

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Intractable Quarrels



## 1. Introduction

Logical tradition defines the term ‘argument’ quite narrowly. Copi’s definition is well known: “An argument, in the logician’s sense, is any group of propositions of which one is claimed to follow from the others, which are regarded as providing support or grounds for the truth of that one” (Copi, 1994, 5). Immediately following this definition he says, “Of course, the word “argument” is often used in other senses, but in logic it has the sense just explained” (Copi, 1994, 5). In whatever other senses the word ‘argument’ can be used, for the *layperson*, an argument, typically, “is a conflictual experience charged with emotion where opposing beliefs, desires and/or attitudes are involved” (Gilbert, 1997, 32). It is this sense of argument, what Gilbert calls the “Ordinary View”, that many Informal Logicians have chosen to exclude in their definition of argument. Indeed, some Informal Logicians try to make it clear what they mean by their definition of argument by explicitly contrasting it with what they call a ‘quarrel’, ‘fight’, or ‘dispute’. For example, (Govier, 2001, 4); (Diestler, 2001, 3-4); (Levi, 1991, 25-27); (Fogelin, 1987, vii); (Thomas, 1986, 10); (Missimer, 1986, 6); (Cederblom & Paulsen, 1982, 1); (Fearnside, 1980, 4); and (Shurter & Pierce, 1966, xii).

In contrast to this “Dialectical view” of argument held by Informal Logicians, the “Rhetorical view” as conceived by Gilbert (1997, 34) includes the quarrel as a type of argument. The inclusion of the quarrel into the realm of argument for Argumentation Theory has been made easier by the work of Communication Theorists, in particular, by Daniel J. O’Keefe’s (1977) distinction between argument<sub>1</sub> and argument<sub>2</sub>. Arguments<sub>1</sub> are products which people *make*, while arguments<sub>2</sub> are social interactions which people *have*. With the recognition of arguments<sub>2</sub>, quarrels became almost, but not quite, a legitimate subject of study for Argumentation Theory. There was still the troublesome question of emotion. At the end of O’Keefe’s paper he raises (but does not try to answer) some important questions about arguments<sub>1</sub> and arguments<sub>2</sub>. One question is whether or not quarrels are “genuine” arguments<sub>2</sub>. The issue here is that we well might hold that “an argument<sub>2</sub> necessarily involves the exchange of arguments<sub>1</sub> and

counterarguments<sup>1</sup>” (O’Keefe, 1977, 127). If there are no arguments<sup>1</sup> exchanged in an argument<sup>2</sup>, then all that is occurring is the (typically) heated expression of emotion. And it was not obvious that in such a situation an argument, in any sense, was taking place. In Wayne Brockriede’s (1977, 129) response to O’Keefe’s question, he states “Although persons can make arguments without engaging in the process of arguing, I do not see how they can argue without making arguments.”

The important innovation which allows Gilbert, following Willard (1989), to include quarrels in his definition of argument is his focus on the fact of disagreement and its cause (Gilbert, 1997, 29). If there is disagreement, then we can inquire about its cause or causes. The sources of disagreement fall into the following modes: logical, emotional, visceral or kisceral. Gilbert’s definition of argument is broad enough to capture these modes. “An argument is any disagreement – from the most polite discussion to the loudest brawl” (Gilbert, 1997, 30). It is this definition of argument that is assumed in this paper.

From such a definition and the inclusiveness of the Rhetorical view of argument, it is not hard to see why psychotherapy is relevant to quarrels from the perspective of Argumentation Theory. It is agreed by all that quarrels involve emotion; typically, they involve much heated emotion. And in at least a basic way, psychotherapy purports to help people deal with their emotional problems. But the similarity is not restricted to the subject matter of emotion; there is also a similarity of purpose. Since at least van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984), there has been a desire to link argument studies with conflict resolution. Also see Crosswhite (1996, 45) on the social needs which argumentation meets. I believe that the time is right for seeing what insights psychoanalysis can give Argumentation Theorists in the analysis of quarrels.

