

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - How Narrative Argumentation Works: An Analysis Of Argumentation Aimed At Reconsidering Goals



Emotion, intuition, and physicality are not plagues that stalk the land of Reason, but perfectly natural and ordinary components of all human endeavor... we must analyze as serious components of argument those non-linear, non-logical activities of communicative practice...

Argumentation Theory, if it is to come to truly serve the needs of real situated arguers, must open the concept of rationality to include the non-logical modes as legitimate and respectable means of argumentation.

Michael Gilbert, *Coalescent Argumentation* (1997, 26; 141-142)

The audience at the start of *The Longing: Based on Palestinian and Israeli Oral Histories* was large. The performance had been listed in the National Communication Association's 2001 annual meeting program as a special evening offering, and many of my colleagues who are especially interested in political communication and performance studies - and the conjunction of those two academic specializations - were present. The program listed three acts, with a total of 14 scenes, as well as a Prologue (entitled "What the West Does Not Know") and Refrains (at the end of the third act). At the end of the first act, I noted that several seats directly across from me were now vacant; at the end of the second, a glance at the row on both sides of my colleague and me as well as those in front of and behind us showed many empty seats. Ample anecdotal evidence, beginning in conversation with the one colleague who also remained throughout the performance and continuing later in the evening and during the following days with those who left early, confirmed that many - even, most - of these communication scholars had found the performance lacking, both as aesthetic event and as argumentation. Repeated phrases in their comments were "one-sided," "heavy-handed," "overstated," "well-intentioned but unpersuasive," and "unconvincing."

The Longing uses oral histories – stories spoken by Christian, Jewish, and Muslim sources – to argue for an alternative view of the political struggle that has continued in Palestine and Israel throughout the lifetime of its audience members. “Recording memories of difficult experiences and adapting them for public performance is a very complex process,” the program notes say. The notes continue: “These stories provide a way of entering and reconsidering a very complex historical, political, religious and emotional arena. We offer these stories as a hope for peace with justice in both Palestine and Israel.” Given the considerable interest in narrative argumentation in recent argumentation theory, this performance’s apparent failure to convincingly – or persuasively – bring about that reconsideration troubled me. While talking about narrative in at a conference a few months later, I mentioned that apparent failure to another participant who had presented work on AIDS narratives. She compared it to successful attempts to present an alternative way of living in the stories told at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, as reported in a recent book by George Jensen, *Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A Rhetorical Analysis*. Upon my return home, I read the book with great interest and began to consider what it might contribute to accounting for the apparent failure of *The Longing’s* stories, in contrast to the apparent success of AA stories as efforts to bring about reconsideration of complex situations. In other words, I began to consider both as argumentative efforts to convince diverse audiences of the viability of an alternative view on the possibility of (for AA participants) a personal peace within a life in recovery or (for *The Longing’s* audiences) a political peace among the Palestinian and Israeli people.

Granted, there are substantial differences between the discursive domains of talks at AA meetings and performances of *The Longing*. But there also are similarities that justify considering them as comparable. Perhaps the strongest bond is that the stories within both domains have, as their goal, changes in attitude toward what’s already known. In the former case, the changes sought are in attitude about what’s known about “alcoholism as a family disease” (Jensen, 2000, vii). Alcoholics who come to AA meetings don’t need to be told about the destructive effects of drinking on those who live with alcoholism, for they have ongoing experience of those effects on their families, careers, and themselves. Readers of Jensen’s book also already know about those effects – perhaps from films and novels, if not from their own experience. In the latter case, as the director says in *The Longing’s* program notes, the changes sought are in attitudes

about war as meaning “families losing their homes, parents losing their children, and people struggling to hold onto their land and their dignity,” rather than a being a matter of boundary disputes, historical rights or privileges, or religious-ethnic differences. Although the stories told in *The Longing* are “specifically Palestinian,” the director notes that he “quickly realized” that they “transcended national and cultural boundaries” (Avramovich in Program Notes, 2001, 5). More specifically, if also more abstractly, neither group of stories aims to impart information, in the sense of new knowledge provided in “bits and units”; rather, both are concerned, instead, with “views and beliefs” about what is already more-or-less known (Gilbert, 1997, 104). (The history, which provides a major dimension of *The Longing*’s factual context, is presented in the *Prologue*, which is clearly delineated (in tone as well as on the printed program) from the stories that comprise the bulk of the performance).

