ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Co-Operational And Conflictual Models Of Discussion

«The only object of Academic's discussion is by arguing both sides of a question to draw out and fashion something which is either true or which come as close as possible to the truth» (Cicero, *Academica*, 2.8)

Debate, the most typical activity of human beings, plays an important and exclusive role in every part of our life. Debate in turn has also become an important object of debate. A great debate occurred and occurs between supporters and detractors of conflictuality vs. co-operation. There was and there is a special controversy about competitive debate, namely about the practice of debating both sides of a question.

Considering that the debate is intrinsically oppositional, adversarial and confrontational, someone would argue the rhetorical creativity and proficiency in argumentation to be kinds of skills an educated person is expected to have. So they think that the controversy-oriented approach and the skill in debating on either side of any proposed argument are inherently pedagogical: they promote rhetorical creative processes and favour training in argumentation. Cicero recommends that the orator should «have commonplaces ready at hand, in which the question is argued and handled on either side». This is the tradition of Cicero and Quintilian, advocated by Erasmus, exemplified by Francis Bacon, taught by Vico, supported by Mill. Toulmin, Perelman, Habermas too are conscious of the importance and promoters of the revival of controversy for philosophy and for social life, today as yesterday when «the life of the mind was exciting because it was framed in conflict». (Ong, 1971, 68)

Against this tradition considering philosophy as war (see: Curi, 2000) and science as argument (see: Pera, 1991) are those who suggest that while co-operation is always moral and proper, conflict is always amoral and vicious; from an educational point of view, to compel students to debate both sides of a question is not pedagogical and consequently they are unfavourable to the pro-con

procedures. The opposition conflict/co-operation is expression of a fundamental cultural opposition.

We can reconstruct the whole history of philosophical and scientific thought as the history of the relationship between two opposite models of discussion, a cooperational model and a conflictual model, the first dialogical and the second polemical. Furthermore we find this dichotomic pattern also in other related couples, such as *episteme/doxa*, theory/practice, reason/unreason, *esprit de géometrie/esprit de finesse*, conviction/persuasion, demonstration/argumentation, not to mention the fundamental one: logic and rhetoric, an important pair that exemplifies a recurring tension, if not a struggle, existing between two contending points of view, that have interacted controversially since antiquity up to the present: *descriptive vs. normative* approach to an argument, practical persuasiveness vs. normative uprightness, logical soundness vs. pragmatic belief.

Starting from the observation that the boundaries between rhetoric and logic and between conflict and co-operation have been often reshaped but always kept up, in this paper I will try to deal with the following two questions:
1. What is the nature of the couple co-operation/competition? Is it good to be co-operative or is it better to be competitive? What is the importance of being collaborative compared with the importance of being conflicting?
2. What is the relationship between «to be right» and «to succeed in persuading someone in thinking so»?

Is conflict the opposite of co-operation?
Committing our thoughts and actions to opposed references is a typical, and the most simple, operation for achieving a categorical ordering, an ordering necessary to our thinking and to our living.
Certainly the reference to dichotomies is a clear principle for classification, but sometimes it is a fallacious project and has inhibitory results. Some couples are clearly separable, other are inseparable; some of them are absolute, some are relative; sometimes the two items of the couple are compatible, sometimes they are irreconcilable.

What is the nature of the couple co-operation/competition? Is it an exclusive or a complementary couple? In other words: does co-operation banish conflict or does it incorporate conflict? Can we can get rid of the incompatibilities that apparently subsist between them?

I would like to show that *conflict* is not the *opposite of co-operation* and that it is not to be confused with opposition to co-operation.

All participants in a discussion have at least a thesis to defend and a thesis to contrast: so each part will be both proponent and opponent. The debaters both give and ask reasons. Moreover, the agents of a debate are players and referee at the same time. In the same time and in the same way they may be co-operative and oppositive, like Janus, the roman numen of doorways, looking in the opposite directions, the best symbol of matching assertions with counterassertions.

