

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - From Arguing Within To Arguing Across Boundaries: Globalization As A Challenge To Argumentation Studies



Is it possible to argue across the boundaries of self-contained, ideologically or culturally incompatible formations (e.g., East and West, North and South, Islamic and Christian civilizations)? In other words, can controversies be discussed and resolved rationally without there being even a common, general intellectual or cultural tradition for disputants to fall back on as the final guarantee for an eventual agreement? The default answer to this question, for a number of reasons, is “No.”

Analytical and neo-pragmatist philosophers by and large have long expressed their doubt that a rational agreement can ever be reached argumentatively between radically different systems. W. V. Quine undercuts such a possibility with his influential doctrine of the “indeterminacy of translation.” For Quine, outsiders “cannot even say what native locutions to count as analogues of terms as we know them, much less equate them with ours term for term,” and the “native may achieve the same net effects through linguistic structures so different that any eventual construing of our devices in the native language and vice versa can prove unnatural and largely arbitrary” (1960:53). Richard Rorty believes that “there is no way to step outside the various vocabularies we have employed and find a metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies, all possible ways of judging and feeling,” which has led him to reject argumentation as the mode of cross-“vocabulary” interactions (1989: xvi, 8).

Postmodern thinkers in general not only accept the premise of a radical incommensurability between different life-worlds, but also add an ethical dimension to the issue, making it even more difficult to contemplate the possibility of rational, non-coercive means of cross-cultural conflict resolution.

Jean-François Leyotard, for instance, introduces the concept of a *différend* as “a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments.” When “a universal rule of judgment between heterogeneous genres is lacking in general,” a “wrong” would necessarily result from the fact that “the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse” (1988: xi). Even Jürgen Habermas has acknowledged that his earlier formulation of a “discourse ethics,” based on the principle that “a norm can be considered objectively right if it would be consented to in free discussion by all concerned as consonant with their interests,” fails to take into proper account “the power of history over against the transcending claims and interests of reason,” the “ideas of the ‘good life’” which “form an integrated component of the particular culture,” and “*Sittlichkeit*, the concrete customs of a community” (Dews 1986: 17-18).

And anthropologists lend further support to this general skepticism with vivid stories of their personal encounters with other cultures. Clifford Geertz, in an account of how, during a 1971 trip to Indonesia, he had a “debate” with a local religious master over the issue of whether American astronauts had indeed landed on the moon, shows what an impossible task it could be trying to argue with people locked in an acutely different cultural framework. The setting was a religious school in Sumatra. His opponent, the teacher-director of the institution, opened with the declaration that “no Muslim could believe [the moon-landing],” because the Prophet was “held to have said that an enormous ocean lies between the earth and the moon and this was the source of [Noah’s] flood.” If the Americans had indeed gone to the moon, then

1. they “would have put a hole in this ocean and a flood like Noah’s” would have ensued and would have drowned us all;
2. they would have proved that the Prophet was wrong, which was impossible;
3. what they did was most likely to be a trick played by God who “had constructed a fake moon off to the side somewhere for them to land on.”

Geertz, feeling that he had better not question the “authority of a *hadith* [a tradition from the Prophet]” there and then, and not quite knowing “what to do with [the master’s] argument,” chose to confine himself to describing what Western science considered the moon to be. And he suggested in conclusion that “maybe the best thing would be for a Muslim to go along on the trip next time.” This invocation of the “seeing is believing” presumption, however, apparently did

not sound particularly persuasive to people who had accepted the premise that the almighty God could easily construct a “fake moon” in the first place. As a result, what promised to be a “great debate” between two cultures quickly fizzled into a “clash of narratives,” with “nothing” being “disturbed” (1995: 82-84).

Even though they have been, and to a significant extent remain, the dominant assumptions, these perspectives have come under criticism from the very beginning. Donald Davidson famously challenges the notion of “incommensurability” on the basis of its own “incoherence.” For if two different “conceptual schemes” were indeed as radically incommensurable as has been suggested, they would be *mutually unintelligible*. And it would not be possible for us to find other conceptual schemes incompatible to ours on the basis of a comparison (1973-1974). Richard J. Bernstein speaks for many when he points out that “[incommensurable] languages and traditions are not to be thought of as self-contained windowless monads that share nothing in common. . . . There are always points of overlap and crisscrossing, even if there is not perfect commensuration” (1991:92). And Geert-Lueke Lueken calls attention to the fact that whether “systems of orientation” (SOs) are incommensurable or not “depends on our interpretations of them,” which can be “improved and revised,” and that incommensurability should be “regarded as a matter of degree” (1991: 244).