This focus on “views and beliefs” rather than “bits and units” – that is, with the significance of information for people, rather than the imparting of information itself – is important for several reasons. First, it signals the relevance of Michael Gilbert’s theory of coalescent argumentation, which takes that difference as the hallmark of argument, which he defines as “any exchange of information centered on an avowed disagreement” (1997, 104). He goes on to say that “the term ‘information’ is not used in the same sense that Information Theory uses it; that is, I am talking about views and beliefs rather than bits and units. . .the more indirectly information so construed can be exchanged, the broader is the sense of argument it isolates” (1997, 104). This attention to indirectness suggests the particular usefulness of Gilbert’s theory for analyzing narrative argumentation, in which indirect communication of information’s significance predominates.

Secondly, the definition’s specification of information as “views and beliefs” rather than “bits and units” directs us toward morality rather than factuality. The stories told in AA meetings and in *The Longing* are concerned with morality, in the sense of suggesting methods and even standards for conducting one’s life with others, rather than with factuality, in the sense of “bits and pieces” of information about the tellers’ physical, cultural, or geopolitical environment. Hayden White calls our attention to this function of stories: “If every fully realized story... endows events, whether real or imaginary, with a significance that they do not possess as a mere sequence... every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats (White in

Mitchell, 1980, 13-14; quoted in Jensen, 2000, 149-150). Neither set of stories urges ratification of a particular ethical system, such as is taught by (e.g.) Christian, Jewish, or Muslim religious traditions, although both indirectly communicate implicit methods and standards for living – i.e., morality.

This sense of morality is used by ethnomethodologists in identifying the methods (incorporating mores, standards and perhaps rules) that people use to accomplish social life. I'd argue that it's a sense of "moral" that's recognized in the "distinction between spirituality and religion" that George Jensen notes is a commonplace in AA, which "affirms a need to be close to a higher power, even as it argues against the kind of dogma that many, especially those who have renounced the training of their childhoods, associate with organized religion" (2000, 52). "Spirituality" here relates to a need for moral standards if people are to live in relative harmony with others and themselves, while "religion" typically relates to systems of ethics. *The Longing* presents the stories of Muslims, Jews, and Christians struggling with conflicts about how to live with one another, without attention to similarities or differences in their ethical codes.

This focus on indirect communication of the "views and beliefs" that ground methods for conducting our lives takes the argumentation in both of these discursive domains beyond the mode of reasoning that Michael Gilbert labels "Critical-Logical." He identifies three further modes – emotional/feelings, visceral/physical, and kisceral/intuitive – that comprise the "multi-modal argumentation" that is the descriptive basis for the "normative ideal" he names "coalescent argumentation" (1997, 74ff., 102). Accepting those three modes, Gilbert emphasizes, requires us to "extend," "suspend," and even "abandon" our allegiance to the "two core assumptions of classical approaches to argument and reasoning [that] are still pervasive," namely, that reasoning is linear thinking in regard to claims, and that those claims can be reasoned about in abstraction from their emotional, physical, intuitive, and political contexts (1997, 76). This expansion of the very meaning of reasoning, he emphasizes, is needed if we are to "separate the normative from the descriptive" despite the fact that, as "argumentation theorists," we "are largely drawn from a highly logical professional group that values linear reasoning above all other modes of persuasive communication" – for if "we are to treat argument as a human endeavor rather than as a logical exercise, we must make room therein for those practices used by actual arguers," rather than impose normative standards that

exclude any reasoning practices that can be described in actual usage (1997, 77).

From my standpoint as a philosopher of rhetoric, Gilbert's argument for expanding philosophy's "classical approaches to argument and reasoning" beyond linear reasoning and decontextualized examples is a welcome addition to contemporary rethinking of embedded assumptions that divide philosophical and rhetorical argumentation theory. More specifically, I find that the descriptive theory ("multi-modal argumentation") that grounds Gilbert's normative theory ("coalescent argumentation") recovers Aristotle's epideictic, or demonstrative, genre of argumentation. Demonstrative argumentation advocates particular actions on the part of present participants, and primarily works through displaying praiseworthy (or blameworthy) actions performed by others. It thus contrasts with two more generally celebrated genres: deliberative argumentation, which advocates future policies, and legal argumentation, which concerns judgment of past actions in accord with legal norms. This focus on the present, as well as epideictic's appeal to a general audience (rather than to policymakers or jurors) and its performative mode (reliant upon implicit and nonverbal demonstration, rather than reference to explicit policies and laws) encourages me to search for clues to the apparent success and failure of these sets of stories by looking more carefully at their temporal and audience characteristics.