The authentic contradictions, assuredly irreducible, are limited. Many situations we can see as hopeless antitheses may become and be quiet co-existence: the funny side should generate laughter; the tragic side should generate distress. But, as we know, there are also tragic-comic situations: at the roots of the comic spirit of Charley Chaplin we find a tragic quality. Without supporting the classical and controversial «*coincidentia oppositorum*», commonly we use in our discourses some conceptual and discursive associations that at a first glance seem to be reciprocally exclusive: *rational nonsense, thunderous silence*. This linguistic, conceptual and rhetorical fact is called «oxymoron», whose etymology (*pointedly foolish*) is autoexplicative: what is fool from one point of view is genial if considered from another point of view. So the yoking of two terms, that ordinarily are contradictory or incongruous, is not problematic; on the contrary it results apt, startlingly apt, being «compatible by their very incompatibility».

This is logically justified by the fact that a word or a phrase («to use the big stick», for example) can be taken in two sense, both in the "proper" and the "figurative" one. And from the practical point of view, this is justified by the fact that the technique of dissociation («distinguo») can be used for resolving (or dissolving) a difference of opinion. The belief that conflict is not incompatible with co-operation is more and more accepted even in non philosophical quarters. This opinion is not so outrageous and it is fairly admissible if we operate a distinction, namely if we consider that the idea that antagonism is dangerous and contemptible is a normative fact, while the idea that antagonism has an epistemic, a rhetorical and a social function is a historical and descriptive fact.

To be right and to be persuading
Which is the relationship between «to be right» and «to succeed in persuading that we are right»? This is a perennial and very intricate problem, involving an interplay and a tension between two ideals: logical validity and persuasiveness,

strength and validity, conviction and persuasiveness.

A strong aspiration to objectivity pervades all the history of science and of philosophy: the objectivity has been considered, at least in western tradition, a value and a highly desirable thing. "Objective" reason is considered superior because it should provide means to resolve conflicts between "subjective" perceptions.

What is right (if any)? The only thing I can say is that, in a discussion, to be really true without appearing true, is unfortunately not enough: it is necessary for the true or right solution to appear true or right to an audience. The statement that the difficult notion of *being right* and the corresponding predicate, *true* (or correct), can be systematically, for many theoretical and practical purposes, replaced by *to succeed in persuading someone in thinking* so and by the corresponding predicate *persuasive*, is defended by the supporters of the theory of «truth by means of consensus» as opposed to the theory of «consensus by means of truth». The truth we find in the «argument community» – where a common solution, but not necessarily the right solution, is found – is a notion introduced by some recent approaches in the study of argument.

Certainly, settling a difference of opinion is not resolving a difference of opinion: the first is merely a practical compromise between the parties, the second would be a true resolution. But, considering that the truth emerges more easily if competing sides are given the opportunity to express themselves in mutual opposition, to assume the legal advocacy as a model for argument is perhaps better than to assume the geometrical, Descartes' model for argument: formalisation of argumentation schemes, diagramming, recently developed argumentation software approaches are surely useful, but have very limited application. And they are not useful when we have to consider the case of war against terrorist threat and the case of alternative responses; or when we have to support anti-abortion positions or pro-abortion positions.

The debate has many facets, meanings and implications: an epistemic facet, a rhetorical facet, and an ethical one. So the question of how and when it is good to debate has at least three kinds of implications.

This means that among the many possible dimensions of analysis of the co-operative/competitive relationship, it is possible to select three aspects: the epistemic-conceptual one, the dialectical-rhetorical one and the ethic-interactional-political one.

Although these three aspects are certainly interconnected, each of them marks a different approach to the problem of understanding what are the mechanisms, the relations and the objectives intervening in a discursive exchange.

Epistemic-conceptual dimension of discussion
Debating is considered a rational, or reasonable, decision making procedure: it is not only a practical modality, action-oriented, but a logical modality, thought-oriented. Furthermore, debating implies the classical opposition *episteme vs. doxa*. Between the two terms exists the same ancient hostility existing between philosophers and rhetoricians, theoretical knowledge and practical wisdom, *contemplatio* and *actio*, (logical) conviction and (emotional) persuasion, reality and appearance. Chaïm Perelman e Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca identify the opposition «reality/appearance» as the primary couple (Perelman – Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958, § 90).