Psychoanalysis has made its appearance in Argumentation Theory relatively recently. For example, Cissna and Anderson (1990) claim that the work of Carl Rogers is important for developing a “philosophical praxis of dialogue”; and Foss and Griffin (1995) suggest that Rogerian “unconditional positive regard” is part of their new invitational rhetoric. However, these theorists don’t apply psychotherapy to analyze quarrels, which is not surprising given their interest in Rogers’ empathic therapy. Rogerian therapeutic practice depends upon therapists’ – or by extension, interlocutors’ – willingness to take up an empathic attitude. And in quarrels, this willingness is usually absent.

Of course this doesn't mean that psychotherapy is an inappropriate framework for the analysis of quarrels, merely that Rogerian psychotherapy is. What is needed for reducing conflict in quarrels is a psychotherapy that doesn't rely on the disputants adopting an empathic attitude. But one may object here and ask why assume that interlocutors can't or won't adopt an empathic attitude in a quarrel? The answer is that my claim only applies to a certain type of quarrel, not to quarrels in general. It is an open question whether or not the interlocutors in a particular quarrel could plausibly be empathic enough to resolve their conflict. The only claim I am making is that in the type of quarrel that we call 'hopeless' or 'intractable', expecting the disputants to adopt an empathic attitude toward each other is not going to be effective. Intractable quarrels are characterized by hostility and a marked resistance to perspective taking or empathy. Hence one of the necessary conditions of a psychotherapy for intractable quarrels is a mediator or third party who will lead the disputants in therapy.

Now it might well be asked why we should want to intervene in a quarrel that cannot be resolved. Why not echo Walton's (1992) attitude that the participants are just too *dogmatic* for any progress to be made? The simple answer is that too much is at stake to ignore intractable quarrels. Much social damage occurs to the children and family when a married couple is locked in an intractable quarrel, not to mention damage to themselves. And obviously the potential damage from heavily armed groups and nations mired in intractable quarrels is much greater. So, if there is to be an alternative to hostility and the threat of violence, then it is the responsibility of the intellectual community to create a way in which participants in an intractable dispute can lessen the hostility.

To my knowledge the term *intractable quarrel* is not found in the Argumentation literature. The terms *quarrel*, *serious quarrel*, *natural quarrel*, and *group quarrel* are found in Walton (1992, 267, 273), (1998, 179, 186, 196); the phrase "...intractable conflict between nations and groups" is found in Govier (2000, 1); and in Crosswhite (1996, 44) we find the phrase "intractable conflicts and disagreements". In the next section I will ground my claim that the issue of the intractable quarrel is relevant to Argumentation Theory by examining Walton (1992), (1998), and Gilbert's (1995), (1997), and (2001) treatment of quarrels.

## 2. Walton

Both Walton's description of quarrels and his recommendation of what should be done about them are commonsensical. By that I mean there is no obvious theory

driving the analysis. I believe that what Walton says about quarrels is correct, so far as it goes. But I also believe that it doesn't go far enough; so his account needs to be supplemented.

Two persistent themes in Walton's analysis of quarrels are their *intentional* aspect and *cathartic potential* (Walton 1992, 215, 257, 273, 278), (1998, 179, 184, 185). Walton believes that in a quarrel both parties intend to remain adversaries. This is important because it shows that there is no openness on the part of the opponents (Walton, 1992, 215). If there is no openness, then there is no hope of resolution; therefore, with openness comes the possibility of resolution. This is right, openness is a necessary condition for resolution. And though Walton doesn't say so, I think we can be confident that he would say that openness is not a sufficient condition. Openness between the parties doesn't guarantee resolution.

