

# ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Case For Cooperative Argumentation



For the past several decades, argumentation theorists and instructors have become increasingly committed to developing and adopting perspectives designed to improve the quality of critical reflection and deliberation. These scholars and educators are particularly interested in developing an approach to argumentation designed to equip people around the world with the knowledge, skills and understanding needed for ethical and effective decision making. To this end, argumentation scholars are looking anew at basic assumptions within the field.

In this essay, I seek to contribute to this project by focusing on one such assumption. Specifically, I challenge argumentation theorists to reconsider the prevailing assumption that argumentation is inherently oppositional, adversarial, and confrontational. I suggest that a cooperative approach to argumentation theory, practice, and pedagogy provides an alternative grounding, one that overcomes key obstacles to ethical and effective individual and group decision making in diverse practical contexts.

## *1. The Prevailing Competitive Model*

In their landmark treatise on argumentation, *The New Rhetoric*, published in 1969, Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca offered a viable alternative to the cartesian dualism dominating the field of philosophy at that time. Perelman, Olbrechts-Tyteca, Stephen Toulmin, Wayne Booth, and other scholars in the New Rhetoric school proposed a theory of argumentation that offered a middle-ground between the certainty demanded by (but never attainable to) formal logicians on the one hand, and the arbitrariness to which so many scholars and practitioners acquiesced during this time. New Rhetoric scholars sought to provide a rigorous theory of practical reasoning, grounded in history and context, while providing cross-contextual criteria for assessment. This quest for a rigorous, yet contingent approach to practical reasoning continues to drive much productive work in the field. A brief overview of some recent efforts reveals, however, that fulfillment of the work's potential has been hampered by unexamined acceptance of a key underlying assumption.

In their treatise, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca assume that all argumentation is aimed at gaining or increasing the adherence of minds to a thesis. This basic assumption continues to undergird much work in the field today. In her insightful introduction to the Spring, 1996 special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, for example, guest editor Catherine Helen Palczewski notes that the field continues to rely heavily on an “argument-as-war” metaphor. Even Trudy Govier - who has worked hard to “differentiate argument as rational persuasion from disputes or fights” - nevertheless adopts “vestiges of argument as combat” in her lexicon. Palczewski notes further that Brockriede characterizes argument in terms of “competing claims,” while Zarefsky writes of argument as “verbal conflict.”

Even Habermas, who pursues argumentation as a tool for achieving understanding, nevertheless “characterizes argument as an adversarial procedure” involving “proponents and opponents” (pp. 164-5). Similarly, in his otherwise laudable effort to link ethics with rhetoric, Herrick (1992) suggests that “rhetoric is oppositional or adversarial by nature” (p. 134).

The extent to which this perspective continues to take hold of the field is most strikingly revealed, however, in its impact on the otherwise innovative perspective advanced by Frans van Eemeren and Rob Grootendorst (1992). Their cutting-edge effort to overcome “both the limitations of the exclusively normative approach exemplified in modern logic and the limitations of the exclusively descriptive approach exemplified in contemporary linguistics” has led van Eemeren and Grootendorst to develop “pragmatic insight concerning speech acts and dialectical insight concerning critical discussion.” They have sought to provide “a theoretical framework for analyzing and evaluating argumentative discourse as critical discussion” (xiii).

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst effectively identify and address shortcomings associated with viewing argumentation primarily as a suasive tool. Their perspective provides the basis for adapting argumentation to the critical discussion context. Grounded with this important insight, van Eemeren and Grootendorst encourage interlocutors to avoid obstacles to effective critical discussion.

Their effort to marry the best of rhetoric and dialectic in the service of critical discussion moves the field forward considerably. Yet even this innovative perspective rests on the potentially limiting assumption that argumentation is inherently oppositional. Van Eemeren and Grootendorst’s pragma-dialectical model of critical discussion begins with a “confrontational” stage. Participants are

characterized as “opponents” and, at the end of discussion, participants check “balance sheets” to see who “has won the discussion” (p. 184).