In every couple there is an axiological implication: the two terms are not judged equal, but one term of the couple is considered right and good, positive and normal, while the opposite one is considered bad, negative and aberrant. But the positive and negative traits are changing and reversing with time.
The normal procedure for selecting one between two contrary positions consists in identifying all significant pro and con points and arguments. Then we should to establish the relevance and importance we assign to each of them and then, by comparison, to "calculate" which is the best or to "weight" which is heavier.
If one group of reasons is significantly "better" or "heavier", we can make a "right" choice.
Debate is thus conceived as a mean to find an intersubjective truth. Arguing and debating is a kind of self-discovery (a discovery of the self) in order to connect dialogically ourselves with the audience (a discovery of the others). In a debate we want to transform our subjective truth (a truth for the subject, true because it presents the state of subject's beliefs or attitudes) in objective truth (a truth for many or for all, because it presents the state of many or all subjects participants).
The trouble is that often there is no guide at all for determining which between two contradictory positions is true/false or is appropriate in a particular situation. Folk wisdom or common sense sayings encounter the same trouble: «Look before you leap» vs. «He who hesitate is lost»; or «Out of sight, out of mind» vs. «Absence makes the heart grow fonder», are two examples proposed by W. Mc Keachie and C. Doyle at the beginning of their general psychology textbook

Psychology (1966, cap 1).

The "subjective" debate (for example, a political one) is normally conducted from the first-person standpoint, while in an "objective" discussion (for example, a discussion between scientists) we should take the perspective of a third person. In the first case the subjective-argumentative attitude prevails, while in the second case the objective-informative one predominates. This distinction is theoretically right and possible; in practice it is very difficult to maintain because these dimensions are mixed. There is an inextricable interplay between objective and subjective.

Summing up the epistemic reasons for debating and for the idea that competition is not incompatible with co-operation, we could say that disconfirmation, contradiction, disagreement stimulate the search for what is wrong in other's and in our reasoning, in line with a critical-falsificationist perspective. In other terms, listing the pros and cons of any question is as essential or as useful as the negative and positive atomic charge of an element. And facing disagreement and responding to an adversary is the surest way to assess our positions.

Dialectical-rhetorical dimension of discussion
This dimension refers to the fact that a dialogue/debate is a way of arguing. To conceive a dialogue/debate as a process of argumentation, instead of a simple interaction, or an exchange or a regulated procedure, means to point out the reasons that proponent and opponent give in support of their assertions. The lines of reasoning required when we have to demonstrate or refute a thesis, are very different in different contexts, especially in polemical and in dialogical exchanges.

In few words, we could say that there are many reasons and motives for being rhetorically and dialectically competitive.
First, dealing with alternative views and contrasting information contributes to instil critical spirit and to acquire basic skills of argumentation.
Second, the skill in debating on either side of any proposed argument is intrinsically pedagogical: training in argumentation promotes creative processes; on the other hand, rhetorical creativity and proficiency in argumentation are kinds of skills we should expect an educated person to have.
In the dialectical arena sometimes it is good to be bad, that is to breach the code of a fair discussion: arguer's dialectical obligations are not the human moral obligations.

Ethical and political dimension of discussion

Do controversy and polemical debate «protect us from exclusivism and ethnocentrism», as says Trudy Govier (1999, 264) or are they deleterious?

This facet includes also a relevant pedagogical peculiarity. The aim of the ancient rhetorical education was to make the student able and versatile in discovering ideas and arguments. Rhetoric should achieve richness in expression as well as richness in content, abundance of style and abundance of subject matter, variety of words and variety of arguments (I refer to Erasmus's *De duplici copia verborum ac rerum*). Increasing our inventive resourcefulness by developing ideas on both sides of a question can produce a change towards a broader range of ways to talk to each other and to face issues vital to us. But this has also an argumentative value. «If it is at all possible, we shall show that what our opponent calls justice is cowardice, and sloth, and perverse generosity; what he calls wisdom we shall term impertinent babbling, and inoffensive cleverness, what he declare be temperance we shall declare to be inaction and lax indifference; what he has named courage, we shall term the reckless temerity of a gladiator» (Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, III, 3, 6) for «no one will propose the abandonment of virtue, but let the speaker say… that virtue consists of qualities contrary to those evinced» (*ibid*.)

