

# ISSA Proceedings 2006 ~ Changing Our Minds: On The Value Of Analogies For Extending Similitude



Analogies are important in invention and argumentation fundamentally because they facilitate the development and extension of thought. (Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric*)[i]

In a recent article, A. Juthe notes that “it is not obvious that the most plausible interpretation [of an “argument by conclusive analogy”] is a deductive argument”; reconstructing those arguments as deductive, Juthe suggests, reveals “the perhaps too great influence of the deductive perspective in philosophy” (2005: 23). Juthe goes on to argue that “argument by analogy is a type of argument in its own right and not reducible to any other type” (16). In this paper, I extend Juthe’s analysis of analogical arguments in the interest of supporting an expansion of the category of argumentation in the public sphere beyond the traditional conception that’s valorized in Habermas’s conception of “communicative action.”

Analogical arguments may be assessed as valid, Juthe argues, by virtue of “a correlation or an intuitive connection based on our experience and background knowledge” (15). This conception suggests that there’s a major shift in orientation that’s needed to appropriately assess the value of analogical argumentation. More precisely, there are three shifts in orientation: reversing the relative importance usually allotted to properties in contrast to relations as well as to substances in contrast to events, when constructing arguments, and reversing the relative importance usually allotted to “warrant” in contrast to “background” when using the Toulmin model for argument analysis. Analysis of discussion of topics in public sphere argumentation suggests that we often rely upon analogical reasoning to propose alternatives to views propounded by discourse partners. Thus, examples in that domain inform my sense of the importance of analogical

argumentation, background knowledge, temporality (events rather than substances) and relationality (correlations and counterparts, rather than identities) in mundane concept formation. It may be helpful to note that I am not concerned to reject the value of warranted arguments involving properties and substances. Rather, my interest is in valorizing analogical argument as worthy in its own right; as irreducible to other forms; and as a form of argument that bypasses what I suspect is a lurking remnant of that “perhaps too great influence of the deductive perspective in philosophy” that Juthe notices. That same influence, I suggest, may well be efficacious in what I argue elsewhere (Langsdorf 2000, 2002b) is a constrained conception of argumentation that limits, and even distorts, Habermas’s conception of “communicative action.” **[ii]**

This paper continues my previous work on the ontological aspect of articulation by focusing on analogical reasoning’s revelatory power in argumentation that seeks truth in Heidegger’s sense of “*aletheia*,” or “uncovering.” But that concept easily suggests a realist, in contrast to constitutive, basis for inquiry. Thus my initial task is to delineate the contrasts between realist and constitutive ontological starting points, in relation to dramatically different expectations as to what analogical arguments may accomplish. My further task concerns the implications that follow from acknowledging that these expectations are embedded in constitutive rather than realist ontologies; namely, we must assess their truth value by standards other than those more traditionally used in argumentation theory. In this paper I pursue only the initial task. The titles I use for the two orientations rely upon John Dewey’s identification of philosophy’s “proper task of liberating and clarifying meanings” as one for which “truth and falsity as such are irrelevant” (1925/1981, p. 307). Yet Dewey modifies that separation of “meanings” and “truth” by his recognition that “constituent truths,” in contrast to “ultimate truths,” rely on a “realm of meanings [that] is wider than that of true-and-false meanings.” My thesis, then, is that analogical reasoning’s value lies in uncovering alternate meanings by using the implicit “background knowledge” that’s intrinsic to any communicative situation. That knowledge includes “intuitive connections” that shape “wider” meanings – those meanings that propose “constituent truths” – and so “facilitate the development and extension of thought.” For that process of developing alternative possibilities and extending conventionally accepted meanings, I suspect, is crucial for that little-understood process we call changing our minds.

