stop or slow the Holocaust. In this respect, many see the document as a

step backwards compared to recent statements by Catholic Bishops in France, Germany and Poland, who admitted that the Church was at fault for its failure to react to Jewish persecution half a century ago. Oddly, they add, the Vatican document fails to do what the current pope, John Paul II, himself has done in less formal documents and speeches – that is, take direct responsibility for the Church's failure to try to ameliorate the attempted genocide of the Jewish people.

Many representatives of Jewish groups voiced their disappointment about the document and declared that it 'did not go far enough'. Some news agencies even claimed that the document has been 'greeted with nearly universal dismay and anger by Jewish experts'. Perhaps this is a exaggeration but only a slight one because it cannot be denied that many expressed their dissatisfaction.**[ii]**

Among the dissatisfied critics were Rabbi Leon Klenicki, director of the Department of Interfaith Affairs of the Anti-Defamation League, who called the paper 'a real insult' and 'a pretext for an apology for Pius XII,' and Goldie Hershon, President of the Canadian Jewish Congress, who criticized the Vatican as follows: 'It is inconsistent to admit the failures of ordinary Christians to speak out against the Holocaust, but to ignore the deafening silence of the Pope.'**[iii]**

Others were even more outspoken in their criticism. For example, Yitzhak Minervi, a former Israeli envoy to the Vatican, said: 'All the responsibility is rolled onto the church's flock […] while the church and its institutions emerges spotless.' And Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League in the United States said: 'The document rings hollow. It is an apologia full of rationalization for Pope Pius XII and the Church. It takes very little moral and historical responsibility for the Church's historic teaching for the contempt of Jews.'**[iv]**

Rabbi Mark Winer, a White Plains, N.Y. rabbi who is president of the National Council of Synagogues, finally, said that 'the "remembrance" is incomplete, the "repentance" is lacking and the "resolve" for the future is pretty weak-kneed.'**[v]**

4. The distinctions in the Vatican document as dissociations

The first distinction in the Vatican document is that between 'anti-Semitism' and 'anti-Judaism':

[…] we cannot ignore the difference […] between anti-Semitism based on theories contrary to the constant teaching of the Church […] and the long-standing sentiments of mistrust and hostility that we call anti-Judaism, of which unfortunately, Christans also have been guilty.

Here, we see the first move towards the conclusion that the Roman Catholic

Church is not guilty and never has been guilty of anti-Semitism. This point is repeated even more explicitly a little but further in the text:
The Shoah was the work of a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime. Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity […]'.

Anti-Judaism, on the other hand, does have Christian roots. According to the document, it can be traced back to 'certain interpretations of the New Testament', beit that these interpretations were totally mistaken:
In the Christian world […] erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability [for murdering Jesus Christ] have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility towards this people.
The second distinction in the document is that between the Roman Catholic Church as an institution and its individual members. On the one hand, the document emphasizes that the Church, including its leader, Pope Pius XII, has done everything to resist and fight racism and Nazi anti-Semitism:
During and after the war, Jewish communities and Jewish leaders expressed their thanks for all that had been done for them, including what Pope Pius XII did personally or through his representatives to save hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives.
On the other hand, the document suggests that in 'some Christians minds', 'anti-Jewish prejudices' were 'imbedded' which made them 'less sensitive, or even indifferent to the persecution launched against the Jews by National Socialism' and observes that:
[…] the spiritual resistance and concrete action of other Christians was not that which might have been expected from Christ's followers.
The 'call to penitence' is, therefore, only directed to the individual members of the Roman Catholic Church, not to itself or to its leaders, because, again, they are not guilty. When the document refers to the Catholic Church's desire 'to express her deep sorrow', it is not because of the things the Church did wrong, but 'for the failures of her sons and daughters'. The 'act of repentance' (*teshuva*) is carried out only indirectly, 'since,' – according to the document – 'as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well as the merits of all her children'.
To sum up: the Roman Catholic Church pleads 'not guilty' with respect to the horrors of the Holocaust, first by distinguishing between pagan anti-Semitism and Christian anti-Judaism, and second by distancing itself from its individual members.