As narratives, both sets embody the temporality of lived experience: "the used to be" and "what happened," which provide the context and specifics of the relevant past; the "now," which tells how things are at present; and "the anticipated," which projects or predicts how things will be or could be in future. The expository form of "critical-logical" reasoning eschews that temporal structure. The emotional, physical, and intuitive aspects of "multi-modal" reasoning, however, require reference to lived temporality. Narrative temporal structure supports the goal shared by the two sets of stories, namely, the possibility of melioration in the circumstances they relate, but it does so in significantly different ways. The performers in *The Longing* tell of a "used to be" that's assumed to match the experience of their audiences in a crucial aspect: the tellers' and listeners' "used to be" are not marked by "families losing their homes, parents losing their children, and people struggling to hold onto their land and their dignity" (Program Notes, 2001, 5). However, congruity of tellers' and listeners' lived experience is limited to that "used to be" temporal dimension. It does not extend to "what happened" or to the results of those events: their "now," which is

marked by longing for a return to what “used to be.” The listeners have not lived the “what happened” portrayed in the performance, and thus cannot identify with the longing (for return to “what used to be”) that is the predominant feature of the tellers’ “now.” For the tellers, melioration is associated solely with that longed-for return. As a listener, however, I bring to the performance my typical everyday association of melioration with future change; with anticipated difference, rather than return to the same (“what used to be”). This difference in implicit temporality limits my ability to identify with the performers’ longing.

In the AA context the storytellers have lived the “used to be ” experiences they recount in their testimony. They tell “what happened” from the perspective of a “now” that they describe as vastly improved in comparison to the “used to be,” and their feelings about the “used to be” are in no way characterized by longing. Tellers who are “old-timers” present their “used to be” as similar to the “now” of the “newcomers,” who are encouraged to recognize that congruence despite differences in their individual histories (Jensen, 2000, 11). Thus the listeners can use typical associations of melioration with the future – and most importantly, they can anticipate and even picture that future, for its content is supplied by the tellers’ account of their “now.” Both tellers and listeners share basic features (again, with individual variations) in “what used to be”: childhood feelings of being different from their peers, entering into a drinking life that enabled them to feel that they belonged, and subsuming other aspects of their lives within the “drunkologs” that predominate in newcomers’, but not old-timers’, tales (2000, 3ff., 235). Both share a “now,” in that they are bodily present in the same space, at the same time. But the content of that spatiotemporal form is different: the “now” of the tellers is the “could be now” of the listeners, while the tellers retain their “now” insofar as they continue in the community that the listeners are invited to co-constitute. In other words, the “what happened” of the tellers is presented as “what could be, starting now” for the listeners, if both groups join in community-sanctioned practices that are summarized as “the program”; e.g., “go to meetings,” “take one day at a time.” The identification between tellers and listeners that Jensen reports as crucial to the AA experience is enabled by this combination of actual and potential sharing of temporal dimensions and their content.

An evident difference between the two sets of stories is connected with this difference in temporality: none of the participants in *The Longing* (neither actors,

who speak the tellers' words, nor listeners) have lived the experiences that are storied in the performance they share, whereas AA participants all have lived experience of the "used to be" dimension. Yet the actors' implicit choice to participate in this performance and their explicit affiliative statements in the Program Notes suggest their belief that "entering and reconsidering" these stories furthers a hope for melioration - specifically, "hope for peace with justice," which clearly would be an improvement upon the tale of war and injustice testified to by the characters they perform (Program Notes, 2001, 5). E.g., one of the actors, Kris Duncan "hopes that this performance will honor and speak out for those she has met and learned from"; another actor, Jennifer Voorhees, "dedicate[s] her performance to the people whose stories she is telling" (2001, 7; 8). The audience's choice to attend the performance suggests that they, also, believed that "entering and reconsidering" these stories would support that "hope for peace with justice," which may well be at the core of the moral reasoning (procedures, standards, or rules for living with others) that, as I mentioned earlier, is embedded in these stories.

