

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Ad Hominem In The Criticisms Of Expert Argumentation



## 1. Introduction

This paper offers a theoretical framework for describing the structure of arguments directed against epistemic authority. The interest of the previous studies concentrates mainly on the argumentations presented by the expert and on the argument *ex auctoritate* (Walton 1997). In this paper a different question is addressed, namely the structure of arguments directed against the expert's arguments. A specialist's reputation that can grant him the status of an epistemic authority depends on two factors, i.e. on what he actually argues and how the recipients react to his arguments. The reaction is direct when a recipient refutes an argument in a discussion with the author, and indirect when a recipient discusses these arguments with other persons, not with the author. Since reputation and refutation are strictly connected (Dascal 2001) negative reactions may contribute to the erosion of expert's status of authority.

The expert is treated as a kind of personal warrant of the quality of arguments he formulates during his professional activity. Indeed, he has got a name and personal recognizability thanks to the quality of his argumentations in professional settings. Therefore, refutation of his argumentations may take a form of criticisms directly against him in his social function of a personal epistemic warrant. Such criticisms may even adopt the form of *ad hominem*, when some personal characteristics of the expert are introduced as premises of arguments against his arguments.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 offers a theoretical framework for describing the ad hominem. It combines the rhetorical categories of *logos* and *ethos* with three concepts stemming from the reputation studies: exceptionality, trustworthiness and solidity. Section 3 relates the concept of exceptionality to the two meanings of 'expert'. In Section 4, the ad hominem in the Hamblian sense is discussed in relation to the trustworthiness. Section 5, instead, is dedicated to the interrelation between the ad hominem in the Lockean sense and the solidity

component. For the clarity of the presentation, the expert will be referred to as 'he', while the critic as 'she'.

## 2. Theoretical framework

With respect to the human factor in argumentation, there are two main lines of research: the argumentation analysed with or without a human agent (Reygadas 2003).

The mainstream studies on argumentation seem to privilege the research on apersonal norms which assure the quality of argumentation. Virtually any reference to human agents involved in the argumentation has been treated for a long time as fallacy or at least as heterogeneous intrusion with respect to the logical rules and principles. However, the studies in the last decades have led to the identification of many nuances, some of them regarded as non-fallacious.

Another trend conceives of argumentation as relation, i.e. a consequential social act (Tindale 1999). It is claimed that the structure of arguments should be examined in relation to complex social, psychological and emotive factors. Such factors influence the arguers and nuance the interpretation of the arguments. In the authentic settings of communication, the human agents are held responsible for their own arguments and they are expected to be responsive to the arguments formulated by others. Not all *de homine* remarks are to be treated as fallacious *ad hominem*, only those which are used as irrelevant premises for an argument.

The first formulation of *ad hominem* argument has been traced already in Aristotle (Walton 2001: 209). Subsequent important developments appear in the work of Galileo and Locke (discussed e.g. in Finocchiaro 1980). *Ad hominem* is classified as one of the fallacies of irrelevance (Hamblin 1970: 41). In the standard treatment (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1993), three realizations of *ad hominem* are pointed out: the abusive variant, the circumstantial variant and *tu quoque* variant. Modern studies explore various aspects of this argument, mainly concentrating on factors which differentiate fallacious from non-fallacious uses. Perelman (1969) regards *ad hominem* not as an error, but as a necessary condition for successful argumentation. Walton (1997) offers a detailed account of realizations of *ad hominem*, many of which are non-fallacious. For Johnstone (1959, 1978), *ad hominem* (in the Galileo's and Locke's definition) is regarded as the very basis of philosophy, in which the philosopher as author of his own argumentative universe is the expected warrant of the coherence of the expressed

views. The complexity of ad hominem explains why sometimes it can be conceived of as a fallacy and sometimes as a valid argument.

The interest of studying the ad hominem in relation to the expert's argumentation is due to the fact that the expert, with his unique intellectual capacities proved in various instances of argumentation, is perceived as an embodied warrant of knowledge. The key concept is 'being perceived as': it relates the research on expert argumentation with the reputation studies.