This twofold distinction amounts to what Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, in Chapter 4 of their landmark study *The New Rhetoric. A treatise on argumentation,* call a 'dissociation' (1969: 411-459).**[vi]** They contrast dissociation with association:

By processes of *association* we understand schemes which bring separate elements together and allow us to establish a unity among them […]. By processes of *dissociation*, we mean techniques of separation, which have the purpose of dissociating, separating, disuniting elements which are regarded as forming a whole or at least a unified group within some system of thought […]. (1969: 190).

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca mention several examples of dissociated concepts: 'scientific truth' and 'religious truth', 'reality' and 'appearance', 'verbal' and 'real', et cetera. They also point out that paradoxical expressions such as 'learned ignorance', 'happy misfortune', 'bitter joy', 'thinking the unthinkable', and 'expressing the unexpressible' 'always call for an effort at dissociation'. Another example of a paradoxical expression is: 'I do not mind dying. But it grieves me to depart from life.' Here, the dissociation is 'the result of opposition between a word and what is ordinarily regarded as a synonym for it' (1969: 443).

If association unifies elements which were previously regarded by the audience as separate and dissociation separates elements which were previously regarded by the audience as a unit, it will be clear that the twofold distinction in the Vatican document is, in fact, a double dissociation. The document introduces a division into a concept the audience previously regarded as constituting 'a single entity', 'a natural unity' or 'an indivisible whole': first there was only 'anti-Semitism' and 'the Roman Catholic Church', now there is 'pagan anti-Semitism' versus 'Christian inspired anti-Judaism' on the one hand and 'the Church as an institution' versus 'the individual members of the Church' on the other.

Although Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca clearly believe that dissociation, just like association, is a general principle for defining argumentation schemes, the only loyal supporters of this idea I know of are Warnick and Kline (1992: 10). But then, they admire Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's work so much that they seem to accept almost everything they say without question.**[vii]** There are several other authors, however, who express their doubts about dissociation as an argumentation scheme. Schellens, for instance, observes that 'it is unclear which argumentation forms or schemes make use of dissociation' and concludes that 'the dichotomy between association and dissociation is impractible' (translated from 1985: 59). Kienpointner restricts his overview of argumentation schemes to

those based on association because he finds the dissociative schemes 'less systematic' (translated from 1991: 189). Garssen even claims that 'dissociation is neither a specific type of argumentation nor an argumentation scheme.' His reason for this is that 'dissociation provides no specific way to connect a starting point with a thesis in such a way that acceptance of the latter is increased' (translated from 1997: 72).

In the Vatican document, the twofold dissociation aims at changing the audience's beliefs about the Roman Catholic Church's role in the Holocaust. The initial dialectical situation the document encounters is the general opinion which holds the Church jointly responsible for the terrors of the Holocaust inspired by Nazi anti-Semitism: 'The Roman Catholic Church is accessory to the Holocaust because it has done too little to resist it and has always endorsed or even promoted anti-Semitism.' The result of the twofold dissociation desired by the Vatican is that after reading the document the audience will believe, first, that only some individual members of the Church have done things to be blamed for and, second, the Church has never adopted an anti-Semitic attitude.

In order to succeed in the endeavour of changing the audience's starting points, the document must convincingly show that the two distinctions (Church as an institution versus members of the Church and anti-Semitism versus anti-Judaism) are justified. The burden of proof is a heavy one. To what extent has the attempt been succesful? In my opinion, the attempt has failed totally.

5. Incorrect dissociations as pragma-dialectical fallacies

The twofold dissociation in the Vatican document would have been succesful only if it would have proved convincingly that there is no connection whatsoever between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism on the one hand and between the Church as an institution and its members on the other. Judging by the reactions to the document the intended proof was not convincingly at all.

First, though the document admits that anti-Judaism has Christian roots which is based on 'erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament', it ignores the fact – as is rightly observed in some of the reactions to the document – that the official Roman Catholic doctrine taught the 'sons and daughters' of the Church for centuries that the Jews murdered Jesus Christ. After all, it was only in 1965 that this doctrine was renounced by the Second Vatican Council.

Moreover, the document denies every relation between Christian anti-Judaism and pagan anti-Semitism, as if the second was not at all inspired and legitimized by the first. In this respect, the document is a step backwards compared to other

statements, for example, by Dutch bishops who declared already in 1955 that 'the tradition of theological anti-Judaism has contributed to a climate in which the Shoah could take place.'
Second, though the document states that 'the Catholic Church expresses her deep sorrow for the failures of her sons and daughters in every age', it maintains a sharp distinction between the Church as an institution on the one hand and its individual members on the other – as if the latter are not supposed to do what their religious leaders tell them to do.