In addition to presuming a competitive, oppositional and adversarial framework, van Eemeren and Grootendorst limit their perspective’s contributions by presuming its inapplicability to a “context of discovery” (p. 138). From their perspective, argumentation is primarily a tool for resolving disputes, but may be less constructive for the preliminary discovery process.

## *2. Limits of a Competitive Framework*

Van Eemeren and Grootendorst’s presumption of inapplicability to a context of discovery helps to underscore some of the limits resulting from adoption of a competitive framework. When participants gather for discussion having already formed their opinions and seeking to persuade others, they are much less likely to encounter others’ perspectives with full and open minds and hearts. Among other limitations, they are not likely to approach dialogue with what Martha Cooper (1994) identifies as key to full and engaged discussion. She refers to this central element as “response-ability,” the ability to “reach out, recognition of the other, careful listening that allows the other to be heard, empathy that validates what is heard” (p. 3).

Similarly, participants in competitive or adversarial communication contexts tend to be more occupied with listening to reenforce their own perspectives than with listening for understanding. Yet only through development of understanding can participants fully contribute to ethical and effective decision making on complex moral, social and political issues of the day. Seyla Benhabib (1990) provides a fruitful overview of key elements required for the development of understanding. Among these are the will and capacity for reversing perspectives. She writes, for example, of “the capacity to represent to oneself the multiplicity of viewpoints, the variety of perspectives, the layers of meaning which constitute a situation” (p. 359). Benhabib emphasizes as well the importance of the will and capacity to represent to oneself “the world and the other” as seen by the other (Benhabib, 1990, p. 359).

These capacities have always contributed to the context of discovery, as well as to resolution of disputes. However, the advent of the 21st Century significantly increases both their value and significance. As I have argued elsewhere (Makau, 1996), this age of potential global perils calls upon us to develop heightened capacities to reason together. Confronting 21st century challenges responsibly and effectively will require sophisticated capacities to engage in meaningful and

effective dialogue across disciplinary boundaries and cultural borders. As Susan Welch (1990) suggests, “the equation of otherness with opposition is a dangerous fallacy because it has effects of truth. To the extent that it is believed, it shapes the relationships between nations and peoples” (p.35). When individuals in critical discussions view each other as rivals, they are inclined to “see differences oppositionally; rather than seeking mutuality, they seek to overcome their rivals” (Makau, 1996, p. 327).

The complexity of issues, technological proliferation, and increased cultural diversity and global interdependence which will characterize 21st century life dramatically heighten the importance of overcoming such obstacles and of constructing effective and ethical dialogic communities. Paulo Freire (1994) notes insightfully in his last book, the *Pedagogy of Hope*, for example, that the challenges and opportunities associated with cultural diversity are relatively new phenomena in human history. Demographic changes, combined with technological proliferation, afford more and more people around the globe the opportunity to live and work in culturally diverse settings. As technological proliferation changes patterns of communication and more people around the globe both have the opportunity to, and the expectation of, identifying and addressing complex issues through the use of electronic media, the need and capacity for cross cultural dialogue will increase even further.

Approaching argumentation within a competitive framework limits the prospect of ethical and effective cross-cultural dialogic interaction. Competitive and oppositional frameworks limit, for example, the prospects of full inclusiveness, participation, and reciprocity - three qualities identified by Lana Rakow (1994) as linked with a “communicative ethic that could help guide relations - between individuals, between cultures, between organizations, between countries” (p. 3).

G. Thomas Goodnight (1993) offers similar insights. He invites readers to consider development of “an understanding of argument where critical-rationality and effective public persuasion productively inform and complement each other” (p. 331). In pursuit of this goal, Goodnight seeks a “responsible rhetoric,” one which “takes discourse ethics as its informing dialectic” (p. 333). Goodnight notes that: “a responsible rhetoric is one whose argumentative practices take into consideration in the particular case both the need to engender effective deliberative outcomes and to preserve the communicative relationships that make such action meaningful to all concerned” (p. 335, italics in original).**[i]**

The cooperative model of argument highlighted below provides a framework for

Goodnight's vision of a responsible rhetoric. This model marries dialectic with rhetoric - as Goodnight, van Eemeren and Grootendorst, and others aspire to do. Perhaps most importantly, however, this model fulfills Goodnight's vision of a model grounded in a strong relational communicative ethic.