According to an early definition, "A good reputation consists in being considered a man of worth by all, or in possessing something of such a nature that all or most men, or the good, or the men of practical wisdom desire it" (Aristotle, Rhetoric 1361a 8). This formulation underlines the role of evaluation by others ("being considered") in the emergence of good reputation. However, it only hints at the objects of evaluation ("worth", "possessing something") and it does not address the mechanisms involved in the emergence of good reputation.

The modern studies on reputation in different professional settings list factors such as exceptionality, reliability, solidity, fitting the expectations, responsibility, and trustworthiness (for recent contributions, see Klewes and Wreschniok eds. 2010). Some of these concepts partially overlap (e.g. solidity and fitting the expectations, which in the subsequent analysis will be treated as equivalent). Three of them seem to be essential for a good reputation (Wieseneder and Cerny 2006). The first one is exceptionality: a person differs positively from others and he is indeed perceived by them as outstanding. The second one is trustworthiness: a person continues repeating positively valued actions and people actually perceive him as doing so. The third one is solidity: a person performs his role within the framework of the professional and ethical expectations and is actually perceived as such. The good reputation is therefore based on the paradox of being different from others, i.e. exceptional, and fitting the expectations of others, i.e. deserving trust and behaving as expected. The definitions of the essential factors of the good reputation are very broad, since they refer to the activity in any profession. In what follows, these three concepts will be examined in relation to a peculiar case: the activity of argumentation performed professionally by an expert and to the criticisms in the form of ad hominem.

Since knowledge is communicated through texts, the interrelation between

“apersonal” and “personal” aspects of expert argumentation may be fruitfully described in terms of rhetorical logos and ethos. Logos is a term loaded with many philosophical, epistemological and rhetorical meanings. For the purposes of this paper, logos, a rational component within persuasive communication, is defined as roughly equivalent to the argumentation presented by the author. In other words, it represents “apersonal” view on argumentation and allows for examining arguments in terms of structures and rules.

Ethos, treated as a “personal” and, according to Aristotle, emotive component of argumentation, is far more complex. For the goals of this paper, it is useful to distinguish its three facets. The first one is the ethos in the strict sense of the term, i.e. based on what is actually argued in the text (see below, Section 3). The second one combines the textual information, i.e. ethos proper, with the referential information about the author in the extratextual world. It concerns both the features independent from the author (such as ethnicity or gender) and the features at least partially dependent on him (e.g. academic credentials, intellectual commitments; see below, Section 4). The third facet regards a kind of “capitalised ethos”, i.e. a global evaluation based on the body of texts ever authored by the expert (see below, Section 5).

### *3. Expert's exceptionality*

Within the common use of the term ‘expert,’ there are two partially overlapping meanings. One is the term ‘expert’ in an institutional sense: after having acquired appropriate academic credentials, anyone can be called an ‘expert’ (or a ‘specialist’, or a ‘professional’).

The other is the term ‘expert’ granted to relatively few knowledgeable persons in virtue of the professional recognition of their outstanding performances. The two notions cannot be directly opposed, since any active member of a professional community, i.e. an expert in the institutional sense, aims at gaining good reputation as an expert in the qualitative sense. However, the recognition of the quality of his performances is not always unanimously shared by all the members of his community. The exceptionality, i.e. the basic element of good reputation, is therefore required to become an expert in the qualitative sense of the term.

In the case of the professional activity consisting of producing well-argued texts, the essence of the exceptionality is the rhetorical ethos. The complexity of the concept is underlined by Aristotle: “Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s

personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses” (Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1356a).

In the strict meaning of the term, the rhetorical ethos is a textual construction: “when his speech is delivered in such a manner as to render him [i.e. the speaker] worthy of confidence”. Aristotle underlines that this conviction should emerge from the text and not from the extratextual information. The best illustration of ethos in written texts is the practice of the blind review. In such a case, no extratextual information about the author is available: the only cues emerge from the quality of arguments. An outstanding quality of argumentation in a text permits to evaluate the author as possessing exceptional intellectual abilities. The rational, i.e. logos, creates the emotional, i.e. ethos, converted into a sort of social gain assuring the respect among the recipients.

