ISSA Proceedings 1998 – How (Not) To Argue With 'Fundamentalists'. On The Problem Of Arguing Without A Shared Basis

In 1997 the German philosopher Hubert Schleichert published a book, which became a kind of philosophical bestseller in Germany. It is titled *Wie man mit Fundamentalisten diskutiert, ohne den Verstand zu verlieren. Anleitung zum subversiven Denken* (Schleichert 1997)**[i]**. Schleichert's book sketches a general theory of argumentation and offers a conception of *subversive argumentation* as a means to deal with the problem of fundamentalism. His discussion of this problem primarily deals with historical examples, in particular the fight of the Enlightenment against Christian dogmatism. One of Schleichert's heroes is Voltaire, who seems to exemplify what Schleichert means by subversivity.

In this paper I will outline and discuss Schleichert's approach with respect to some systematic conceptual issues, concerning in particular the problem of argumentation without a shared basis. After discussing Schleichert, I will briefly give some suggestions for a more adequate approach to this problem.

1. Schleichert s approach
1.1 *A positivist concept of argumentation*
It is obvious that Schleichert adopts a "positivist concept of argumention". At the outset he introduces a distinction between the normal standard-case of argumentation and the non-standard-case. In the *standard-case* a thesis is logically derived from a set of sentences, i.e. the arguments. An argumentation is correct if the arguments are true and the inference is logically valid, or can be transformed into a valid one by adding acceptable premisses. In order to convince someone by argument, there have to be at least some sentences which are already accepted or turn out to be acceptable. These sentences, shared by both sides, constitute the argumentation-basis and may function as a resource for

reasons and objections. Schleichert regards in particular sentences which express fundamental values, judgements, beliefs and principles as belonging to the argumentation-basis.

If there is no sufficient argumentation-basis shared by the opponents we have the *non-standard-case*. However, the positivist concept of argumentation rules out this non-standard-case as a case of argumentation in the strict sense. The lack of a shared argumentation-basis must, at the end, lead to a breakdown of the discussion. And, indeed, this often is the case. The fact that people, at least sometimes, continue to argue without a shared basis appears as a curious phenomenon in the positivist framework. From a logical positivist point of view, the efforts of these people are hopelessly in vain.

It is one of Schleichert's merits that he, in spite of adopting the positivist view, does not stop at this place. Instead, he asks for an *explanation of this curious phenomenon* and distinguishes four lines of explanation. We may, first, assume that the discussants simply overestimate the possibility of argumentation and are victims of this illusion. Second, the participants may mutually negate their principles. But this kind of *external criticism* is not really argumentation, since it can neither hope to convince the opponent, nor rest on a commonly shared principle. Both explanations of the phenomenon remain compatible with the positivist picture according to which real argumentation is impossible in non-standardcases. What is explained, here, is why the participants may falsely believe to have a discussion while, in fact, there is no argumentation at all.

Schleichert's third exclanation is that arguers may still try to gain a shared argumentation-basis by means of *internal criticism*. ("… wird versucht, doch noch eine gemeinsame Argumentationsbasis zu gewinnen; dies ist der Fall bei der »internen« Diskussion bzw. Kritik." Schleichert 1997: 64). Internal criticism, as conceived by Schleichert, accepts the basic assumptions of the opponent, interpretes them in a different way, and tries to show internal contradictions in his view. Schleichert obviously thinks of internal criticism as including a kind of *pretended acceptance* of the opponent's basis, if only pretended »for the sake of the argument«. Given, that the acceptance were sincere, we didn't have a non-standard-case at all. However, this line of explanation, again, does not call the presupposition of a shared basis into question.

Only the fourth explanation admits the possibility of discussions in which a shared argumentation-basis is not necessarily required. The discussants may argue subversively. *Subversive argumentation* is different from an exchange of logically

valid reasons and objections. ("…, kann man sich mit dem ideologischen Gegner auch anders als nur in einer logisch zwingenden Argumentation wirksam auseinandersetzen. Das soll mit dem Ausdruck »Subversivität « bezeichnet werden." Schleichert 1997: 65) As conceived by Schleichert, subversive argumentation neither is logically conclusive, or refuting, nor does it require a preceding acceptance of the opponent's fundamental convictions. It aims at *undermining* his ideology by showing drastically what he really believes, by showing bare facts that are embarrassing and painful for the opponent, and by showing alternative views. Subversive argumentation opens an external view and aims at the effect of shaking the creditability of the opponent.