So, if two parties intend to remain adversaries, they will, end of story. But there is more to the story, and to see that we have to move to another perspective which is different from the commonsense one. The most basic alternatives to a common sense notion of quarrels are derivatives of systems theory. One such derivative, the family systems theory of Watzlawick et al., (1967), disputes the universal applicability of linear causality. In linear causality it makes sense to claim that event A comes before and causes event B. However, in a circle, linear causality is not appropriate. Watzlawick et al., (1967) claim that there are circular communication systems and hence

Thinking in terms of such systems forces one to abandon the notion that, say, event *a* comes first and event *b* is determined by *a*'s occurrence, for by the same faulty logic it could be claimed that event *b* precedes *a*, depending on where one arbitrarily chooses to break the continuity of the circle (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 46).

The issue of where to break the circle in a series of messages or communications is called "the punctuation of the sequences of events" after Whorf (1956) and Bateson and Jackson (1964) (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 54). Punctuation is important because if we take too narrow a focus, we will naturally understand the series of messages in a linear way. For example, if we limit our analysis to one interchange – one message from person A and one from person B – then we are almost forced to see person A's message as a stimulus and person B's message as a response to it.

Walton's analysis of quarrels suggests that he takes a fairly narrow scope with

respect to punctuation; this is why he believes the *intention* to remain adversaries in a quarrel is significant (Walton, 1992, 215). Walton's view is just commonsense and it is like that of the husband and wife in the following example from Watzlawick et al., (1967, 56).

Disagreement about how to punctuate the sequence of events is at the root of countless relationship struggles. Suppose a couple have a marital problem to which he contributes passive withdrawal, while her 50 per cent is nagging criticism. In explaining their frustrations, the husband will state that withdrawal is his only *defense against* her nagging, while she will label this explanation a gross and willful distortion of what "really" happens in their marriage: namely, that she is critical of him *because of* his passivity. Stripped of all ephemeral and fortuitous elements their fights consist in a monotonous exchange of the messages "I withdraw because you nag" and "I nag because you withdraw" (Original emphasis).

Here both husband and wife punctuate narrowly yet at different points in the cycle. The husband focuses on a previous instance of his wife nagging him while the wife focuses on the husband's current instance of passivity. The husband and wife cite the intentions of the other as a major cause of their conflict. The husband says that his withdrawal is his "only defense against her nagging" - the word 'nagging' suggests intent. The wife is even more explicit: she sees her husband's explanation as a "gross and willful distortion". A 'willful' distortion is obviously an intentional one. So Walton is correct, for the *parties in the dispute*, the intention to remain adversaries is what keeps the conflict going.

Given this understanding of the situation, it is not surprising that Walton doesn't really have any recommendation for dealing with these quarrels. The only positive advice he gives is "You can argue with a dogmatic or prejudiced individual, but it will be tough going. But there is no point in trying to argue with a fanatic..." (Walton, 1992, 277). This is true enough, but more needs to be said.

First, the theory of Watzlawick et al., can deepen the analysis. The example of the husband and wife reveals that while the intention to remain adversaries is crucial *to them*, the intention is not necessary for their quarrel to continue; thus showing that the locus of the problem lies elsewhere. It is not necessary because whether or not the intention to remain adversaries is present, the parties will perceive it in each other. This perception is part of how the couple understand the situation, and this understanding is the result of their punctuating narrowly. Second, According to Watzlawick et al., this analysis suggests a way to help the couple. If

we take a sufficiently longer focus and punctuate broadly, we see that every message in the series is both stimulus and response (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 55). So the recommendation would be to try to get the couple to stop punctuating narrowly.

Now as with intention, Walton's understanding of catharsis is conventional. People can quarrel and the result may be a feeling of relief after they air their grievances (Walton, 1992, 257). More importantly, in a quarrel "to some extent one's deeper feelings of what is significant may be expressed" (Walton, 1992, 257). Walton doesn't expand on this but I think the implication is clear. If a quarrel causes people to express how they really feel about important issues then in that sense progress has been made.