Since ethos is in a way a byproduct of logos, in order to damage ethos it is necessary to undermine logos by a direct attack against the arguments themselves. Such a criticism apparently does not have a form of ad hominem, since it is the argumentation, and not its author, that is at stake. However, although formulated in *ad rem* way, such criticisms are abusively made with an ad hominem intent, aiming to destroy the author’s credibility as an expert. The typology of such attacks is very rich; since it has been discussed elsewhere (see Załęska 2008), it will not be reminded here due to space limitations.

#### 4. *Expert’s trustworthiness*

In the case of expertise, the trust is the essence of the relation between epistemic authority and authority, based on the cognitive asymmetry. The non-experts in a particular field of competence are constrained to trust the expert because they lack the necessary field knowledge to evaluate his arguments. The expert, on his side, is expected to observe the ethical standards of intellectual honesty, formulating a possibly unbiased judgment, based only on available evidence

transformed in relevant premises and conclusions.

Two of Walton's (1997) critical questions regard the trustworthiness. One of them - the backup evidence question ("is the expert opinion based on evidence?") - addresses it indirectly. This formulation may be linked to the requirements of the rhetorical *logos*. The trustworthiness question addresses it directly: "is E personally reliable as a source?".

The meaning attributed to trustworthiness within the reputation studies does not limit itself to the relation of cognitive trust. It is defined instead in behavioral terms, formulated very broadly in order to fit the description of any profession. A trustworthy (or reliable) person is the one that continues repeating positively valued actions and is actually perceived as such. This definition of trustworthiness underlines the temporal and iterative aspect of habituation that both confirms previous expectations and enhances further ones (see below, Section 5).

When the answer to the Walton's trustworthiness question (especially if negative) is inserted into the premises of the argument itself, it is treated as an *ad hominem* in its most popular definition, i.e. when "a case is argued not on its merits but by analyzing (usually unfavorably) the motives or the background of its supporters or opponents" (Hamblin 1970, p. 41). The *ad hominem* (1) concerns mainly the expert's extratextual features, i.e. his being "personally reliable as a source". In a way such a criterion of extratextual *ethos* appears also in the Aristotle's definition quoted above in which he underlines that "it is not true [...] that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion" and that "his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses".

There are three interrelated meanings of trustworthiness relevant for the *ad hominem* referred to an expert. One, the extratextual *ethos*, regards the stereotypical trustworthiness ascribed to the groups to which he belongs (e.g. nation, gender, profession). The stereotypical motivations attributed to members of these groups stem from the ideas about their trustworthiness. Such an information gives material for the circumstantial version of *ad hominem* which overlaps with the genetic fallacy of the polluted source.

The two other meanings emerge within the textual universe. The first one is textual *ethos* as described above (see Section 3): the trust is due to *ethos* which

emerges through the quality of arguments. If each text raises trust, it is likely to generalize into the second kind of trustworthiness, i.e. as a lasting attribute of an author.

The introduction of the extratextual ethos as overt or covert premise of an argument is fundamental for the ad hominem (1). The first group of examples regards the prejudice (in the etymological sense of *prae iudicium*, i.e. 'before judgment') or stereotypes, which, on the one hand, are regarded as useful heuristics to a preliminary categorization, but, on the other hand, usually exemplify the fallacy of hasty generalization. The author is perceived as biased often due to the biases of his opponents who insist on analyzing (usually unfavorably) his motives or his background. Biased perceptions of ingroups and outgroups revolve about attributions of positive or negative intentions, beliefs, motivations and predetermine one's trustworthiness even before he starts to speak. These judgements may concern the sociological categorizations into nations, professions etc., or psychological ones, attributing stereotyped intentions to different groups of people.

In the aggressive version of ad hominem (1), a hint at motives and backgrounds stigmatized in various historical periods presents the author as unworthy of trust (e.g. as in the case of Einstein, discredited by Nazis as a Jew). This realization of ad hominem aims at depriving the expert of the right to argue and/or at destroying his arguments as stemming from an allegedly polluted source.

In the apparently non aggressive version, a favorable interpretation of motives and backgrounds imposes instead the relation of trust based on the extratextual information (e.g. *she is your professor, so she is right*). It is one of the realizations of the inverse ad hominem, i.e. *ex auctoritate*. Sometimes it is merely a manifestation of an informal probabilistic reasoning: it is indeed probable, and only probable, that a professor is a knowledgeable person. However, the introduction of such pieces of information about the author of the argument is treated usually as fallacious due to irrelevance of a general categorization regarding extratextual features for the structure of a concrete argument.