While perspectives such as these have alleviated our anxiety over an incommensurability-caused breakdown in cross-cultural communication (not to mention argumentation), there is still no denying the fact that neither a neutral ground nor a commonly acceptable “meta-vocabulary” is available when symbolic exchanges take place between independent formations such as the above-mentioned. A culture is definable precisely by the uniqueness of the basic assumptions and beliefs its members subscribe to. If the disputants insist on invoking their own first premises, as in the case of Geertz “debating” the Indonesian religious master, there can be no way a mutually agreed-upon decision can be reached on what should be the point of controversy (e.g., the question “Did American astronauts actually land on the moon?” would have invited scorn rather than argument had it been raised in an intra-cultural context of the Western discourse), much less that a position can be justified rationally. Large international or inter-cultural formations, moreover, came into being because of an irreconcilable conflict, real or imagined, in vital interests. As a result, much of the “argumentation” that pits one of those

formations against another (e.g., the daily debates in the U.N.), upon a close examination, turns out to be little more than veiled exercises of *realpolitik*, calculated horse tradings, self-advertising exchanges between the deaf, etc.. Within this context, the “complexities of [international] political life are reduced to a calculus of power, justice is reduced to self-interest, appearances are reduced to the reality they conceal, and, ultimately, language is reduced to the world it would represent” (Beer and Hariman 1996: 390).

It must be a keen awareness of this intrinsically realist nature of international or intercultural relations that has discouraged argumentation scholars from going beyond an *intra*-cultural context in pursuit of a normative theoretical model applicable to *inter*-cultural debates as well. An incredulity toward the possibility of what the Self and the Other would *both* regard as a rational exchange between them is deeply embedded in the practices of argumentation studies. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out in their *The New Rhetoric* that argumentation presupposes an “effective community of minds” whose “minimum” conditions of possibility include everything from a “common language” to a shared body of “norms set by social life” and a mutual “wish to enter into conversation.” As an illustration of what could result had one tried to argue in the absence of such a community, they refer to Alice’s helplessness and frustration over her failed attempts to communicate with the denizens of the Wonderland. The need for a community remains as much a going assumption as Alice’s story continues to function as a cautionary tale for the discipline of argumentation studies as a whole (1969: 14-15). Even though among theorists of “argument fields” or “argument spheres,” an interest in inter-field border crossing has been developed since the 1980’s, the multiple “fields” or “spheres” in question are clearly understood to have come into being within, and to depend for their existence and normal functioning on, the same cultural formation of the West (Eemeren et al. 1996: 204-206).

Since in its most fundamental orientation, argumentation studies is devoted to studying conflict resolution through exchanges of reasons, which is hardly the normative mode of international or intercultural interactions, its disciplinary inclination to focus attention on *intra*- rather than *inter*-cultural disputation is not without its justification. And the propensity would stay warranted were it not for the fact that a new world-wide rhetorical situation is taking shape and the clarification of this emerging situation is posing a serious challenge to this field of

inquiry. With the end of the Cold War and the unprecedented and unstoppable drive toward globalization, a brave new era has forced itself upon us. The world as a whole has become to such an extent interconnected financially, economically, environmentally and communicatively that the notion of a “generalized interest” begins to make sense, and scholars and public commentators alike, most of whom are by no means naïve and sentimental idealists, have started to talk openly about formulating “universal ethics” or codifying “planetary legal standards.” In days gone by, writes international relations scholar Stephen Schlesinger, ideological constructs ranging from “nationalism” to “historical memories” had had such a hold on people that “the idea of a world of laws” would have seemed “a laughable proposition.” Today, however, “the imperatives behind worldwide trade . . . are [so] tightening the bonds among nations” that not only have we been witnessing a steady movement toward “working together in a lawful fashion around the world,” we have actually started to forge a “juridical global community,” with treaties governing trade, global warming, land-mines, etc., as its “building blocks,” and we may even have “become a world legal society without admitting it” (1997). Columnist Flora Lewis maintains that “globalization of economics and technology is no longer a contentious thesis but an irresistible reality with concrete effect on people’s lives.” As a result, the idea of “articulating . . . a global ethic” applicable to “everybody everywhere” is “spreading with increasing insistence” (1997). And in a critical survey of new theories on globalization and communication, Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi presents a whole range of scholarly arguments “around the public sphere and its apparent or possible growth into a transnational civil society,” from the suggestion that “the only possible response to global market forces is . . . a universal public sphere in which common interests can be recognized and acted on” to calls for “the creation of a global perspective and values in the depths of people’s hearts and minds, establishing the idea of a global civil society” (1997: 11-12).