Again, with a quarrel where the disputants are caught in this kind of cycle, catharsis is the wrong concept to apply. People who punctuate narrowly will understand any particular quarrel to be about the latest malicious act of their partner. They will not be able to see that the dispute is really about the way they understand the situation. Another way of illustrating this is to draw a distinction between the content and relationship levels of a dispute (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 80). The content level represents what the quarrel is ostensibly about while the relationship level represents what the dispute is really about.

While to the therapist the monotonous redundancy of pseudodisagreements between husbands and wives becomes evident fairly quickly, the protagonists usually see every one of them in isolation and as totally new, simply because the practical, objective issues involved may be drawn from a wide range of activities, from TV programs to corn flakes to sex (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 81).

In these disputes no amount of expressing how one really feels on the content level is going to make any difference at the relationship level.

Walton says that an example of a group quarrel is "... a border dispute between two countries" (Walton 1992, 273). While I do not doubt that *some* border disputes can be characterized as "intentional" (Walton 1992, 274), I think it at least as likely that some are the products of dysfunctional patterns of understanding and communicating. Walton recognizes that group quarrels can often become "...systematized and institutionalized..." (Walton 1992, 273) yet he does not follow up on this point. He describes the interaction of group quarrels accurately but is either unaware or unwilling to attribute the cause of such "ritualized" (Walton 1992, 273) conflict to the way the parties relate to each other. This leaves us with no recommendation about what to do when there is a

boarder dispute between two countries. The commonsense view results in defeatism, where the only options seem to be war, or the kind of isolation that comes from building a permanent barrier between the countries.

### 3. Gilbert

We saw that Gilbert's definition of argument placed the quarrel in the realm of argument. The quarrel is a type of argument<sup>2</sup> on the same level as the critical discussion, the debate, brainstorming sessions, etc. Since Gilbert's four modes – logical, emotional, visceral, and kisceral – are kinds of argument<sup>1</sup>, what distinguishes the quarrel from these other types of argument<sup>2</sup>, is that the predominant mode of communication is the emotional mode (Gilbert, 1997, 79). So quarrels contain more emotional arguments than other kinds of arguments from the other modes. But this doesn't mean that all emotional arguments are quarrels, or even that most are (Gilbert, 1995, 7). Typically, quarrels contain arguments<sup>1</sup> that are *highly* emotional and *highly* chaotic (Gilbert, 1995, 7).

Because emotional arguments are at the heart of quarrels, we should look to Gilbert's examples of emotional arguments. Standard examples of emotional arguments include "...the tantrums of children, the despair of rejected suitors, or the complaints of frustrated spouses" (Gilbert 1997, 83). In any of these categories of examples the issue of punctuation could be relevant.

From Gilbert (1995), (1997), and (2001) there are seven examples of arguments that could be on the content or the relationship level. From Gilbert (1995) the examples are *Paul & Mary* and *Lisa & Paul*; from Gilbert (1997): John & Mary, Affirmative Action, and Holidays – The Beginning; and from Gilbert (2001) the examples are Apology, and The Next Morning. In all these examples except one, Affirmative Action, there is emotion indicated in the text. However, even in the case of Affirmative Action, the context indicates that the "untenured male scholar" has "intense conviction" about his position (Gilbert 1997, 107). In all but Affirmative Action the parties are sexual intimates.

Significant emotion and a significant relationship are necessary conditions for an intractable quarrel. The other condition is that the dispute be on the relationship level. How do we know whether or not a dispute is on the content or relationship level? We can determine this by having enough of the argumentative context. This not only includes the entire series of interchanges in any particular argument. So from Gilbert (1995, 5) we would need the whole argument, not just this excerpt:

Paul: You never listen to a word I say.

Mary: Right, and you hang on my every syllable.

As well as the whole argument, we need *additional* arguments that the parties have had in the past. Through a history of their arguments we can get a sense of whether or not any particular argument in their history was likely about the content or the relationship. We can do this because there are basically two types of patterns of interaction: symmetrical and complementary (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 70). Symmetrical interaction occurs when the parties tend to mirror each other's behaviour (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 68). In a complementary pattern one party's behaviour complements the other; so if party A's behaviour is aggressive, party B will be passive, or vice versa (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 68). Such patterns have no normative implications, neither is to be inherently avoided or sought after.

