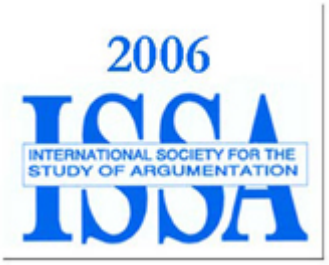
ISSA Proceedings 2006 – Didactics And Authority: Towards A Pragma-Didactical Approach



Didactical arguments are shown to be a kind of argument raising specific problems. I discuss the way they are related to dialectical arguments and to arguments from authority and suggest a new research orientation in argumentation: pragma-didactics.

1. *Aristotle on didactical arguments*

At the beginning of the *On Sophistical Refutations* (II, 165 a-b), Aristotle gives a four types classification of arguments that can be involved in a discussion:

Of arguments used in discussion there are four kinds, Didactic, Dialectical, Examination-arguments and Contentious arguments. Didactic arguments are those which reason from the principles appropriate to each branch of learning and not from the opinions of the answerer (for he who is learning must take things on trust). Dialectical arguments are those which starting from generally accepted opinions, reason to establish a contradiction.

First, two remarks. Although dialectical arguments are discussed at length in *On Sophistical Refutations* and the *Topica*, Aristotle says hardly anything more about didactical arguments. Thus, scientific arguments are not listed here although they are discussed in some later books, especially the *Analytics.* This last point can be explained by the fact that scientific arguments are not debatable because of the specific nature of their premises. In *Posterior Analytics* (I, 2, 71, b, 20), Aristotle writes that scientific premises must be "true, primary, immediate, better known than, prior to, and causative of the conclusion". Accordingly, neither the premises nor the full scientific argument are open to discussion: this could explain why scientific arguments are missing in *On Sophistical Refutations* list.

So, when asking whether an argument can be both scientific and didactical, the answer would be "no!" since didactical arguments are debatable when scientific arguments are not. This seems confirmed in *Topica* (I, 1, 100, a 30) when Aristotle claims that "Things are true and primary which command belief through

themselves and not through anything else; for regarding the first principles of science it is unnecessary to ask any further questions as to ask “why”, but each principle should of itself command belief”.
This conclusion about compatibility between didactical and scientic arguments leads to the surprising conclusion that science cannot be a branch of learning.

To avoid this difficulty, a solution is to make a distinction between didactical practice and science acquisition. Note that such a distinction is quite common, at least in folk psychology, when a distinction is made between explanation – an action made by the teacher – and understanding – an action made by the student.
However, as suggested by the previous quotation from the *Topica*, Aristotle seems to admit that a discussion may begin in a scientific context: suffice the student asks “why?” about a principle. But this should not happen since it would be a sign that the student does not understand the principle as a principle. In any case, following Aristotle, since the scientific knowledge of principles must be immediate it cannot rely on trust paid to a master. Moreover, according to *Posterior Analytics* where Aristotle sets out his empirical and inductivist epistemology, the principles of knowledge are said neither demonstrable (otherwise they would not be principles) nor undemonstrable. They are acquired by another way: “there is a definite first principle of knowledge by which we recognize ultimate truths” (I, 3, 72, b, 20).

Now, what about the Aristotelian distinction between didactical and dialectical arguments? It is rooted into the status of premises and, more precisely, into a pragmatical concern. Besides their acceptability, what matters is on what grounds they are taken as providing support to the conclusion. An argument is properly dialectical if its premises are about opinions whose truth is “probable”, this word being taken with the ancient meaning of “generally accepted”. That is, following Aristotle’s celebrated expression, that the premises “commend themselves to all or the majority or to the wise – that is, to all of the wise or to the majority or to the most famous and distinguished of them” (Aristotle, *Topica,* 1, 100, b 20).
On the contrary, with didactical arguments the master has not to strive to find acceptable premises. It is up to the learner to submit himself to the requirements of “the field of knowledge” and to make its principles his own. But how is this possible? In any case, if a strict demarcation must be made between dialectical and didactical premises, we are back to the previous dilemma: either the learner knows the principle – already or immediately – or he relies on the master’s word.