I would summarize the contrasts involved in analogical, in contrast to more traditional, argumentation in these terms:**[iii]**

traditional argumentation	analogical argumentation
	focus
substances	events
static universals	temporal particulars
sameness	relations
confirming hierarchies of concepts	creative formation of concepts
warrant-reliant	background-reliant
reality as given	reality as constituted
	goal
clarity	complexity
limiting options (what is)	expanding options (what might be)
achieve agreement/consensus	induce consideration/deliberation
aim: truth (as correspondence)	aim: truth (as <i>aletheia</i> )
inductive strength/deductive certainty	possibility, plausibility, probability
action in accord with justified true belief	action motivated by identification or adherence
"ultimate truths" (Dewey)	"constituent truths" (Dewey)

There may well be an historical shift in interest in, and even preference for, each of these two modes of argumentation. Ronald Schleifer finds that "some time around the turn of the 20th century a new mode of comprehension arose," which supplemented those "received Enlightenment ideas concerning the nature of understanding and explanation" as culminating in Cartesian ideals of "'clear and distinct ideas' and the large assumption, central to Enlightenment science from Newton to Einstein, that the criteria for scientific explanation entailed . . . accuracy, simplicity, and generality" and which understood "reduction and hierarchy to be the 'methods' of science and wisdom" (2000, p. 1). The "analogical thinking" that "supplemented without replacing the reductive hierarchies of Enlightenment explanation," Schleifer continues, relies upon "metonymic series rather than synechdochial hierarchies"; more specifically, it encourages thinking in concrete and particular terms, rather than abstract and universal terms - and thus, valorizes an orientation toward the particular and transient, rather than the universal and stable; toward complexity and plurality, rather than simplicity and univocity (pp. 8-9). "Analogical knowledge," Schleifer reminds us, "is irreducibly complex. It traffics in similarity and difference that cannot be reduced to one another," and so "suspends the law of excluded middle" (pp. 14-15). It "embodies the serial work of the negative" in proposing relations, similarities, and differences that may be discerned in "momentary or emergent insights" (p. 24).

The conceptions of knowledge, logic, and argumentation predominant in each of these modes of comprehension rely upon remarkably diverse ontological

assumptions. Traditional argumentation correlates well with Schleifer's characterization of "Enlightenment ideas . . . of understanding and explanation," which rest upon an assumption that reality - including human beings - is given to inquiry, although physically as well as psychologically malleable. Traditional argumentation thus seeks clarity and consensus in regard to propositions that assert generalizable points of correspondence between claims and reality; between what we know and what is the case for what is, independent of the human interaction with reality that's a necessary condition for any particular process of inquiry. Jürgen Habermas adopts this mode of argument in his delineation of communicative action as a process of representation and transmission. What's implied here is the presence of a given - whether objects, events, or sense-data - that is identified in language. Communicative action's task, then, is accurate representation of that given, in language that can be used in deductive or inductive reasoning toward an epistemic goal. This is so whether that goal is sought through speakers' communicative action engaged in cognitive efforts toward accurate knowledge of the natural world, or interactive efforts toward correct interpersonal establishment of our social world, or expressive efforts toward truthful disclosure of their subjectivity. **[iv]**

Without requiring rejection of that conception of knowing and being, analogical thinking - particularly as carried out in analogical argumentation that marshals premises in support of a conclusion - seeks to comprehend the complexity of matters. Within this alternate mode of comprehension, inquiry is oriented toward uncovering *how* matters might be, rather than positing propositions that correspond to *what* things are. A multiplicity of meanings emerge in the interaction between (in Kenneth Burke's terms) "beings that by nature respond to symbols" (1962, p. 567) and the elements that engage those beings' attention. For those beings - we who essentially and extensively engage in communicative action - evoke an apparently inexhaustible wealth of perspectives on, and ways of assigning meaning to, elements that engage our attention. In so doing, we constitute a multiplicity of ways that matters could present themselves to us and ways that we, and they, could be related. Comprehending human being as using our symbolic capacities in constitutive, rather than representational, ways enables us to recognize the goal of analogical argument as inducing cooperation among distinctly diverse beings who devise ways of signifying what engages their particular attention, from within their particular perspectives and in relation to their particular goals. The meanings that emerge from the interaction between

symbolically active beings and their environments range in plausibility from possibility to probability, and each of us seeks to induce others' consideration of, and even, identification with, those meanings that win our adherence - even, transiently.

Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, in what may be the earliest explicit consideration of distinct ontological assumptions underlying rhetorical theory, emphasizes that a focus, such as Burke's, on human beings' symbolic abilities encourages investigation of "the rhetorical dimension present in all language use" (1970, p. 105) rather than delineating discourse that articulates a perspective as worthy of consideration as either "logical argumentation" or "rhetorical persuasion." Contrary to ontological assumptions that understand human being as primarily rational or volitional, cognitive or affective - and so, inspire rationalistic or behavioristic theories of human being - she proposes understanding human being as intrinsically symbolic. She grants that doing so sacrifices the "neatness and order" offered by the "analytical and empirical perspectives" adopted by (formal) logic and (physical) science. What's gained, I would add, is appreciation of the argumentative dimension of communicative action as informed by analogical as well as propositional characterizations. Further, what's enabled is recognition, in Thomas Farrell's words, that "every major institutional practice associated with a vital public sphere . . . seems to embody the creative strain of reason which we call rhetorical art" (1993, p. 237). That "creative strain of reason" seems to me to be especially exercised when we devise analogies to argue for how things both are and are not related to other things.

We can now look more closely at some examples that illustrate how analogies work to develop and expand thought. Analogies, in contrast to propositions, persistently signify both what is and what is not; or, what may be and what may not be the case. Assessing the value of a particular analogy requires us to look beyond the concepts that it joins via tentative and transient relation in a particular situation. But this looking "beyond" the particular situation in which the analogy is proposed involves looking into the background and goals that may be operative in proposing that analogy, while refraining from positing causal efficacy between background and analogical relation, or between analogical relation and goals - and also, refraining from positing general (even, universal) hierarchical structures.

Our first example is provided in the film, entitled *Capote*, that focuses on Truman

Capote's book, *In Cold Blood*, in the context of documenting his life. Gerald Clarke, author of the biography that provided the basis for the film, asked Capote about his feelings for Perry Smith - one of the two men executed for the murder that is the central event in Capote's book. In the film, the actor who plays Capote, Philip Seymour Hoffman, replies by suggesting both similarity and difference: "It's almost like we grew up in the same house, and I went out the front door and he went out the back." I reconstruct the analogy implicated in this response in order to direct our attention to the background knowledge - which may well be culturally specific - that supplies its force:

(1) Socially acceptable character : socially unacceptable character : : front door :  
back door  
(e.g., author) (e.g., murderer)

Empathy (an expressive attitude; Habermas's third category) is articulated here not by approximating measurement of a property (such as "I felt a strong sense of empathy with Smith") but by identifying a process (leaving the shared house by doors that connote positive and negative relation with the inhabitants) that reaches into another domain for explanatory efficacy. The terms that are used evoke our understanding, which may be quite vague, of growing up within the same household (i.e., environment), but leaving that physical and social commonality in either a positive (author) or negative (murderer) way. Thus the response sketches a connection, rather than describing a propositional state of affairs, and so may invite reflection on the relation between upbringing and character development.

A second example relies on patterns of personality development within social interaction (Habermas's second category) to imply something about the nature of an entity (Habermas's first category). The source is an editorial in *The New York Times* on the topic of Vice-President Cheney's shooting accident, which wounded a fellow bird-hunter. The editorial writer articulates a less-than-complimentary assessment of Mr. Chaney with these words: "The vice president appears to have behaved like a teenager who thinks that if he keeps quiet about the wreck, no one will notice that the family car is missing its right door" (2005, February 14). I would reconstruct the analogy here so as focus on one element in background knowledge that's highlighted - and which may generate greater trans-cultural efficacy than the first example:

(2) Vice President : immature person : : keep quiet about a misdeed : no one will notice it

The analogical relation here is provided by only one element in the target - Mr. Cheney's behavior in this incident, but not his size, or age, or particular office - in relation an element in the source - practices in which we ourselves, or others in our experience, may have engaged. Such first-person or hearsay evidence provides supporting, although uncertain, evidence: Sometimes, although not certainly, what remains unspoken remains unnoticed. Here also, understanding comes by way of sketching a process (remaining quiet about an accident) and relation (vice president or teenager to audience, whether immediate family or voting public) rather than through describing a propositional state of affairs, and so may invite reflection - in this case, on the possibility of recognizing other immature actions by this, or other, government figure.