1.2 *Arguing with the fundamentalist: Subversive Argumentation*
Schleichert then discusses internal criticism and subversive argumentation as means to argue with fanatic fundamentalists. Here, he points at dangers of internal criticism and advocates subversivity as superior. What does Schleichert have in mind when he talks about discussing with fundamentalists? And what does he mean by "fundamentalism"? Surprisingly enough, Schleichert in a sense defends fundamentalism. He does not accuse fundamentalism of perverting or distorting valueable religions or ideologies, but he insists that fundamentalism is more consequent than rather tolerant and pragmatic versions of the same doctrines. By going back to the roots and sincerely taking the original sources as radical as they are, *fundamentalism reveals the real character of the respective ideology or religion.*
According to Schleichert, a basic principle of fundamentalism is that the truth has a privileged status above all false teachings and opinions. This alone, however, is not distinctive of fundamentalism. The fundamentalist additionally believes that he *knows the truth* and that he is justified by a higher authority (divine inspiration, a holy text, historical necessity, etc.) to use even violent means for pushing this truth through. Fundamentalism, therefore, is essentially opposed to tolerance. Nevertheless, fundamentalists also use argument. Schleichert warns us to underestimate the intelligence and rationality of fundamentalists. If examined *internally*, their argumentation is far from being inconclusive or irrational. Moreover, Schleichert suggests, that within the respective religious or ideological frame, fundamentalist positions are even more rational than rather liberal or tolerant interpretations of the dogmas.

This is where Schleichert sees the *dangers of internal criticism*. Internal criticism

accepts, or pretends to accept, the basic beliefs of the fundamentalist, as the basis of argumentation and participates in the interpretation of, say, the holy texts. Schleichert believes that, since there are no objective criteria to decide about interpretations, such discussions will endlessly go on and lead, almost unavoidably, to subtleties which are unintelligible for a broader public. Even if the internal critic may demonstrate inconsistencies, this will never shake the fundamentalist's faith, but lead to reinterpretations of the text. So, playing the game of the enemy, the internal critic has no chance to overcome the critcised ideology. Internal criticism, Schleichert concludes, may, at best, contribute to some initial phases of a non-standard-discussion.

Only *subversive argumentation*, Schleichert insists, may bring the fundamentalist entirely into discredit by showing embarrassing and painful facts as well as consequences of the fundamentalist ideology. Subversive argumentation may call cruel practices by their name and avoid to cover them by a veil of religious or ideological interpretation. Since it is an essential feature of fanatic fundamentalists not to be impressed by arguments, Schleichert recommends to address subversive argumentation not primarily to the fundamentalist himself, but rather to a public which is less infested by the ideology. The subversive strategies may vary with the different grades of the public acceptance of fundamentalism. If a majority supports the fundamantalists, subversive argumentation may disguise as internal criticism ironically pretending to accept the domaining ideology. If fundamentalism is rather weak, subversive argumentation may overtly make a fool of the fundamentalist.

One of the techniques of subversive argumentation is what Schleichert calls "substitution *salva absurditate*". His example is Voltaire 's discussion of the Augustinian principle »*credo quia absurdum est*«. ("I believe, because it is absurd".) Voltaire contrasts the context of theology with the context of the court. If a witness reported that the accused was, say, at two places at the same time, and insisted that this is the more certain the more it is absurd, he would be judged as a lunatic. According to Voltaire, the *theological principle* means that, what appears absurd and impossible in our eyes, does not so in God's eye. Revelation, miracles, and religious faith belong to a *different sphere* than witnessing in the context of human affairs. Schleichert, however, assumes that Voltaire merely *ironically* draws this conclusion, while in fact he shows the madness of the religious principle. According to Schleichert, Voltaire's emphasis on the difference between the spheres is *hypocritical*. He pretends to accept the religious principle, but at the same time undermines it. By substitution *salva*

absurditate he shows how bizarre the religious principle really is. Assuming subversive hypocrisy, Schleichert reads Voltaire in such a way that, what is literally said, means exactly the opposite.

2. Making Sense of Schleichert's approach
2.1 *Conceptual Incoherences*

There are many grave conceptual problems in Schleichert's approach. Most of them are connected with the idea of subversive argumentation.