The most crucial difference between these domains may involve the specificity of the goal, peace, that's shared by both sets of stories. The "hope for peace with justice" portrayed in *The Longing* is a geopolitical one, literally global in its ramifications. How that hope might be furthered by individuals' particular practices (beyond giving "a contribution to sustain this oral history project," which is mentioned on the last page of the Program Notes) is unclear. The hope endemic to AA storytelling, however, pertains to the relatively narrow sphere of the participants' individual and particular situations (including their families and associates), and provides a procedure for bringing about the hoped-for peace: Memoirs of both the founders and contemporary members of AA emphasize that melioration of participants' "nows" depends upon their ability to identify with tellers' stories by engaging, daily, in specific practices advocated in those stories.

Jensen's analysis suggests that this ability is furthered by reasoning that Gilbert labels "emotional," "visceral," and "kisceral," rather than with traditional logical reasoning. For example, he summarizes one member's desire for serenity - a personal mode of peace - as sufficient to overcome her "ambivalent reaction to the program's slogans": "Knapp only began to accept the simple way of living expressed in the slogans because she identified with those telling their stories and she wanted what the program's ideology seemed to bring: a calmer life"

(2000, 85). That identification prevails over biographical particularities (e.g., ethnicity, economic status, gender). As another memoir states, the “program ‘message’ of hope is superior in value to historical truth – but this notion co-exists with the ideal of honesty, so that representations must be carefully, deliberately mediated” (O’Reilly, 1997, 158, in Jensen, 2000, 98). The tellers’ careful and deliberate (one might say, formulaic) communication of stories reinforces the importance of ceasing to understand oneself as different from others who live with alcoholism, and coming to understand oneself through similarities with those others: “Within AA, at least initially, it is crucial that the newcomer identify with others, begin to move beyond a sense that no one else in the world has ‘my kind of problems,’ no one else ‘has done the things that I have done.’” (Jensen, 2000, 98). As epitomized by one speaker: “‘If you look for the similarities, you’ll probably stay sober. And, if you focus on the differences, you’ll probably continue to drink’” (AA Talk, Dr. Paul O., in Jensen, 2000, 98).

Two theoretical proposals seem to me helpful for understanding what encourages (or not) an ability to identify with goals. The first is Walter Fisher’s (1987) recognition of “coherence and fidelity” as essential characteristics for a narrative’s acceptance by an audience. The progression of “used to be,” “what happened,” and “now” in AA stories displays both of those characteristics. There are no gaps in the causal or circumstantial connections the tellers portray that might strain listeners’ credulity. The stories’ inner consistency supports their tellers’ presentation of them as trustworthy accounts, similar enough to the listeners’ experience of what “used to be” to be accepted as models for living their “now” and anticipating what will or could be in future. In other words, the past and present dimensions of AA stories ring true to their listeners’ actual experience, and so are trusted as guides for their future practices and situations.

The second helpful theoretical proposal is a distinction crucial to Michael Gilbert’s description of “multi-modal argumentation”: that between positions and claims. “A position,” as Gilbert defines it, “is a matrix of beliefs, attitudes, emotions, insights, and values connected to a claim” (1997, 105). These components embody the feelings, physicality, and intuitiveness that characterize human experience, and which Gilbert’s theory of argumentation includes as emotional, visceral, and kisceral reasons relied upon as “legitimate and respectable means of argumentation” by “real situated arguers” who employ “multi-modal argumentation” in their “communicative practice” (1997, 26; 142;

quoted in context in the epigraph). Those arguers reason about the positions that situate them in ways that are more inclusive of their experience than is permitted by “critical-logical” reasoning. Gilbert honors the latter as “a basic, clear, and valuable mode of argumentation vital to academic and commercial enterprises” (1997, 81). Insofar as it reasons from de-contextualized claims that can be abstracted from stories, however, rather than from contextualized (i.e., situated) positions that are the very stuff of human experience as it occurs and as it is storied, “critical-logical” reasoning seem to be less operative than “multi-modal” reasoning” in the narrative argumentation embedded in stories.