A third example relies upon actions by animals that may well be less familiar than are the positive and negative associations of front and back doors, or the wishful behavior of immature persons. The source is a news article in *The New York Times* (February 14, 2006) that reports on the growth of online real estate transactions. In the context of responding to a reporter's questions concerning the extent of change involved in real estate services provided online, rather than in face-to-face communication with a real estate salesperson, Glenn Kelman, chief executive of Redfin.com, a new online real estate agency, is quoted as recognizing "that change might be difficult . . . We are like the penguins on the edge of an iceberg when no one wants to jump in first. Redfin in going in first." But, Mr. Kelman continued, "Maybe that isn't such a good analogy. The first penguin in usually gets eaten by sharks or something." I would reconstruct this analogy so as to focus on the speaker's uncertainty about an element in the natural world (that is, an aspect of Habermas's first category) that seems to instigate immediate reassessment and thus retraction:

(3) Redfin (online agency) : real estate industry : : first penguin into water : flock of penguins

The analogical relation here is one that's immediately re-evaluated by the speaker, who shifts the relation involved from one of adventuresome or brave action to that of foolish and even self-destructive action, and so indicates unwillingness to adhere to, or continue to identify with, his own proposal for

relation based in similar action. Here again, one element – this time, an explicitly temporal one, being first into a situation – provides the basis of similarity. When that element is re-assessed negatively, the speaker rapidly retracts the analogy. A listener may, however, wish to retain the analogy in order to suggest that Mr. Kelman’s firm is, so to speak, shooting itself in the foot by taking the lead in bringing about the demise of its own industry.

The last example is far more contentious. The source is a response from Ward Churchill, a professor at the University of Colorado, to criticism of his characterization of certain persons who died in the attack on the World Trade Center as “little Eichmanns” because of their jobs as “technocrats of empire” within the U.S. economy. [v] He compared their employment to Adolph Eichmann’s job within the Nazi economy, which involved “ensuring the smooth running of the infrastructure that enabled the Nazi genocide.” I reconstruct his argument in order to focus on what appears to be the crucial element, the process of “enabling”:

(4) WTC “technicians” : Eichmann : : enabling U.S. aggression : enabling Nazi aggression

By extension, Churchill continues, “American citizens now” are analogous to “good Germans of the 1930s & ’40s” in regard to a set of practices that constitute only one element of their being: U.S. citizens’ “complicity” in accepting the consequences of government standards for “‘justified . . . collateral damage’” (namely, “economic sanctions” leading to the death of civilians) which he proposes is analogous to German citizens’ complicity in accepting the consequences of Nazi racial standards (namely, genocide).

The controversy provoked by Professor Churchill’s analogies illustrates the intense complexity of language choice, and thus, of communicative action, in comparison to the relative simplicity of Habermas’s fourth category, language. That is: in contrast to the validity claim of truthfulness in regard to disclosing one’s subjectivity, or rightness in regard to establishing interpersonal relations, or truth in regard to representing nature, Habermas links language to a validity claim of “comprehensibility.” Yet there is an intellectual and emotional space that separates comprehensible linguistic formulations such as propositions that can be assessed through traditional standards for argumentation, from communicated symbolic action that is evaluated by the standards of analogical argumentation.



The importance of that space is suggested by Churchill's reminder, in the response from which I take the particular terms I've quoted here, that his "analysis . . . presents questions that must be addressed in academic and public debate." That is, he is sketching a perspective that invites - even demands - reflection on the extent of similitude between the processes and events he evokes from our background knowledge in relation to certain current events, rather than proposing a description of any entity.