In the latter case, the argument is from authority of the simplest form “X says p, therefore p”.
This shows a strong connection between didactical arguments and epistemic authority. But authority may be involved in other kinds of arguments, for instance in Aristotelian dialectical arguments where premises are said to be based on the sayings of “wise men” or even of a minority of them. Aristotle acknowledges that it may be wise to rely on someone else’s advice and that it happens when you give your opinion on a topic you do not know: “on a question of medicine one would think as the doctor thinks and in matters of geometry as the geometrician thinks, and so too with the other arts” (Aristotle, Topica, I, 10, 104, a, 35).
A few lines before, Aristotle writes that to rely on an expert and to grant his proposition is to make it a dialectic proposition for “it is obvious that all opinions of those which accords with the arts are dialectical propositions; for one would accept the opinions of those who have examined the subjects in question”. Becoming dialectical, the proposition cannot be scientific since it is neither grasped immediately nor a step in a syllogistic demonstration.
To summarize, between didactical and dialectical arguments Aristotle makes a sharp distinction based on the way premises are used by the people committed in the discussion. Thus no room is left for an appeal to authority in scientific arguments: hence the paradox of an education claiming to be scientific for it makes no sense to introduce dialectically a scientific proposition that would also belongs to “a field of knowledge” as it is the case in didactical arguments.

2. *Didactics and epistemic authority: a new alliance?*
Leaving Aristotle now, in almost every field of contemporary science – since it goes by fields – the rule is that principles are not immediately known. And the idea that those principles could be learned by induction from a common and widely shared experience is certainly an illusion. This situation is not a consequence of a particular human cognitive incapacity but rather of the difficulty to set up the sophisticated experiments relevant to modern fields of knowledge. Most contemporary scientific experiments are not accessible to “all or the majority or to the wise – that is, to all of the wise or to the majority or to the most famous and distinguished of them”. Therefore the principles of many disciplines, including experimental sciences, are acquired rather by hearsay than by experience, by authority rather than by immediate knowledge or reasoning. Even basic scientific knowledge may depend more on communication than on direct perception.

Accordingly, the importance of didactical argumentation and of epistemic authority is not only to be reappraised but deserves nowadays a specific attention that may not be reducible to the one paid to dialectical argumentation.

3. *Authority*

The word "authority" comes from the Latin verb "augere" which means "to increase". This shade of meaning is not salient in contemporary uses but can be found in the word "author" with its connotation of production or creation, a kind of increase. However, a negative interpretation of the notion is commonly prevalent and darkens the fact that authority can be a source of knowledge.

In a celebrated text about authority, Hannah Arendt recalls the many shades of meaning of this term applied to numerous different human practices (Arendt, 1954). Her main claim however, is that in its major use non coercive authority is political but would have been waning since the beginning of the XXth century. She tries to understand why and makes a genealogical endeavour to explain it. But first, she states that authority and argumentation are incompatible, the former presupposing a hierarchy when the latter would be egalitarian. Unfortunately she says nothing about didactical arguments or appeals to authority in a free debate. But this is not her main concern here: her topic is broadly political and does not get into technical details about the practice and form of argument.

However, she makes an interesting point about the connection between didactical arguments and authority. According to her, the problem of authority would be rooted and decisively shaped into a very particular Greek situation, at the crossing of politics and knowledge. A model can be found into Plato's *Republic*. In the celebrated episod of the cave, when the philosopher comes back into the cave after the enlightening vision of the sun, he notices that lay people are not constrained by the power of reason. So, a new political way has to be found to allow an enlightened ruling of the city. According to Arendt, it is discovered in the kind of relationship that exists between adults and children or, as Aristotle will have it later, between aged and young people. Although not stated explicitly, a first decisive connection between authority and didactics is clearly made here.

As for the "increase" at the root of the roman "authority", it would not be an epistemic but rather a political matter. It would qualify any action counting as a reinforcement of the foundating act of the city, of the *patria*. Arendt claims that the bond at the very heart of roman authority will also be at the root of a new

religious link. More precisely, she explains that the Christian Church made the connection between the Greek and the Roman approaches to authority, political and religious and epistemic concerns becoming deeply intertwined within this notion.

Aside from Arendt's historical considerations it may be noted that many authors have acknowledged that authority is actually widely present in human affairs. And the most frequent example is the authority of adults over children, be it epistemic, didactical or ethical. What daddy or mummy says is true because it is daddy or mummy who says it! This argument, absolutely similar to the basic argument from authority seems to have been a model for many forms of non coercive authority. This meets perfectly Arendt's point about the political model chosen by the Greek philosopher yearning for popular recognition.