“Claims,” Gilbert holds, “are best taken as icons for positions that are actually much richer and deeper. A claim is merely a linguistic tag or label... like the tip of an iceberg... Arguments, then, ought to focus on positions rather than claims if they are to proceed to agreement” (1997, 105). When we apply this distinction between experiential positions and abstracted claims to analyzing the arguments presented in these two sets of stories, three factors – temporality, identification, and agency – emerge as important to positions, although they are unimportant (indeed, removed) when we translate the positions told about in stories into claims made by those stories.

AA stories and *The Longing’s* stories display a common temporal form of “what used to be,” “what happened,” and “what we’re like now” (Jensen, 2000, 11, 51, 73). The AA teller dismisses the importance of variations and even substantial differences in the details of content through a single claim that is ritually repeated – “I am an alcoholic” – and that unites the “now” told from the position of “sober alcoholic” with the “now” experienced from the position of “practicing alcoholic.” The full opening of any AA story begins with an indication of individuality that only partially individuates, because of its partial naming. In its classic and often parodied form, the opening is: “Hello, I’m Bill.” The audience response – “Hello, Bill” – constitutes, as Jensen notes, “a dialogic exchange that is surprisingly complex” and initiates “a rhetorical act that transforms” both speaker and listener (2000, 79).

My analysis of this ritually-repeated exchange suggests that it epitomizes an intricate blending of sameness (the greeting term) and difference (the name) that characterizes any community, within which many speakers of “an ‘I’ discourse” act as a “we” who repeat the second sentence of the utterance (“I am an alcoholic.”) but do so within a culture that refrains from giving advice to any

“you” (Jensen, 2000, 10; 65). Jensen identifies the exchange as a ritual practice that accomplishes an “erasure of difference [that] accentuates similarity and promotes objectivity” (2000, 81). By transforming individually spoken problems into commonly articulated ones, speakers (who in other instances of ritual repetition are listeners) both are, and yet are no longer, their former selves: “The transformation of identity that comes with the utterance of ‘I am an alcoholic’ does not kill off the former self,” for no one ever says “‘I used to be an alcoholic’” (Jensen, 2000, 82). This communal telling, and thus, positioning, of each person’s situation as different “intonations” of the same “now” enables a sharing of each story “before an audience,” and then, “with an audience,” rather than a telling – or even, preaching – “to an audience” (Jensen, 2000, 54; 78ff.; 91; 107; 111). The result is identification with a commonly-practiced way of life, as the positions of each participant in the meeting – their emotional states, physical practices, and intuitive responses to difficulties – and negotiated and coalesce into a communal position that supports the agency of each member. In other words, the differences between the practices of the “practicing alcoholic” and the “recovering alcoholic” are not formulated as claims to be argued, but are enacted as positions to be negotiated (adapted and adopted) within a community-sanctioned ethos of looking for similarity without denying difference. Within this continuous process of negotiation, transformation occurs as participants attend meetings, repeat, in their diverse intonations, the community’s rituals, and engage in the practices that are advocated by the “old-timers” performances. The “practicing alcoholic” becomes a “recovering alcoholic” not by accepting claims about his or her situation, but by adopting positions that transform their present situation. The goal of peace is attained through enacting alternative practices that signify transformed positions, rather accepting alternative beliefs or affirming knowledge claims proffered by arguments that “win.”

Participation as speaker/actor or listener/audience member in the performance of *The Longing* that I attended may have won some members of the audience (even, some who left early) over to the claims articulated in the Prologue, enacted throughout the 14 acts, and re-articulated in the Refrains. The lack of congruity in temporality that I mentioned earlier, however, seems to limit listeners – who can only respond through applause (which signifies affirmation of a claim) or leaving (which could signify disagreement) – to their initial positions as audience members to whom – rather than before or with whom – the speakers tell their story. Perhaps the basic difficulty with this performance of narrative argument is

that no one's morality (in the sense of ways of being with others) seems to be transformed by the experience, despite the performers' earnest repetition of information that could be summarized as claims within a form of traditionally-accepted argument:

Any government that seizes the homes and vineyards of a segment of the population living within its (self-proclaimed) borders, and gives that property to members of another segment of its population, is unjust and must be resisted.