«In practice, rhetorical education is education in two-sided argument, argument where the truth is decided by the judge or the jury, where the truth is a dramatic criticism handed down on the forensic drama which has been played out according to the rules laid down, finally, by a rhetorical education» (Lanham, 1988, p. 600.)

Pro/con pedagogy is primarily concerned with the generation and presentation, defence of and attack on claims, argumentation and counter-argumentation, grounding and undermining. An education based on competitiveness and antagonism, on conflict and antitheses, is naturally objectionable. That debating is educationally valuable is an argument debatable and debated. Certainly it is not of great value, in a debate about the value of silence/loquacity, to simply oppose the argument «Silence, like night, is convenient for treacheries» to the argument «silence is the sleep that nourishes wisdom». These are two of the antithetical sentences collected by Francis Bacon in his 47 topics included in his *Antitheta rerum*, (*Antithesis of Things*, in *Works*, IV, 492) and arranged for and against. Even if to set down and collect antitheses may be risky, they are *seeds* – seeds

only, not *flowers*, says Bacon.

But it is of great value (of heuristic, practical and moral value, that is in the framework of argumentation theory, of practice and of pedagogy) the confrontation of the two theses and of the two supporters in conversation in order to solve, dissolve or resolve a disagreement.

Modern rhetorical theory and practice have implications for contemporary pedagogy. With the words of George Herbert Mead: to learn "to take the roles of another", in games and in other situations, is vitally important also for the development of thought. (Mead, 1934, pp. 253 ff.)

In 1955 Kenneth Burke suggested the revival of ancient *disputatio*, in its practice and in its spirit: «were the earlier pedagogic practice of debating brought back into favor, each participant would be required, not to uphold just one position but to write two debates, upholding first one position and then the other. Then, beyond, this would be a third piece, designed to be a formal transcending of the whole issue, by analyzing the sheerly verbal maneuvers involved in the placing and discussing of the issue. Such a third step would not in any sense "solve" the issue, not even in the reasonable, sociological sense of discovering that "to an extent, both sides are right". Nor would we advise such procedures merely as training in the art of verbal combat. For though such experience could be applied thus pragmatically, the ultimate value in such verbal exercising would be its contribution toward the "suffering" of an attitude that pointed toward a distrustful admiration of all symbolism, and toward the attempt systematically to question the many symbolically-stimulated goads that are now accepted too often without question» (K. Burke, cit. in Sloane, 1997, pp. 290-91)

The moral is simply this: even in a highly controversial framework, a cooperational intent is possible and desirable; the ideal and the most advantageous situation is when an initially irreducible antagonist is finally co-operatively ready to modify his opinion.

We are dealing with two types of exchanges marked by opposite traits, whose major differences are the following.

The importance of being collaborative. The dialogical debating
Conflict has been charged with many misdeeds: from an epistemic point of view it is considered disturbing, methodologically it is considered hazardous, socially and ethically inadmissible. Why?

First, the agents of a conflictual debate tend to be more attentive to defend and to strengthen their position than to interpret the adversarial position or to achieve understanding.

Second: the role and the result of conflict in discussion are eristic, not heuristic.

Third: in systematically debating opposite solutions, there is the dramatic risk of transforming a thinker in a Hamlet, unable to make up one's mind, vacillating inconclusively between being and not being.

Finally, the competitive argumentation aims at winning, not at finding the best answer. The competition generates winners and defeated.

Using the words of Deborah Tannen: «But when opposition becomes the overwhelming avenue of inquiry – a formula that *requires* another side to be found or a criticism to be voiced; when the lust for opposition privileges extremes views and obscures complexity; when our eagerness to find weaknesses blinds us to strengths; when the atmosphere of animosity precludes respect and poisons our relations with one another; then argument culture is doing more damage than good» (Tannen, 1999, 25)

The importance of being contrasting. The antilogical debating
Why, on the contrary, is the antagonism important in discussion?
First, disconfirmation, contradiction, disagreement stimulate the search for what is wrong in other's and in our reasoning, in line with a critical-falsificationist perspective. Dealing with alternative views and contrasting information contributes to instil critical spirit and to acquire basic skills of argumentation.

Second, a liberal "mind-set" and a pluralistic society can be created via pedagogical strategies, e.g. by means of competitive debate, being this a condition for a democratic society.