4. *Authority and fallacy*

It is widely taken for granted, both by classical and contemporary thinkers, that an argument from authority is not structurally fallacious even if it stays far from our contemporary models of rationality. Unless the authority quoted is infallible the argument is taken not to be logically valid. But this is not a reason to call it a sophism, unless you are ready to claim that any inductive argument is a sophism. Only a pragmatical analysis can show why and when some uses of this kind of argument are fallacious.

The triviality of the appeal to authority is often acknowledged as a fact, all the more so as non coercive authority has many faces. A call to authority can even be praised. And if an appeal *ad populum* is looked upon as an appeal to authority, democracy itself is likely to be more an authoritative form of government than a reign of reason. And this is why voluntarist policies of education and dissemination of knowledge are often viewed as absolutely necessary to prevent democracy from being only an authoritarian political system. The French Revolution, for instance, very clearly discussed the question of public instruction in order to secure an alliance between the sovereign People and the throne of Reason.

Locke is said to have introduced the very notion of argument *ad verecundiam* to denounce arguing from authority to intimidate an opponent. But another founding father of the critical analysis of authority, namely Antoine Arnauld, had already set forth that a distinction had to be made between its edifying and illicit uses. The celebrated Logics he wrote with Pierre Nicole warns against the lack of validity of all these "false reasonings […] we fall into […] in deciding hastily ot the

truth of something according to an authority that is not sufficient to make it sure" (Arnauld & Nicole, 1662, 1992 p 264). According to Arnauld and Nicole, this kind of reasoning is the most frequent of fallacious arguments. However, they expect their reader to feel secure learning God wanted the mysteries of religion to be accessible to "the most simple of the faithful" without any learned examination of the details of the doctrine for God "has given as a sure rule of truth the authority of the universal church that proposes them". Whatever you may think of the border between sophism and "true reasoning", this latter example confirms that authoritative argumentation is not necessarily bound to an open dialectical context but may occur in a situation where didactical and political decisions are closely connected.

Granted that an appeal to authority is not formally fallacious, contemporary theorists have looked closely to its fallacious uses. But little attention has been paid to its acceptable uses. This may look puzzling if it is true that non fallacious appeals to authority are so common. We suggest that this tendency is a consequence of the supremacy given nowadays to the dialectical and critical conception of argumentation, perhaps inspired by moral or political values. For to call to authority seems to contradict our contemporary standard conception of a fair debate and of the founding values of egalitarian political systems that nevertheless give shelter to authority in wide areas, especially education. The prestige of equality may have belittled the interest of scholars for appeals to authority, didactical or not, and made it somewhat peripherical to contemporary concerns.

A typical feature of the argument from authority is certainly its tendency to create a dissymetry between the arguers, especially from the point of view of their access to truth. When an arguer appeals to authority, she claims for herself or someone else a position that is supposed to be beyond her opponent's reach who may then adopt – consciously or not – an attitude of respect, doubt or distrust. The principles of equity, reciprocity and permutability, usually taken as necessary conditions for a critical dialog, seem to be broken as soon as authority is called to describe, organize or rule the world.

5. *Contemporary criticisms*

Now, let us have a look at two major tendencies in the critical analysis of the argument from authority to check its status as an argument.

The first one – I oversimplify – is the position usually met in books representative

of the North American movement of critical thinking and informal logic. A look at a few textbooks or even at more theoretical works shows some constants in the critical treatment of the argument from authority. First, it is generally discussed in chapters or paragraphs dedicated to sophisms although it is commonly acknowledged that not all of its uses are fallacious and that it may be fairly rational to subscribe to such an argument.

It is precisely because not all arguments from authority are fallacious that precautions have to be taken. It is in order to sharpen her critical mind that the reader is warned against the risks of an argument of authority even free of any bad intention. The argument being inductive if the authority is not infallible, the problem is then to perform a correct evaluation of the support provided by the premises to the conclusion. Govier, for instance, notes that "accepting a premise on authority is similar to accepting a premise on testimony" (Govier, p 126.) although there is a major difference between the two cases: the authority must have a genuine and recognized knowledge of the field she is talking about. Then, as many other textbooks explain, the critical thinker has to check the acceptability of the "authoritative" premise – explicitly stated or not – claiming that the teller is an authority, and then if the authority's saying does provide some support to the conclusion. The discussion of several cases usually helps to the setting up of a general checklist aiming at testing the reliability of the would-be authority: Is the conclusion relevant to a genuine field of knowledge? Is the authority a well-known expert in this area? Is it sure that she has no reason to deceive? Do the experts of the field agree on the authority's statement? All these questions should get positive answers for the authority's saying to be reliable. In his book devoted to the appeal to authority, Walton sets forward about the same criteria to make sure nothing is fallacious in an argument from authority (Walton, 1997, p 237).