One cannot imagine a “world legal society” or a “global ethic” being instituted without there already being a “global rhetorical regime” in place to serve as one of its indispensable institutional infrastructures. What shape the “trans-national public sphere” would eventually take remains vague and controversial at this moment. What is beyond any doubt, however, is that the construction of such a sphere must necessarily be based on a global consensus that results from *rational* discussions and debates among *all* its would-be members. Whereas the principle of give-and-take on the basis of cold calculation of private interests and power

relations has been the principal means of international conflict resolution, it would never work as far as building up a “global civil society” is concerned. As an indication that preliminary work to build up this society is already underway, controversies have erupted in recent years over issues such as “democracy,” “human rights,” or “Asian values.” A close look into the mode of verbal exchanges typically found in efforts to resolve issues such as these yields some unexpected findings.

First, no incommensurability-caused problems seem to be plaguing the contentious cross-cultural, inter-continental or even inter-civilizational exchange of opinions. The representative “voices” of the East, the South, or the non-Western cultures in general do not come from people like Geertz’s interlocutor in the above-mentioned episode, much less from the denizens of Alice’s Wonderland. Rather, they typically come from people such as former Singaporean prime minister Lee Kuan Yew or the current Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who tend to be Western-educated Third World elite and who are conversant in Western rhetoric to such an extent that they usually have no problem whatsoever in understanding, communicating with, and debating champions of Western values. An example is Bilahari Kausikan, Singapore’s representative to the United Nations. Not only did he defend “Asian values” vigorously in Western mass media or public forums, he also contributed rhetorically sophisticated articles to influential American academic journals such as *Journal of Democracy*.

Second, as their primary strategy, these (often self-proclaimed) spokesmen for the non-Western world tend to draw from *Western* discursive resources and to frame, formulate, and defend their positions in Western, rather than their native terms. The arguments, presumptions, and modes of reasoning they characteristically deploy are likely to be those authorized or even valorized by Western, especially contemporary Western, discourses. Thus in his defense of Singapore’s political system, Kausikan appeals only to authoritative Western sources (e.g. C.B. Macpherson’s theory of democracy, David Hitchcock’s comparative study of Asian and American values) and invokes only currently valorized Western beliefs, presumptions or values (e.g., contingency, particularism, diversity) (Kausikan 1997). And in none of his speeches addressed to an international audience has Prime Minister Mahathir invoked any Islamic doctrine as the warrant or backing of his position.

In pleading for a globally regulated currency trading (which mainstream West opinion makers had found to be an absurd idea) following the outbreak of the

Asian crisis in July 1997, for example, Mahathir draws an analogy with three milestones in the development of modern capitalist market in the U.S.: the anti-trust legislation that effectively outlawed monopolies; the legislation to prevent anyone from “acquiring controlling interest in companies and then stripping their assets” at the expense of other shareholders; and the legislation that stopped “insider trading” by making it illegal. The market, he argues, has always been subject to regulations, and if a financial community such as the U.S.’s deems it necessary, and can always find the right legislative or legal means, to protect small investors, ordinary shareholders, common people, from being victimized by big wheelers and dealers, why cannot the *international community* find a way to prevent similar victimization of small financial entities or players in a globalized market? (1997).

Third, even though - or perhaps because - the debates are conducted in Western terms, Western interlocutors in general do not appear as effective argumentatively as one would expect them to be. Public commentators and scholars alike tend either to ignore the arguments presented by people like Mahathir or to greet them with rire d’exclusion or with ideologically inspired indignation/condemnation, rejecting them off-hand as self-evident anti-Western nonsense or self-serving sophistry in defense of undemocratic institutions and practices at home, not to be dignified with reasoned rebuttals. When they do respond, the counter-arguments are often of suspect validity and currency in contemporary Western discourse (e.g., resorting to universalism, apriorism, the notion of “intrinsic value,” etc. to counter attempts to relativize human rights culturally). In spite of the protests from the non-Western interlocutors against what Kausican terms “willful misunderstanding” of their positions, the Western representation of these positions by and large remains unsatisfactory to the represented. Samuel Huntington, for example, characterizes Singaporean leaders as believing that what their people want and need is “not democratic government but good government - that is, government that will provide economic well-being, political stability, social order, communal harmony, and efficient and honest administration” (1997: 11). And yet he leaves out “democratic accountability” from their announced list of the components for a good government. And as one suspects must be the case, no Singapore spokesman has pitted “good government” against “democratic government” (cf. Kausican 1997).