### *3. A Cooperative Model of Argument*

The cooperative model of argument begins by rejecting the assumption that all argumentation is inherently confrontational, adversarial or oppositional. This perspective draws a distinction between competitive argumentation, which "aims at winning something," and cooperative argumentation which focuses on the "shared goal of finding the best answer or making the best decision in any given situation" (Makau, 1990, p. 57). According to this model, "argumentation is defined as the process of advancing, supporting, modifying, and criticizing claims so that appropriate decision makers may grant or deny adherence" (p. 57).**[ii]**

This perspective on argumentation emerged out of an exploration of the United States juridical context. The legal system within the United States is inherently adversarial. Grounded in the belief that the truth has the most optimal chance of surfacing in a courtroom if competing sides are given the fullest opportunity for suasive expression, the legal system adopted in the United States embraces a highly oppositional and adversarial view of legal advocacy. Lawyers for competing sides are expected to do all they can to win their clients' cases. Georgetown Law Professor Carrie Menkel-Meadow (1995), among many others, has recently challenged the efficacy of this approach, particularly for the pursuit of truth and justice. It is beyond the purview of this essay to address the merits of this case (though it will no doubt be clear from what follows that I endorse their critiques). It is worth noting, however, that even within this highly oppositional and adversarial context one can find a cooperative framework of argumentation.

Specifically, the final arbiters in the United States legal system are expected to adopt a cooperative, rather than a competitive, approach to argumentation. Justices on the United States Supreme Court are expected to give open, fair, and full hearing to all sides in any dispute and to work together, cooperatively and with open hearts and minds, in framing a reasoned and fair decision. Numerous studies of the Court reveal varying capacities to fulfill this vision, but none deny the overarching mandate for and efficacy of such practice if performed fully and well.

The cooperative model of argument borrows heavily from this practical context.

This model emphasizes reasoned deliberation, rather than advocacy. Individuals participating in cooperative argumentation are invited to work together in pursuit of reasoned, fair, equitable, and effective decision making. They are encouraged to view one another as resources who together are more likely to find or craft viable and responsible decisions than any individual is capable of discovering or creating. They are invited to share all available information with one another, to bring to bear insights garnered from their diverse backgrounds and experiences, and to participate in the kinds of respectful and open exchanges most likely to result in reasoned deliberations.

Recent scholarship on bioethical decision making endorses such a model for this practical context as well. Jonsen and Toulmin's (1988) overview of the constituent elements of phronesis, for example, reveals close parallels to the elements associated with cooperative argumentation. **[iii]** In *A Matter of Principles?* (1994), scholars representing the fields of medicine, philosophy, theology and law join Jonsen and Toulmin in embracing the view that contemporary bioethical issues can be resolved only through development and exercise of sophisticated practical reasoning and associated dialogic interactions. Their recognition of the contingency, the complexity, and the particularized and temporal nature of bioethical issues and problems underscores the importance of effective and ethical reasoned dialogue in this and related practical contexts.

As I have suggested elsewhere (Makau, 1997), these characteristics of contemporary social, political, and moral issues combine with "constraints of local location, limited epistemic frames and ambiguity" to create compelling needs for "dynamic dialogic interaction with concrete others whose beliefs, values, and interests differ from our own" (p.56). Only through such cross-cultural dialogic exchanges "can we hope to reason competently and morally" (p. 56) in juridical, bioethical, and other contemporary practical contexts. Benhabib (1992) notes, for example, that critical "judgment involves the capacity to represent to oneself the multiplicity of viewpoints, the variety of perspectives, the layers of meaning which constitute a situation. This representational capacity is crucial for the kind of sensitivity to particulars which most agree is central for good and perspicacious judgment" (pp. 53-54). Embracing a cooperative, rather than an adversarial, oppositional, or competitive approach to argumentation inspires development of this representational capacity.