Of course, none of the books we examined distorts the argument by bypassing the authority through a call to a premise that would directly support the conclusion. However nothing general is said about the difficult – but common – cases when checking all the criteria is not practically manageable or when a genuine and truthful authority holds a view definitely new or opposed to the majority of the experts of the field.

A second and very different treatment of the fallacious appeal to authority can be found in the pragma-dialectical approach to argumentation (For instance: Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1987, 1995, 1996). To understand it, let us recall that

pragma-dialectics subscribes to a critical rationalism wishing to evade from two traps: first the hyper-globality of an abstract or formal view of argumentation (typical of formal logics), then the hyper-locality of a naïve empiricism limiting its work to case studies because of a theoretical relativism suspicious of theoretical generalizations.

Pragma-dialectics proposes to analyze actual cases of argumentation by comparison with a model of rationality playing then a normative role (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1995, p 131). Unlike a strictly logical approach to argumentation, pragma-dialectics holds a thesis of "functionalization" very important for the point made in this paper. It says that "Argumentation arises in response to, or anticipation of, disagreement and particular lines of justification are fitted to realize this purpose in a particular case" (*Ibid,* p 133). Other texts confirm this view of argumentation arising from a context of disagreement or, at least, of dialectical opposition. For instance,Van Eemeren and Grootendorst write: "Dialecticians consider any argumentation as a component of an implicit or explicit critical discussion" (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992, French transl. p 12.). This strong statement explains why any argumentation should be related to a single set of constitutive normative rules.

So, from a pragma-dialectical point of view didactical arguments are not a kind of argument but a kind of dialectical argument, even if no dialectic move is made by the people actually arguing. For sure, it is always possible to ask questions to an authority, to a principle (remember Aristotle's disciple asking "why?" to the principles) or to what Bachman and Hintikka call an oracle (Hintikka & Bachman, 1991; Bachman, 1995). Thus a dialectical orientation would actually be given to the argumentation. But my claim is that this mere possibility is not sufficient to systematically apply the pragma-dialectical model to didactical arguments. Moreover, a symmetrical argument can be opposed to the pragma-dialectical import from dialectics to didactics: a "normal" critical debate can be seen as a didactical argumentation with master and student changing places. This should challenge the claim of a universal dialectical background to any argument, and the more so as actual argumentations are likely to follow a mix of several models (See Walton, 1998.).

Pragma-dialectics applies to the epistemic appeal to authority – often closely connected to didactical arguments – the general treatment it applies to fallacies, namely that it is a local breaking of the constitutive rules of dialectical discussion. Therefore, an argument from authority will be fallacious only if it produces an

infringement of at least one of these rules, typically by creating a dissymetry between the arguers in strengthening one position with no compensation for the other one. This will happen, for example, when one of the arguers claims that a premise is acceptable because it is what an authority says or when one arguer claims to be an expert or have any superiority that would spare him the burden of proof.

6. *Towards pragma-didactics*

Pragma-dialectics gives a universal normative role to the critical discussion. However, because of its postulates and the model chosen as a norm it seems incapable of providing a full and satisfactory account of didactical arguments and of very common uses of epistemic authority. The choice open via the pragma-dialectical approach is either to take didactical arguments as no argument at all or at most as hidden dialectical arguments or as a fallacious move. In any case didactical argumentation is looked upon as peripheral. To go back to Aristotle, let us say that his typology of argument is more charitable and more careful – but less bold – since it admits no single model of argumentation.

Didactical arguments and epistemic authority are so widely and differently used that we claim they deserve more than case studies or enumeration. For sure, they occur in a context, a place and a time that are particular; however they show at least one typical feature, namely that one arguer claims to be a spokesperson. And this could be enough to think of a local theoretical unification that would not fall under the global flag of pragma-dialectics.

So, we propose to keep the main positions of pragma-dialectics, especially its pragmatical orientation, but also to broaden this research program by dropping the supremacy of the critical discussion model to leave room to what we will call pragma-didactics. Hopefully the door is already half-open. For pragma-dialectics acknowledges several kinds of difference of opinions, among which the fact that an arguer sometimes neither disagrees nor doubts the proposition made but simply does not know what to think about it. No comeback to Aristotle is required to see that this case is relevant for a pragma-didactical approach that will certainly bring some new flesh to the reflexion about the links between argumentation and explanation.

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