If we find a dysfunctional pattern of escalating symmetry or rigid complementarity, then we have reason to believe that any particular argument might have been at the relationship level; if we do not find a dysfunctional pattern then we have reason to think any argument was on the content level. The rationale here is that if enough of the disputants' argumentative history is known, i.e., if we know the disputants quarrel in the same way, then we might expect that the real issue is *between them* and not over television programs or corn flakes or sex.

The problem is that Gilbert's examples are not extended enough so there is no way of knowing whether or not this kind of dysfunction is present. Any or none of these examples of emotional arguments could be an episode in an endless intractable quarrel where the respective parties argue over the same or different content.

Now this distinction between content and relationship levels has not gone unnoticed in Argumentation Theory. This distinction has many manifestations, including the basic one between topic and context with which Goffman was concerned.

A frame, in this sense, is only a particularly tangible metaphor for what other sociologists have tried to invoke by words like "background," "setting," "context," or a phrase like "in terms of." These all attempt to convey that what goes on in interaction is governed by usually unstated rules or principles more or less implicitly set by the character of some larger though perhaps invisible entity (for example, "the definition of the situation") "within" which the interaction occurs (Goffman, 1974, xiii).

Willard explicitly recognizes the different levels of argument.



Our characterizations of argument and of the constructs relevant to it are likewise as diverse as our aims and interests. We sometimes focus on the unit of meaningful utterance (Wallace, 1963, 1970), the syllogism, the sentence, the word-object dyad, the text, the text milieu or corpus of a field, the encounter or relationship among arguers, the relations of individuals to groups, organizational structure, and at a high level of abstraction, the culture (Willard, 1989, 23).

This quote shows that Willard is aware of the difference between the content and relationship levels, for the content level can be any unit of analysis smaller than the relationship unit of analysis. Of course, the quote also shows a recognition of larger or higher levels above the relationship level.

And Gilbert is aware of the distinction too. The way Gilbert utilizes the distinction shows a mix of Goffman and Willard. In Gilbert's multi-modal schema we can see that for any dispute on the logical level which requires a move into the emotional mode, we are going from the topic of the dispute (the claims) to the context (the feelings), in order to make progress in the dispute. In Willard's terms, there is a movement from a smaller unit of analysis to a larger one.

If Gilbert is aware of the different levels on which arguments and disputes can arise, why are his examples ambiguous with respect to the level on which the disputes occur? The answer is that like Willard, his focus is different from Watzlawick et al.

Willard recognizes the phenomenon of an intractable dispute.

Seeing arguments as conversations does not preclude the claim that disputes might be sustained over many encounters, that they are developmental aspects of relationships as well as circumstantial features of encounters. Spouses, for instance, may sustain disputes about child rearing, sex, or finances over years, their differences flaring up and simmering down across numberless encounters. They might well call it the "same old argument,"...

In interviews, I have obtained descriptions of this *pattern* (Willard, 1989, 83) (My emphasis).

However, Willard's analysis of the relationship level and of these patterns in particular, is not very thorough. This is because he is concerned with a more general point; to wit, the facts of relationships point up the problems of Speech Act Theory and a focus on Claim Reason Complexes (CRC's), i.e., they "undervalue speakers' interpretive procedures and exaggerate the conventional force of impersonal entities – the act, the situation, and the CRC" (Willard, 1989,

82).

Spouses, close friends, business associates, and siblings point to a recurring dispute, often a serious one, that is the “same old argument.” This permits the inference that social relationships are built upon regulative assumptions that allow ongoing disputes to flare up occasionally and ensure that they will simmer down before permanent damage is done to the relationship. Whether these regulators are automatic, on a par with a thermostat, or emergent in particular encounters *need not concern us*. They are likely a little of both (Willard, 1989, 84) (My emphasis).