Schleichert, again and again, repeats the positivist doctrine that what may count as proper argumentation has to be logically sound. If an inference is logically inconclusive, we do not have an incorrect argumentation, but no argumentation at all. However, subversive argumentation, as advocated by Schleichert, is not conclusive in the logical sense, not logically compelling. Here, there are no conclusive arguments. ("Beim subversiven Argumentieren (…) werden Argumente vorgetragen, die (…) im Sinne der Logik nicht konklusiv, logisch zwingend sind. Konklusive Argumente gibt es an dieser Stelle nicht." Schleichert 1997: 115) Now the question arises: Do we have two kinds of argumentation, conclusive and non-conclusive ones? Schleichert cannot have both, a positivist concept of argumentation and subversive argumentation. The positivist view entails that subversive strategies of influencing an audience's opinion cannot count as argumentation. The idea of subversive argumentation requires a non-positivist concept which allows for taking non-conclusive moves as arguments.

Another conceptual problem concerns Schleichert's use of "fundamental" and the concept of an argumentation-basis. At many places Schleichert refers to fundamental beliefs and principles arguers *subjectively* take as certain and immune against revision. These certainties are constituted by education and rarely change in the adult's life. More or less, we are held captive by these fundamentals. At other places Schleichert gives a rather *functional* characterisation of the argumentation-basis as an intersubjectively shared reference point. What may function as such an argumentation-basis may vary from discussion to discussion. Whether there is an intersubjective basis of discussion depends on whether there is an overlap of the participants' pregiven sets of beliefs and principles. It is, again, subversive argumentation that does not fit in, since it is designed as a kind of argumentation that does not *presuppose* an overlap, but may make an impact on fundamental beliefs. If subjective fundamentals can be influenced by arguing without a shared basis, this may suggest a rather dynamic view including the possibility of transforming and even

creating the argumentation-basis within the discussion.

A third conceptual problem concerns Schleichert's distinction between an *internal* and an *external* discussion which is crucial for the distinction between internal criticism and subversive argumentation. Internal criticism, Schleichert suggests, accepts the fundamental beliefs and principles of the opponent, but interpretes them in a different way. If internal criticism is supposed to be a kind of non-standard-argumentation, the acceptance of the opponent's basis must be either only »for the sake of the argument« or even entirely pretended. Merely pretended acceptance, however, may also be a strategy of subversive argumentation, which operates from an external position. Subversive argumentation, though implicitly negating the opponent's fundamentals, in certain cases ironically pretends to accept them. So, we are left with the problem how to distinguish between internal criticism in the strict sense and subversive argumentation disguised as internal criticism. Schleichert may reply that subversive argumentation remains external in so far as it operates by irony or hypocrisy. The subversive arguer hides his external standpoint from the opponent while he shows it to the audience. This reply, however, amounts to distinguishing internal criticism from external subversivity with reference to *different addresses*; it does not explicate the internal/external-difference with respect to the relation between the arguers.

Before I draw some consequences of my discussion I would like to confess that I do *not really accept* Schleichert's subversive argumentation as a genuine species of argumentation. My main reason is that subversive argumentation does not acknowledge the opponent as a partner in searching the truth and that it hides, and thereby immunises, its own background-beliefs by playing a game of disguise and pretention. Such strategic games do not fall under the concept of argumentation. In my preceding discussion of conceptual problems I accepted the idea of subversive argumentation only »for the sake of the argument«. By a kind of "internal discussion", I wanted to show how one can arrive at overcoming positivism, if one starts within Schleichert's approach. Schleichert's idea of subversivity breaks through positivist restrictions of the concept of argumentation. Argumentation must not necessarily have the shape of a logical derivation. Arguing does not necessarily presuppose shared beliefs and principles, but may change or even create it's own argumentation-basis. These conclusions seem to contradict some of Schleichert's explicit claims, but I would like to support them. Perhaps, they can be made compatible with Schleichert, if we read him like he reads Voltaire, viz. as a subversive thinker.