Third, as we said, the skill in debating on either side of any proposed argument is intrinsically pedagogical: it promotes rhetorical creative processes and favours training in argumentation. Rhetorical creativity and proficiency in argumentation are kinds of skills necessary for an educated person.

Finally, "civil" (polite, quiet) discourse can be sometimes a device for demoralizing and silencing some positions and people.

We see that the values that come into play, and into conflict, in the clash between the co-operative pattern and the competitive one are values of a certain, if not vital, importance, such as:
Values of epistemic-conceptual nature:

objective vs. subjective
authenticity vs. manipulation
reality vs. appearance
monism vs. pluralism
consensus by means of truth vs. truth by means of consensus
being right vs. appearing to be right

Values of dialectical-rhetorical nature:
correct vs. convincing
truth vs. persuasion
logic vs. rhetoric

Values of ethic-interactional nature:
morality vs. functionality
end vs. means
conflict as break-up vs. conflict as opportunity
"edifying" vs. destructive
consensus vs. dissent

The different pairs mentioned may be perhaps all unified under the general opposition of "to be right" and "to succeed in persuading someone in thinking so". I tried to explore this path: discounting the possibility of eliminating the conflict, I would exclude also both the necessity and the opportunity of doing so.
It is my belief that controversy and subjectivity are not only abundant but also normal, indispensable and desirable. As it has been said, the usefulness of competition is best expressed by one single yet important quality: that the well-known advantages of co-operation may be achieved even better and more assuredly through argumentative competition.

In conclusion it seems that *competition is the best partner of co-operation*. For this thesis I suggest some reasons, some motives and some causes. All of them try to respond to the interrogative question «why?», but in different ways: a reason tries to explain and *justify*; a motive tries to find what *induces*; a cause tries to indicate what *determines.*

I admit that we have to distinguish among many types of discussions, because someone may be persuaded that s/he is right, whatever the argument of the opponent; in other settings someone else may advance, support, modify and

criticise all claims in order to grant the best solution or conclusion. In Cattani 2001 five main types of discussion have been identified, on the basis of half a dozen classifying criteria for including visible contents and relationships, as well as intentions, aims, attitudes and other classifying parameters, such as

– the initial situation;
– the main goal of that type of debate;
– the participants' particular aims;
– the degree of legitimisation acknowledged to the interlocutor;
– the agreement and disagreement on rules and facts;
– the possible outcome of the debate.

On the basis of these traits it is possible to outline a taxonomy of debates and to identify for each type some typical argumentative schemes, moves, standard of evaluation: *Polemic* or *fighting, Negotiation* or *trading, Confrontation* or *playing, Research Dialogue* or *travelling*, and *Colloquy* or *building* may be identified as the five modes of arguing and debating. We can sum up the traits of the five types of debates in the following schema.

Polemic – *war metaphor* – to debate is to fight
Negotiation – *market metaphor* – to debate is to deal
Confrontation – *sport metaphor* – to debate is to play
Research Dialogue – *exploration metaphor* – to debate is to travel
Colloquy – *building metaphor* – to debate is to construct

Polemic
Exemplification: eristic debate; political argument; ideological dispute.
Initial situation: antagonistic conflict; possible disagreement both on rules and facts.
Goal: to defeat, destroy, humiliate the opponent.
Relationship between interlocutors: deep-rooted hostility, distrust and aversion as between enemies.
Possible outcome: a winner and a loser; a competitor, rather than his thesis, prevails on the other.
Associated metaphor: war.
Peculiar fallacies: argument *ad hominem, tu quoque*, many questions, shifting the burden of proof.

Negotiation

Exemplification: mediation; arbitration; trade-unions negotiation.

Initial situation: conflict of interests.

Goal: to weaken the opponent.

Relationship between interlocutors: antagonism, generally polite, such as between two businessmen.

Possible outcome: partial withdrawal from initial position and comparative valuation of theses.

Associated metaphor: trading.

Peculiar fallacies: argument *ad misericordiam, ad baculum, ad metum.*

Confrontation

Exemplification: persuasion dialogue; critical discussion.

Initial situation: problems and conflict of opinions on controversial matters.

Goal: to define points of agreement and points of disagreement, in order to persuade the audience.