Earlier, I quoted Juthe's characterization of analogical argumentation as that which proposes "a correlation or an intuitive connection based on our experience and background knowledge" (2005, p. 15). The relatively acceptable analogy underlying Churchill's contentious claims relies upon background knowledge that is at least vaguely familiar to generations not far removed from an agricultural economy: chickens let out into the barnyard will return to their nests. Also, it evokes language familiar to adherents of major faith traditions in the U.S., who have some degree of adherence to the principle that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, or, that human beings reap what they sow. More abstractly stated, actors cannot expect to avoid the consequences of their actions. More contentiously than in the first three examples we've considered, Churchill's argument, by weaving analogies together, uncovers connections, relations, and correlations that may be as resistant to complete rejection as they are reminiscent of background knowledge to which we give implicit, and perhaps only partial, adherence.

In contrast to epistemic orientations that traditionally valorize clear and distinct ideas, articulated in propositional form and evaluated by means of traditional logic, analogical argumentation is ontologically efficacious. This is not to say that communicative action creates a natural, or social, or even individual state of affairs. It is to propose that analogical argumentation performs the constitutive function that Lloyd Bitzer identified with rhetoric's functioning as "a mode of altering reality, not by the direct application of energy to objects, but by the creation of a discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action" (1968, p. 3). Or, to return to the quotation from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca with which we began: analogical argumentation, and particularly the type of analogy that Juthe calls "incomplete" - which would include the four examples we've considered here, all of which rely on highlighting one element in the many that constitute any event - enables the "development

and extension of thought” by (in Juthe’s words) by foregrounding elements that “determine . . . only probably and not definitely,” and so evoke “only a correlation or an intuitive connection, based on our experience and background knowledge” (2005, pp. 14-15).

## NOTES

**i.** The epigraph is from page 385.

**ii.** The particular impetus for these remarks on the nature and value of analogical argumentation, by way of reconsidering the ontological assumptions underlying diverse assessments of that value, comes from an event within the contemporary US-American educational context. The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is created and administered by a private corporation, The College Board, and used by most US colleges and universities (with diverse levels of reliance) for determining admission to their institutions. The 2005 edition of the SAT replaced the segment that measured analogical reasoning ability with an expanded segment that measures writing skills. I have argued elsewhere (Langsdorf 2005) that argumentation theorists and teachers ought to join their colleagues in composition in urging reconsideration of that change. In this paper, I focus on a question that’s implied by that proposal: just why is analogical argumentation valuable for communicative action? In other words, my focus here is on the value of analogical argumentation for the informal logic-in-use in mundane communication, in contrast to the formal logic that characterizes abstract conceptualization.

**iii.** By “traditional” I mean deductive and inductive – but also, for some theorists, abductive and conductive – argumentation that is particularly relevant to work in the formal and physical sciences (e.g., mathematics, logic, physics), in contrast to work in the human sciences and humanities (e.g. rhetoric, literary studies, cultural studies). The social sciences (e.g., anthropology, communication studies, sociology) encompass (with diverse predominance in particular times and places) orientations toward both categories. In articulating these contrasts, I rely upon Chaim Perelman’s analysis in *The New Rhetoric* and *The Realm of Rhetoric* as well as on Kenneth Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives*

**iv.** I refer here to the four-dimensional analysis of communicative action delineated in Habermas (1984: 238) for discussion, see Langsdorf (2000b). Here is Habermas’s diagram (slightly modified) of the ontological dimensions or domains in which communicative action is operative:

Issues of Justice	Mode of Communication (Basic Attitudes)	Validity Claims	Ground Practices of Speech
"The" World of Rational Justice	Cognitive-Objectivizing Attitude	Truth	Representations of Facts
"Our" World of Justice	Intersubjective-Confirmative Attitude	Rightness	Institutionalization of Legitimate Intersubjective Relations
"My" World of Rational Justice	Expressive Attitude	Justifiability	Disclosure of Speaker's Subjectivity
Language	-----	Comprehensibility	-----

<sup>1</sup> The fullest development of Churchill's argument is in the widely circulated essay (Churchill, 2005) although the responses to it may well rely upon excerpts from that source or the number of articles and speeches he has given which repeat the contentious phrases.

v. The fullest development of Churchill's argument is in his widely circulated essay (Churchill, 2005) although the responses to it may well rely upon excerpts from that source or the number of articles and speeches he has given which repeat the contentious phrases.

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