2.2 *A Sketch of a Subversive Interpretation*

It is not very probable that an experienced philosopher like Schleichert is not aware of the conceptual tensions in his book. If this is so, it would be most charitable to interpret his approach in such a way that the conceptual incoherences make sense. Schleichert even may have produced them in order to show something that he does not explicitly say. Such an interpretation would amount to reading the book itself as *exemplifying* subversive argumentation. Seen in this way, Schleichert would criticise rationalist rather than religious ideologies. Even if the author did not intent this, it could be worthwhile to read the book along these lines.

Let us suppose, Schleichert himself argues subversively trying to show something that contradicts what he literally says. Like Voltaire, Schleichert could be a hypocritic who tries to undermine the positivist view of argumentation by showing it's absurdity. If this were the case, the conceptual incoherences would make sense. Schleichert would show us, the third party, how absurd the positivist doctrine of argumentation is. Moreover, the message of the book would turn into the opposite. Schleichert presents himself as a pioneer of tolerance and openness, while he does so in a rather rigid and almost intolerant way. He does not show the slightest charity towards internal religious discussions; he pretends to regard fundamentalism as the real face of Christianity. His caricature of Chistianity as fundamentalism is so crude and overdrawn that one could suspect that he in fact wants to show how dogmatic, intolerant and hostile the absurd picture of religion is that some radical atheists or rationalists draw, that he wants to show that the fanatic critics of fundamentalism are rationalist, or atheist, or positivist fundamentalists themselves. He would not primarily show how, but how not to argue with fundamentalists.

3. *Argumentation-basis: A Dynamic View*

Before I finish let me briefly return to the problem of an argumentation-basis. Schleichert has drawn a picture of an overlap: Some belief or principle can serve functionally as an argumentation-basis, if it belongs to the overlapping domain of the participants' subjective fundamental beliefs and principles. I would like to replace this picture by a more dynamic one.

Following Wohlrapp (Wohlrapp 1998) and others, the fact that fundamental beliefs and principles become very deep-rooted and stable within subjective positions, can be described as a result of a process of *framing*, i.e. a process of coming to see something *as* something and act accordingly. Such ways of seeing

and acting to some extent exclude other ways of framing. We cannot see and treat, say, the same mountain as a holy site and as a resource for copper-mining at the same time. When such ways of seeing and acting have become unconcious, and thereby have gained some stability we may call them *frames.* It is characteristic of such frames that we are unable to see what is outside of them. Arguers may have very different frames, according to which they see and treat the matter they are discussing about. Although they hope to convince each other by giving and asking for reasons, this hope may be disappointed systematically. Their very different frames may prevent them from finding any argumentation-basis.

However, in a discussion we do not deal with isolated sentences. *By arguing discussants express their frames.* Their argumentative moves are particularily connected by being embedded in such frames. Expressing their frames in the discussion, the participants may become aware of the fact that their frames are *limited* and that there are alternative ways of framing the matter. And this may be a first step in the process of arguing without a shared basis: the *acknowledgement of the frame-difference*. This means to get some distance from seeing one's own view as a self-evident natural thing.

A second step may be the effort to *explore and understand* the internal coherence of the opponent's frame by anticipatory practices. (Cf. Lueken 1991) As Wittgenstein said, "It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support." (Wittgenstein 1969: § 142) The more we explore the web of mutually supporting beliefs expressed by the opponent's argumentation, the more we understand his way of framing the matter. Such processes of learning distinctions and related practices can be regarded as part of or accompanied by argumentative exchanges.

A further, third step may be to *integrate the different frames*, at least partially. This is, of course, the most difficult step. But such integrations of ways of seeing sometimes happen in discussions. This often shows itself in *reinterpretations* of already expressed claims. Thereby, things may be made coherent that previously appeared as incompatible. The search for or construction of analogies between the involved belief-systems may further such an integration. Therefore, arguments by analogy, and disanalogy, are significant here. (Cf. Mengel 1991)

Following these lines an argumentation-basis may stepwise be established in an argumentative exchange that started without a shared basis. This dynamic view

may perhaps also open our minds for possibilities of arguing with fundamentalists. Acknowledging frame-differences, seeing ourselves as being, to some extent, kept by frames, and adopting an argumentative attitude that allows for learning even from fundamentalists, we may have a chance to overcome hostility and solve conflicts with fundamentalists not only by strategic means of deception and power, but also by argumentation.

NOTES
i. In English: 'How to Argue with Fundamentalists Without Losing One's Mind. A Guideline to Subversive Thinking'.

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