The second group of examples involves local, insiders' knowledge about the particular experts who do act in particular social settings and have particular interests. The information used in such an ad hominem is therefore concrete (e.g. *he is an independent expert vs. he is an expert hired by a firm X*) which renders

the particular categorization more probable. However, it is always only hypothetical and probabilistic. In reality, an expert hired by a firm X can offer an unbiased, professional judgment. The adequacy of the evaluation of expert's trustworthiness depends on individual contextual knowledge and on the evaluator's perspicacity and objectivity. Indeed, the evaluation may range from imputation of quite imaginary motives up to the unveiling of an actual hidden agenda.

The uncertainty of this type of judgment makes it difficult to include such an extra-textual information about the person into schemes of valid argumentation. However, a dismissal of background knowledge regarding the complexity of human intentions, interests, characters in favour of the pure face-value of the arguments sometimes would be a theoretical and practical naiveté. The appeal to such a standard is namely evoked by some pseudo-scientists, propagandists, politicians, spin doctors or scammers who are likely to have problems with trustworthiness. They often claim that their utterances should be interpreted only against the face-value of the arguments they present. As a rule, indeed, nicely expressed and well sounding arguments seem very appealing if interpreted without an examination of the intents, biases and actions of their authors.

The distinction between general, approximate knowledge and detailed information about a peculiar case is not polar. It is rather a combination of some general, preliminary categorizations with the circumstances of a peculiar case. Such a correlation confirms the already formulated observations that not all ad hominem are fallacious, and that sometimes the skepticism towards the author allows for appropriate evaluation of his argument.

The author's professional trustworthiness, as meant in the reputation studies, is mediated through the way in which the reader perceives author's professional competence as constructed in the text. If the reader:

1. interprets that the argumentation is reasonable, based on evidence, without any (perceptible) bias,
2. believes that, until contrary evidence appears, by default all the authors act in *bona fide*,
3. decides to accept the face-value of the arguments, she may infer that the expert is trustworthy.

The criticisms and the consequent discredit may occur at any of these three



levels. If the argumentation is not valid, the counterarguments *ad rem* suffice to dismiss it; the author's textual ethos is damaged but collaterally. Instead, in the second and in the third parameter listed above, the skepticism appears when the reader has doubts concerning the expert's good faith. The opponent may voice the divergence between textual ethos, which emerges from the face-value of the arguments presented, and the supposedly relevant extratextual ethos, e.g. ascription to categories of people who are not trusted, for instance, propagandists. A remark such as *what he says sounds too well to be true, I don't believe him* illustrates this case of *ad hominem*. Particularly appealing, almost irresistible arguments, sometimes raise trust. However, they can also provoke distrust if they are interpreted as reminiscent of manipulation techniques which only mimic the valid arguments. The allusion to the untrustworthiness of the author and his text is created by evoking a general category of people (propagandists, scammers, manipulators) who try to create well-sounding arguments while realizing their hidden agenda. The opponent may also throw discredit on the expert by showing that what he claims in his publications is not adequate to what actually happens, or, in more *ad hominem* way, that what the author used to claim in the textual universe is at odds with his own decisions in the extratextual universe. The growing split between what the author affirms and what are his personal decisions within the same area (e.g. the economic decisions) may be interpreted in terms of the lack of trustworthiness.

### 5. *Expert's solidity*

Solidity is not a concept used within the argumentation theory, although some of its features are involved in the discussion of other notions. Within the reputation studies, solidity in the most general sense means that a person is able to perform his role within the framework of the professional and ethical expectations, behaving in a coherent and responsible way. In the case of an expert, the solidity refers to a peculiar aspect of expert's professional activity, i.e. formulation of arguments in professional texts. Thus, solidity regards the capacity to formulate correct and coherent argumentations consistent with the author's declared epistemic commitments. Using the criterion of solidity, the recipients treat the expert as a living link between all the argumentations he has ever authored. Even if the expert, while developing his competence, changes his views, abandons the obsolete concepts, refines his first intuitions and searches for better solutions, it is expected that he will not contradict himself by arguing for standpoints which are at odds with what he had claimed previously.