The document's failure in convincingly making the twofold dissociation is clearly illustrated by Rabbi Mark Winer: 'In ascribing sinfulness to individual Catholics, it sidesteps responsibility on the part of the church […]. It never says that Catholic teaching was central to the teaching of contempt about the Jewish people.' Dr. Geoffrey Wigodor, one of the two Israeli representatives on the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations with Christians, is even more outspoken: 'In the document, the line is that it is not the Church that was to blame, but individuals who fell short of the Christian ideal. This flies in the face of history, noting it was the Church fathers themselves who interpreted the New Testament in an anti-Jewish manner; it was the Church councils which ruled against the Jews; and it was the popes themselves who drove the Jews out of civilized life, locking them up in gettos.'**[viii]**
One may add, as an aside, that if it would really be true that the Roman Catholic Church as an institution has done nothing to be blamed for, one may wonder whether the 'call for penitence' is, in fact, not totally out of order. Repentance always comes too late, the proverb tells us. But what is repentance without guilt?
To come back to my original question whether the twofold dissociation is justified, it is now possible to analyse the incorrectness of the dissociation in terms of the pragma-dialectical rules for critical discussion (van Eemeren et al. 1996: 298-306). Since the Vatican document presents the distinctions as self-evident and ignores the obvious relations between the two pairs of dissociated elements, the document's arguments violate Rule 6 of pragma-dialectics: 'A party may not falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point […]' (van Eemeren et al. 1996: 284). The protagonist who violates this rule in this way (here: the authors of the Vatican document) is guilty of begging the question (van Eemeren et al. 1996: 305). One cannot resolve a dispute succesfully by presenting a dissociation as if it were already accepted by the antagonist (here: the readers of the Vatican document). This special case of begging the question may be christened (no pun

intended) the fallacy of *incorrect dissociation.*

6. Conclusion

Only by committing the fallacy of incorrect dissociation, the Vatican document is able to maintain the Roman Catholic Church's claim to guiltlessness of the Holocaust – a claim to 'innocence by dissociation', so to speak. This phrase is the terminological counterpart of the well-known fallacy *guilt by association*: an attempt to 'transfer some perceived discredit to an opponent, based on some association that person has with a supposedly discreditable individual or group' (Johnson and Blair 1983: 82). According to Johnson and Blair, the fallacy of *guilt by association* is 'a special case of *ad hominem*, for it is an attack on the person (instead of the argument), but an indirect one – via some (alleged) association of the person' (1983: 90). As is clear from this definition, the parallel really is only terminological. For Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, the term *association* as well as the term *dissociation* does not refer to relations among people but between things.

Having said that the Vatican document commits the fallacy of *incorrect dissociation*, I am tempted to conclude that, after all, the Roman Catholic Church is guilty of something: if not of failing in fighting the Holocaust, then of committing a fallacy – albeit that the former is, of course, to be taken much more seriously than the latter. But then, I am sure that the Vatican could easily manage to produce a document in which even this less serious accusation would be refuted.

NOTES

i. The Vatican document is published on The Holy See's Internet site (www.vatican.va).

ii. The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc., virtualjerusalem.com (www.jta.org), March 16 and 29, 1998.

iii. The quotations in this paragrapgh are taken from the BBC News Online (news.bbc.co.uk), March 16, 1998; the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc. virtualjerusalem.com (www.jta.org), March 16, 1998; and the Canadian Jewish Congress (www.cjc.ca), March 16, 1998.

iv. The quotations in this paragrapgh are taken from The Miami Herald, Heraldlink (www.herald.com), March 17, 1998; and The Jerusalem Post, Internet Edition (www.jpost.com), March 17, 1998.

v. This quotation is taken from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc.

virtualjerusalem.com (www.jta.org), March 16, 1998.

vi. The book was originally published in French as La nouvelle rhétorique: traité de l'argumentation (1958).

vii. Cf. Van Eemeren, Grootendorst et al. (1996: 124-125).

viii. The quotations in this paragraph are taken from the Jewish Telegraphic Agency Inc. virtualjerusalem.com (www.jta.org), March 16, 1998; and The Jerusalem Post, Internet Edition (www.jpost.com) March 17, 1998.

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