Similarly, Cooper (1994) suggests that there are three elements required to develop response-ability: conditions conducive to reaching out in respect to one another, a willingness to listen, and the will and capacity to develop sensitivity to

the perspectives of others (p.3). Individuals who come together aspiring to reach a reasoned decision - rather than to win an argument or prize - are much more likely than their oppositional counterparts to listen to one another with fully open hearts and minds, and to share openly and respectfully. Decision makers who come together in the spirit of cooperation are much more likely to work together to reach reasoned, fair, and responsible decisions than are their counterparts who come together with balance sheets designating winners and losers in disputes. **[iv]** Finally, adoption of the cooperative framework in argumentation pedagogy promises to help create the conditions and to develop the capacities associated with Goodnight's vision of a responsible rhetoric. Instructors adopting the cooperative model encourage students to work collaboratively and to share information with one another. Student performances in these classes are assessed not on the basis of persuasiveness, but in terms of their contributions to the group's decision making process. In the cooperative argument learning environment, students are encouraged to view others as valuable resources, rather than as competitors. These classes - grounded in a strong communicative ethic - embrace and develop a connected epistemology. **[v]** Perhaps most importantly, this approach to argumentation theory, practice and pedagogy offers the promise of helping to "transform relationships and the larger culture so that the alienation, competition, and dehumanization that characterize human interaction can be replaced with the feelings of intimacy, mutuality, and camaraderie" (bell hooks, 1984, p. 34).

Numerous issues remain to be explored, **[vi]** including questions of the range and limits of participation in specific deliberative contexts. We do not need to resolve these issues to conclude, however, that we have much to gain and little to lose by adopting a cooperative framework and lens.

Most significantly, abandoning the assumption that argumentation is inherently oppositional, and embracing in its place the cooperative model of argument proposed in this essay will help argumentation theory fully exploit the "connection of theoretical and practical reasoning through dialectical argument" described by Goodnight as the "genius of the Aristotelian system" (p. 229). Such an approach both engenders "effective deliberative outcomes" and preserves "the communicative relationships that make such action meaningful to all concerned" (Goodnight, 1993, p. 335). As Goodnight (1993) suggests, "the work of connecting 'a new dialectic' and 'a new rhetoric' is unfinished, but its prospects appear to be quite promising" (p. 339). Adopting a cooperative framework for argumentation

theory, practice, and pedagogy will position the field to realize this promise fully as we enter the new millenium.

## NOTES

**i.** Richard Fulkerson (1996) provides an overview of similar efforts in the field of philosophy. He cites Maryann Ayim's call, for example, to replace the "dominant confrontational style" of contemporary western philosophy with an "affiliative nurturant style." He points further to Janice Moulton's critique of what she terms "dualism in philosophy," an approach in which "winning arguments rather than encouraging and developing good ideas becomes the role of the teachers." The work of Michael Gilbert on "coalescent argument" is also featured in Fulkerson's essay, as is my work on cooperative argumentation.

**ii.** For a detailed overview of this model, see Makau (1990).

**iii.** For a detailed account of the parallels, see Makau (1993).

**iv.** Philosopher Martha Nussbaum offers a similar perspective in her book, *Cultivating Humanity* (1997). She calls upon us to do what we can to foster a "democracy that is reflective and deliberative, rather than simply a market place of competing interest groups, a democracy that genuinely takes thought for the common good" (p. 25). The cooperative model of argument proposed in this essay is designed specifically to achieve this end.

**v.** For elaboration of this approach, see Belenky, M. F., et. al. (1986).

**vi.** See Goodnight (1993), p. 339 for a particularly fruitful overview of such issues.

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