Relationship between interlocutors: antagonism mixed with co-operation and full legitimisation of the opponent.

Possible outcome: understanding of reciprocal positions, leaving judgement to the audience.

Associated metaphor: play and sport.

Peculiar fallacies: argument *ad populum, ad antiquitatem*, witty diversion.

Research Dialogue

Exemplification: co-operative exchange, as between two scientific researchers.

Initial situation: shared problems. Disagreement on data and agreement on rules.

Goal: to verify or falsify a thesis.

Relationship between interlocutors: co-operation and cordiality as between two travellers.

Possible outcome: to agree upon the conclusion or resolution.

Associated metaphor: exploration.

Peculiar fallacies: over-generalisation, faulty analogy, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

Colloquy

Exemplification: classroom dialogue, consultation, investigation.

Initial situation: agreement, sometimes in a context of unequal knowledge.

Goal: to remove doubt and strengthen a thesis.

Relationship between interlocutors: confidence, even collusion.

Possible outcome: establishment of a thesis. Neither winner nor losers.

Associated metaphor: building.

Peculiar fallacies: argument from authority, *ad verecundiam*, wishful thinking, *petitio principii.*

Each of them is characterised by a different mode of thinking, of conceiving and of perceiving the debate; note that models and metaphors of arguing are also ways of shaping our way for understanding arguments and for establishing our behaviour in arguing, the way in which we theorise, practice and study argument and argumentation.

The difference is particularly clear if we compare the two extreme types of debate, namely *polemic* and *colloquy.*

In the polemic there is a clash between two or more parties, each of them having a different or opposite opinion to defend and whose aim is to prevail over the opposite side: debate is oppositional and is by nature an adversarial procedure, involving proponents and opponents: it is more a dispute or a fight than a rational persuasion. This justifies the repeated «argument-as-war», «argument-as-combat» metaphor.

In Colloquy or Dialogue the parties may disagree on procedures and on goals to be obtained, but accept the so called rules of the game, concerning, for example, the length and the turns of exchange, the admissibility of certain moves etceteras. Co-operation manifests itself also in the fact that each party is prepared to modify his opinion if the other gives new information and new convincing argument.

The abstract relationship between competition and co-operation may be of four kinds: mutual exclusion, complementarity, partial overlap and inclusion.

In the first case, conflict and co-operation is a pair wholly heterogeneous and one term excludes the other: if there is conflict there is not co-operation, if there is the moon there is not the sun. The hypothesis of exclusion implies struggle.

For the case of complementarity, each of the two forms of relationship carries out its own function, without switching off the other. The hypothesis of complementarity implies effective and substantial coexistence.

The third possibility admits that there is some amalgamation between the two. The hypothesis of partial overlap implies co-ordination.

Finally, the hypothesis of inclusion is connected with the idea that conflict is part of co-operation. This pattern admits in abstract also the opposite inclusion (conflict including co-operation). The hypothesis of the inclusion implies some dependence.

Using a metaphor, we may compare the nature of the relationship between conflict and co-operation to the relations between two communicating states. The exchanges between two neighbouring nations can occur in many ways (the case where no relations at all are provided is left out): they may be casual and underground (recreation, pleasure, smuggling, contraband) or continuos and official (import-export, diplomatic services, ambassador's exchanges) or freely irregular (tourism, seasonal work). In other words, has the relationship – the flux and the influence – between conflict and co-operation to be a clandestine, casual and unwanted phenomenon or an admitted, continuos and desirable fact?

I would argue that the rejection of conflict is not necessary and that to tolerate the conflict within the field of co-operation is not only permissible, but it may be advantageous and perhaps unavoidable.

Without being obliged to decide if the value of free discussion transcends the value of all other values, I would say that the controversy is a *paradigm for philosophy*, a rhetorical protocol and a good *pedagogic practice*: conflict is required also where the co-operation is possible and desirable. This is my *for* argument. Each *pro* argument obviously corresponds with a *con* argument, because every question has two sides and everything may be contested. In order to re-establish the equilibrium of the chiasmus «competition with co-operation, co-operation with competition», I'll do my best for being competitively co-operational with people who will propose an *against* argument for adopting an exclusively co-operative setting for argumentation theory, practice and pedagogy.

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