

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 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 devalue controversy. Many of us have beliefs we live by, some have beliefs we would die for, and we often do not wish to acknowledge evidence that those beliefs are open to objection. Other people - some of them apparently sensible and faring well in this world - hold different beliefs and organize their lives in different ways. This is not good news: hence the temptations of exclusivism and isolationism - and the timeliness of Toulmin's message that dissent is something to be treasured.

As noted, we find in Western philosophy a strong tradition of searching for certainty, a tradition which would suggest that controversy has negative value. Of course we also find such philosophers as Aristotle, who have qualified and

contextualized his quest for certainty, arguing for different norms for different areas of knowledge. And there are still others – such as Sextus Empiricus, Hume, Voltaire, Mill, Karl Popper, Paul Feyerabend, and Chaim Perelman who have claimed or implied that controversy has positive value. Mill’s valuing of controversy is implied in the following well-known statement:

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

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

1. Controversy can serve to expose errors and omissions. This role of controversy is of obvious intellectual value in leading us away from false views and, through such correctiveness, in helping us to approach the truth.
2. Controversy will also expose integral assumptions that have not been questioned, alternate interpretations of data or cases, and objections to views held. Such exposure may amount to the exposure of error or may lead to recognition of the need for further argument or revision in our views.
3. Through controversy, we may come to better understand our own beliefs, insofar as we are exposed to objections to them, see how those objections may be answered, and come to set our beliefs in the context of alternatives to them. If, in the wake of controversy, we retain our beliefs, we nevertheless understand better

because, as a result of controversy, we come to understand how our view compares and contrasts with others.

4. For many issues of complexity and depth, involving norms and other claims of a non-observational and non-empirical nature, there is ample reason to suspect that certainty should not be possible and that the absence of controversy reveals lack of critical thinking or a failure in social processes of discussion and debate. For such issues, if there is no controversy, we should be worried. In a recent issue of the *New York Review of Books*, the following criticism is raised against George Frederickson, who had in a previous issue reviewed two books about race relations in the United States.

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

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

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

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

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

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

7. From the perspective of particular philosophical theories of knowledge such as scepticism, fallibilism, falsificationism, and coherentism, controversy may be deemed to be of positive theoretical value in illustrating the pluralism of human belief and constituting the testing grounds which is necessary to render beliefs more accurate and reliable.

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

3. Returning to the Dilemma

My original dilemma was that adversariality seemed to be bad, controversy seemed to be good, and yet adversariality seemed to be a necessary feature of controversy. I am not so inclined now to see this as a real dilemma. Minimal adversariality is neutral or, at worst, mildly negative; many ancillary aspects of

adversariality are negative. And controversy is of mixed value. Unless one believes that nothing can be of mixed value, there is no problem of consistency with these judgments.

What problems there are would seem to be practical ones. Grant that we would not want to eliminate controversy even if we could, because of its many positively valuable effects. Grant that insofar as adversariality is integral to controversy, we would not want to eliminate adversariality either. But grant in addition that controversy often brings with it dogmatism, intolerance, lack of empathy, hostility, inefficiency, and many other bad things. The question then is how we can mitigate these negative effects – how we can participate in controversies politely, constructively and effectively, without such degeneration. Part of the answer lies in learning to express our arguments carefully and with respect, while avoiding ad hominem, 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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