Such an approach is not only ineffectual, it violates the communication ethics observed in the West. The rhetorical awkwardness is indicative of an unexpected

encounter with rhetorical difficulties that the overnight breakdown of what used to look like a permanent binary structure has created. Whereas this structure rendered it unnecessary to think about the norms of argumentation with anyone other than a fellow Westerner, the clear-cut distinction between us and them, and the sense of communicative security such a distinction provided, are no longer there. Among the disturbing questions the new situation has raised are:

1. Will concepts, arguments and procedures keep their intra-communal status in legitimacy, validity, or strength when applied inter-communally?

“Democracy,” for example, is regarded as an “essentially contested” concept within the Western discourse of political science, its meaning having been interpreted differently and debated upon constantly (e.g., the recent debate over the distinction between “liberal” and “illiberal” democracies). And yet there has been a reluctance on the part of Western interlocutors to discuss with non-Western critics what it should mean, for the simple reason that to agree to argue about the meaning of democracy is to admit implicitly the “debatability” of whether the current model of Western liberal democracy, as such, is suitable for non-Western parts of the world, and to imply a willingness to accept whatever comes out of a debate. Another example, can those powerful arguments that have been formulated and presented for cultural diversity in the U.S. be admitted if they were employed by people like Mahathir or Lee Kuan Yew in pleading for what they claim to be the need to maintain a world-wide diversity in cultural values?

2. Must the ethical guidelines applicable within the Western world apply inter-communally to its rhetorical interactions with the non-Western world also?

Within the framework of the Western rhetoric, for example, the going assumption is that one should distinguish between the message and the messenger. And yet *ad hominem* is frequently applied inter-communally (e.g., “Mahathir is an anti-Semitic authoritarian and there is no way we should take what he says seriously”).

3. What should be the basis for defining the relationship between argumentation and interests?

When participating in intra-communal argumentation, there is a clear understanding that one is willing to make serious commitment to the adjudicating authority of argumentation, and would subject one’s interests to the regulation and conditioning of good reasons. Could we expect, or ought to expect,

participants to the inter-communal argumentation to make the same commitment?

4. What should be the guideline for dealing with the relationship between argumentation and ideology?

Ideological differences do not prevent people within a community from arguing with one another (e.g. the Republicans vs. the Democrats in American domestic politics). Should considerations for international ideology be allowed to preempt one's obligation to justify positions which are domestically correct and yet controversial in a global context, or to preempt one's obligation to respond to counter-arguments presented by one's perceived ideological Other from the non-Western world?

Reflections on these issues against the background of an ever-intensifying process of globalization have begun to produce new approaches and fresh thinking in cross-boundary argumentation. Scholars who have interacted intimately with their non-Western counterparts have become increasingly aware of the need for a less ethnocentric attitude toward cross-cultural disputes. Many human rights experts have realized, for instance, that "it is not realistic to deny the real or apparent insufficiency of cultural legitimacy of some human rights standards," and have sought to "explore the possibilities of cultural reinterpretation and reconstruction through *internal cultural discourse and cross-cultural dialogue*," as a more effective means for "enhancing the universal legitimacy of human rights." Such an approach abandons the assumption that "sufficient cultural support for the full range of human rights is either already present or completely lacking in any given cultural tradition," for the new view that "prevailing interpretations and perceptions of each cultural tradition can be expected to support some human rights while disagreeing with or even completely rejecting other existing human rights" (An-Na'im 1992: 3). Accepting this new foundational assumption makes it possible to have real argumentation among different cultural traditions.

Western political leaders have also become sensitive to issues standing in the way toward an international dialogue. U. S. President Clinton in an important speech on the issue of China, for example, declares that American criticism of Chinese human rights records has been made "in the hope of a dialogue, and in dialogue we must also admit that we in America are not blameless in our social fabric.... And if we expect other people to listen to us about the problems they have, we must be prepared to listen to them about the problems we have" (1997). And in an

interview given to *The New York Times* shortly after she became the U. N. Human Rights High Commissioner, Mary Robinson “stresses balance in approaching human rights,” pointing out that “[it] is only a moral voice if you have real credibility,” and credibility grows from impartiality” and fairness. And she promises “open debate about Western and Eastern values,” observing that “[we’re] not going to make real progress for women in Afghanistan unless we can do it within their culture” (1997).