The Israeli government perpetrates such seizures, and does so within its (self-proclaimed) expanded borders.

Thus, the Israeli government (and the segment of its population that benefits from those seizures) is unjust, and must be resisted.

Expanding this critical-logical form into multi-modal argumentation that characterizes the practices of real arguers would require accessing the feelings, physicality, and intuitive ways of being spoken of by the performers and establishing relationships between them and our own experience. But we as audience members lack lived experience of how it "used to be," and so we are limited in our response to "what happened," and unable to share the longing (for a return to the "used to be") that is the tellers' experience of "how it is now." We tend, therefore, to rely on an alternative experiential structure: we envision a future of how it "could be" that differs significantly from the tellers' longing to return to their past, as things "used to be" before their constantly-renewed memories of "families losing their homes, parents losing their children, and people struggling to hold onto their land and their dignity" (Avramovich, in Program Notes, 5). Upon leaving the performance, we are apt to enter into argument (oral or imagined; with ourselves or others) that proposes claims about an alternate political future, based upon our own experience "of the now" - say, in a multiethnic context such as the U.S., which was formulated, in large part, to meliorate the conflicts that marked how "it used to be" in its founders' (and later immigrants') experience in the old country.

Must we then conclude that there is nothing to be gained by listening to others whose claims testify to an alternative experience that we cannot share - and who long for a past that present circumstances cannot accommodate? What is at issue here will not be resolved by the addition of "bits and units" of information that might (each party to the dispute would hope) strengthen one's claims at the expense of the other's, and so accomplish a winning argument. Frustration of that

goal (winning the argument as to whose claims are to triumph) seems to leave, as the only alternative, continued destruction of lives and property – in other words, frustration of the goal of peace.

Although I have focused here on the descriptive aspect of Michael Gilbert's coalescence theory, I want now to refer briefly to the normative aspect of his theory in order to suggest the value of shifting the ground of argument from claims to positions. Recognizing that currently recognized goals are frustrated is a positive beginning, since Gilbert's normative theory is based on "key assumptions" about goals: "Every arguer has a complex set of goals," which "range over more than one modality" – which is to say, which include emotional, visceral, and kisceral reasons, along with the critical-logical reasons that are traditionally emphasized by argument strategies oriented toward claims strong enough to accomplish argumentation's "most general goal," which is "agreement" (Gilbert, 1997, 136). But the goal of reaching "agreement" through winning an argument, Gilbert notes, "does not occur frequently," and the "win" is unstable: "one would not be surprised to find, at the next encounter, that one's opponent has reverted to the previously defeated claim" (Gilbert, 1997, 103). This occurs, I want to propose, because the "win" has been achieved through "critical-logical" rather than "multi-modal" argumentation. Thus it has employed linear reasoning about claims, as in the deliberative and forensic modes I mentioned earlier, rather than engaging a demonstrative (epideictic) mode that would appeal to participants' emotional, visceral, and kisceral – as well as critical-logical – reasoning; through showing how things could be, rather than telling how they should be.

Gilbert's normative theory advocates a goal of coalescence, rather than winning, sought through a procedure that begins when arguers "expose the positions" in order to "find the points of commonality" across them, and so "explore means of maximizing the satisfaction of goals that are not in conflict and explore ways of satisfying goals that are apparently in conflict" (1997, 119). What is exposed in that first step, I suggest, is the complexity of positions formed in the "ways of conceptualizing and relating" intrinsic to multi-modal arguments (Gilbert, 1997, 90). These ways are basic to any argument's backing (in Toulmin's sense), for they are ways of "conceptualizing and relating" those "views and beliefs" that form the emotional, physical, and intuitive lived experience – the "shared concerns and values" (Gilbert, 1997, 121) – that underlie the opposing stories we

tell. Once we recognize the largely non-discursive backing of multi-modal argumentation, we can begin listening to the stories as the AA audience listens: with emphasis on the emotional, visceral, and kisceral similarities that remain unarticulated in the backing of our argumentation, rather than on the differences that are too easily articulated in propositional form as an argument's claims. Within that alternative mode of listening, a goal other than winning can be discerned: creating a common "could be" that's reoriented from winning claims to enacting alternative positions.

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