The responsibility for the coherence of views ever expressed is the basis for the argument *ad hominem* (2), whose first formulations are attributed to Galileo and Locke (Finocchiaro 2005): “to press a man with consequences drawn from his own principles or concessions [...] is [...] known under the name of *argumentum ad hominem*” (Locke 1959 [1690]: 2, 411).

The criteria evoked above underline the importance of both the authorship and the readership. On the one hand, it is expected that the author is aware of the consequences of his arguments and controls the unity of the created argumentative universe. On the other hand, only an inquisitive and critical audience, which takes the arguments seriously and is competent enough to detect discrepancies, is able to influence the author.

The author’s “own principles or concessions” may be considered at the intra-textual or inter-textual level. The intra-textual level regards the argumentative coherence as examined within one text. It could therefore be seen as a sub-case of the rhetorical ethos, in a way collateral to the rhetorical logos (see above, Section 3). The author himself creates expectations: he autonomously formulates the claim, chooses the facts he regards as relevant to the case, transforms them into argumentative premises and draws conclusions. Therefore, he is held accountable for the views he authored. It is expected that he will not contradict himself within a text. A historical example that fits nicely this case of *ad hominem* is Socrates’ maieutic method: he elicited from the interlocutors public epistemic commitments and afterwards he confronted them with the argumentative consequences of their own principles and concessions formulated within such a conversation. The intra-textual level has only a partial impact on the author’s reputation, since one text is only a small contribution to the overall evaluation of the author as an expert.

Far more important for the expert’s solidity is the inter-textual level, embracing the whole body of his texts. What changes is the scale of argumentation for which the author is held responsible: not the one exposed in a single text, but the argumentation produced over a longer period of time in different texts. Such a lasting coherent argumentative activity is likely to give the author renown.

If the unity of argumentative universe is barely noticed and/or if important discrepancies are detected, the author may be regarded as expert only in virtue of his institutional credentials, but not his professional activity. Let’s consider a case of an author who in several books develops a theory claiming A. Afterwards,

without any explanation or disclaimers, he starts to affirm that not A. Such an articulation of the contradictory views, if noticed, cannot remain without consequences for his professional reputation.

If instead the author's work is characterized by an overall coherence with the declared epistemic commitments, it contributes to the perception of author's solidity and to his reputation of an outstanding expert. The non-contradictoriness of arguments within the whole of his professional activity projects positively on the expert's reputation, since it suggests that the expert made judiciously his original epistemic commitments, based on a correct interpretation of evidence, and, therefore, he does not need to negate any part of his work based on them.

The solidity may be viewed as a kind of "capitalised ethos", i.e. a generalisation of ethos which emerges from logos in each of the examined texts. Such a "capitalised ethos" is partly a rhetorical achievement resulting from the quality of texts, but partly a result of complex social mechanisms which create one's reputation (Załęska 2010). It is a kind of "*post-iudicium*", or a motivated opinion after having read the texts, which is likely to become a "*prae-iudicium*" when reading a new text written by the author.

As stated above, the solidity in the sense of the non-contradictoriness and coherence of the views endorsed by the same author is not an absolute value. It is connected with the adequacy of the views or theories which should be supported by the factual evidence. Therefore, the requirement of solidity as one of the elements of good reputation is composed of three elements:

1. Expert argued x;
2. Expert still argues x;
3. Expert has been substantially right from the beginning.

There are two main types of opponent's reaction likely to bring the author into disrepute. In the first one, the opponent underlines that:

1. Expert argued x;
2. Expert still argues x;
3. Expert has been substantially wrong from the beginning (or from a certain point in his argumentation). Such a criticism reveals unnoticed errors or even the fallacy of inconsistent commitment. In this case, the expert is unaware of the argumentative consequences of his own commitments, principles and concessions until the opponent attacks them directly, and, directly or indirectly, attacks their

author.

In the second case, the opponent underlines that:

1. Expert argued x;
2. Expert does not argue x any more;
3. Expert has been substantially wrong at the beginning. An appropriate illustration is the case of an expert economist to whom it is reminded that he used to argue for the superiority of the communist system over the capitalist one, and now he is arguing for the superiority of the capitalist system over the communist one, contradicting in this way his own original expert commitments. The cases in which an expert overtly abandons an erroneous view and embraces the one which corresponds with the reality more correctly, seem less discreditable, although not without consequences for the author's reputation.