Argumentation theorists, similarly, have started to turn their attention on these issues. From his effort to address the implications of the concept of incommensurability to argumentation, Lueken hits on the insight that since “the intersubjective constitution of objects and rules does not work in cases of incommensurability” and there is “no possibility to refer to common meanings, perceptions and rules,” participants in an “inter-paradigmatic controversy” should enter “a kind of mutual field research, an open exchange released from the pressure of reasoning, rules, validity questions and performed to understand the alien SO by participation or to create a new one commonly” (1991: 249). This new approach, which Lueken calls “anticipatory practice,” is precisely the one adopted by non-Western elite in their effort to enter a meaningful dialogue with the West on behalf of their cultures. And as more and more Western scholars come to realize the importance of turning their interlocutor’s resources to their use in order to be effective in cross-cultural debates, “anticipatory approach” will be more commonly adopted.

This trend toward strategic application of “anticipatory practice,” however, goes against what Lueken emphasizes as its central aim, i.e., “mutual understanding.” Yet a Habermasian orientation toward “understanding” is problematic in this context, for a freedom from “the pressure of reasoning, rules, validity questions,” which Lueken prescribes for the new practice, could only spell an end to argumentation as a symbolic practice. Contrary to Lueken’s claim that “rule-reconstruction,” such as what van Eemeren and Grootendorst has done when they formulated their famous ten ethical guidelines for argumentative exchanges, is “no solution” to argumentation across SOs (1991: 245), what such an argumentation urgently needs is precisely a special set of ethical rules for its practice. Both President Clinton and Mary Robinson came to grips with this need, if only intuitively, when they reiterated “reciprocity,” “impartiality,” “fairness” as the principles for inter-cultural dialogues. And as Richard Bernstein points out, “the response to the threat of [a] practical failure [to understand ‘alien’

traditions]... should be an ethical one, namely, to assume the responsibility to listen carefully, to use our linguistic, emotional, and cognitive imagination to grasp what is being expressed and said in 'alien' traditions" (1991: 92-93). If a shared "will to argue," which the perception of a widely shared or "generalized" interest in a globalized world has given rise to, and the technique of "appealing to the Other's cultural resources for the justification of the Self's position," have made it unnecessary, as a precondition to argumentation, to have the kind of "community of minds" which we used to take for granted, for cross-communal argumentation to proceed in a civil and productive manner, we do need to define a number of ethical guidelines for all parties to follow.

No definition of such guidelines can become binding without its being legitimated through a truly international dialogue on this subject. For such a dialogue to be at all possible, however, argumentation theorists are expected to open up a space for the global discussion with their thematization on the issues involved and with a drafted list of such guidelines. On the basis of Eemeren and Grootendorst's "ten commandments," some general maxims can in fact be tentatively drawn for argumentation *across* cultural formations:

1. maxim of argumentative burden:

what is presumed to be true or valid on one side of the boundary does not necessarily retain its presumption cross-communally;

2. maxim of attitude:

once entering a debate, parties involved should bracket off their own group's received judgments, perception, etc. of the other group, treating each other as rhetorically equal partners and consider each other's arguments seriously throughout the process of argumentation;

3. maxim of argumentative stance:

no party should expect from the other what is unacceptable within *its own* group;

4. maxim of argumentative strength:

what is granted certain degree of argumentative validity on one side retains the same degree of its *intra*-group validity when advanced by the party from the *other* side in *inter*-group argumentation;

5. maxim of audience:

a *good* cross-communal argument advanced by members of one group should be able to persuade rational judges of the *other* group;

6. maximum of strategy:

it follows from maximum 5 that each group should strive to find support for its

standpoint from the other group's culturally sanctioned pool of arguments;

7. maxim of commitment:

parties should be committed to making appropriate adjustments in perceptions, conducts, policies, etc. in accordance with the outcome of a cross-cultural debate.

These candidates for a normative set of ethical guidelines are meant to be an invitation for open discussions on how argumentation theory should adapt itself to the new reality of globalization, much more than to offer a solution to the numerous problems and issues that have been touched upon in this discussion. Given the urgency of finding a solution to these problems, it is high time that argumentation scholars turn their attention to the new task, and contribute to the successful formation of a future "global civil society" or "global public sphere" with their careful identification and analysis of the conceptual, technical and ethical difficulties lying under those issues.

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