The “regulative assumptions” in a relationship which allow disputes to flare up are precisely what Watzlawick et al., are interested in. Watzlawick et al., would understand these regulative assumptions to be the particulars of the dysfunctional interaction patterns.

Gilbert’s interest in a larger unit of analysis like the relationship level, is always subordinate to his interest in trying to resolve the dispute at hand. This is what his empathic procedure is designed to do. If for any argument the move to the relationship or other levels – the exploration of the emotional or other modes – does not yield any progress, then we might be in an intractable quarrel. The purpose of Gilbert’s examples is to illustrate his method; so it is at least possible that *the participants* can resolve the disputes in the examples by moving to another mode, or going deeper into the same mode. The issue of dysfunctional interaction patterns only arise when two conditions are met:

1. the relationship level explains the conflict between the dispute partners, and,
2. this explanation does not help the participants to lessen the conflict *by themselves*. This is what makes the intractable quarrel distinctive.

Even when the dispute partners are capable of the insight that they are in an intractable quarrel, this insight does not lead them out of it (Watzlawick et al., 1967, 87). For this reason it is necessary to bring in a third party to help reduce the conflict. Thus it is not surprising that Gilbert is not primarily interested in intractable quarrels, and hence, does not treat the issues which arise from them like dysfunctional interaction patterns.

But while Gilbert’s specific interests may lie elsewhere, the following quote about understanding an emotional argument paves the way for an analysis that targets these aspects of quarrels.

In order to understand an emotional argument we must get into it. The greater

the degree of emotion, the more important it is to examine what is being said in its actual context. Heightened emotion tends to occur more frequently when a] the arguers are familiar with each other, and b] *the issue is a serially recurring one*. When both these factors are taken into account it becomes even more clear that interpretations and transformations cannot be made in isolation of the feelings and personal history of the participants. In explaining the importance of perceptual analysis in dissecting argumentation, Nancy Legge (1992) explains that without in depth contextual analysis researchers may misunderstand many of the core dynamics basic to an argument. When people know each other it is impossible to be aware of what they are saying without breaking the codes of *past discussions, implicit taboos, and unconsciously agreed to rules and prescriptions* (Gilbert, 1995, 8-9) (My emphasis).

Note three things about this quote. First, Gilbert recognizes the kind of emotional argument where “the issue is a serially recurring one.” This is like Willard’s “same old argument” and it immediately raises the question of why the same issue keeps coming up. The answer may lead us to the relationship level of a dispute, which in turn may, if other conditions are satisfied, lead us to suspect an intractable quarrel is occurring. Second, Gilbert says that in order to understand an argument we may need to ‘break the codes of past discussions and implicit taboos.’ So he recognizes not only the need for the whole argument, but previous arguments too. And third, he says we also need to break the code of “unconsciously agreed to rules and prescriptions.” Negative interaction patterns fall under this category since typically, parties are not conscious of them.

#### 4. Conclusion

Gilbert has called for and worked out some of the implications of expanding the reach of argument from the linguistic to the non-linguistic, as well as from the logical to the emotional, visceral and kisceral modes. I believe that his suggestion that argument’s reach should expand further to include, at least in theory, the whole history of dispute partners’ arguments, must seriously be taken up in order to deal with intractable quarrels.

The point is not merely that another type of quarrel should be added to the Argumentation Theorist’s list, but that Argumentation Theorists should be knowledgeable about the theoretical issues concerning an intractable quarrel if they are interested in lessening the hostility between the participants. The difference between intervening earlier rather than later may be significant for interested third parties, or even to the disputants themselves. Moreover, even if

one is not interested in intervening in these kinds of disputes, it is still important to be aware of the potential signs of intractability, if only to classify certain quarrels as potentially intractable. This would create a division of labour where those theorists not interested in intervening in intractable quarrels would continue to analyze quarrels, but with the recognition that if the quarrel they are examining shows signs of intractability, then a more psychoanalytic approach is needed.

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