Due to the strict interrelation between personal solidity and the argumentative coherence, the qualification of the criticism by the opponent in terms of ad hominem or not, seems to depend on the linguistic ways of expression.

When the linguistic expressions are explicitly directed towards the person, in the form of meta-textual cues (*now, as a liberal, you say A, but it is not coherent with what you had claimed before adopting a conservative stance, namely -A*), the opponent clearly discredits the author, pressing him with the consequences of his own principles and concessions. In other words, the opponent requires expert's responsibility for the views expressed in the etymological sense of *response ability*, i.e. the capacity to give an answer.

However, the same counterarguments concerning "consequences drawn from... principles or concessions" may be formulated in an ad rem way, as if they were authorless and as if the flaws in argumentation did not have any influence on the evaluation of the expert (e.g. the proposition A is in contradiction with the proposition B). In other words, ad hominem (2) seems not to be the case of substance, but of the linguistic framing of the counter-argumentation.

The realization of ad hominem in Locke's sense fits the tu quoque variant of the argument: it is reminded to the expert that he also shared a certain view at a certain moment of his argumentative activity.

Expert's solidity in the construction of epistemic universe of argumentation interplays with the referential adequacy of this epistemic universe to the facts.

The obstinacy to defend his original epistemic commitments if they are at odds with the available evidence is fatal for the expert's professional reputation.

The gravity of the consequences for the expert's compromised solidity depends on the intellectual atmosphere of a certain historical period. The critical attention for the work of others and respect for the intellectual seriousness increase the possibility of discredit. The pluralism of ideas and the acceptance of different standpoints, instead, makes such inconsistencies barely noticed.

## 6. *Conclusions*

Taking into account the "personal" dimension extends the vocabulary and concepts applied to describe the argumentation. Exceptionality, trustworthiness and solidity, with correlated notions such as intentions, beliefs, biases or personal interests problematize the straightforward relation between the face-value of the arguments and their function in interpersonal communication.

The potential material for clear cases of ad hominem does not stem from the textual ethos, in a way collateral to logos, but from two other interrelated sources. One is the extra-textual ethos, i.e. what the arguer is and/or does and/or supposedly thinks or intends. The other is the "capitalised ethos": what is said about the author, in relation to what he actually argued in previous instances of argumentation. Both are interpreted as two different kinds of ad hominem: the first emerging within the extra-textual universe, the latter - within the inter-textual universe. As shown above, there is a relationship, although not straightforward, between the two discussed versions of ad hominem and the trustworthiness and solidity as conceived of within the reputation studies.

The trustworthiness is realisable only on the interpersonal level. In the prototypical examples of ad hominem, the extra-textual information regarding social or psychological categorizations predetermines the perception of argumentation. However, there are also the peculiar cases in which the author is brought into disrepute through a peculiar interpretation of two factors. On the one hand, there is the face-value of the arguments which sound well and are expected to grant trust. On the other hand, the authors that formulate the arguments are ascribed to a group that by definition is mistrusted.

The solidity is based on the expectation that the expert functions as a personal warrant of the non-contradictoriness of the argumentations he formulates. The

criticisms which have an impact on reputation consist mainly of pointing out to the major contradictions and discrepancies between different argumentations presented by the same expert. The Lockean version of ad hominem evokes therefore intellectual standards of argumentation, holding the author responsible for his words within the whole of his argumentative activity.

Although the concepts elaborated within the argumentation theory and reputation studies share certain common features, there are collocated at different levels of generality. What the argumentation theory defines in relation to the cognitive activity, the reputation studies refer to any professional activity. The argumentation theory and the fallacies that it points out to regard mainly the structure of single arguments. The reputation studies, instead, are concerned with approximate evaluations regarding long-lasting patterns of behaviour, such as series of recognized argumentations.

The study of relation among the structure of the arguments and their social impact is fundamental in order to gain insight into complexities of the actual argumentative practices. It could explain a paradox, so aptly captured by Aristophanes, of apparently correct arguments excluded due to their source: "Even if I believe you, I do not believe you".

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