

ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Emotional Arguments: Ancient And Contemporary Views



1. Introduction

The prodigious development of argumentation theory over the last three decades has raised many issues that challenge some of the long held assumptions that characterize the traditional study of argument. One of these issues is the role of emotion in argument and argument analysis. While rhetoric has, with its emphasis on persuasion, always recognized that emotions play some role determining which arguments we accept and reject, a long tradition sees appeals to emotion as fallacies that violate the standards of rationality and objectivity reason and argument require.

A contemporary interest in natural language argument and the way it operates in different discourses of argument has, in many ways, challenged this view. A more receptive attitude to the emotional elements of argumentation has been encouraged by the study of rhetorical analysis, strategic maneuvering and many forms of argument (e.g., “visual arguments”) that are prevalent in day to day discussion and debate. According to many authors, fallacies associated with emotion (appeals to pity, *ad baculum*, etc.) are argument schemes which are not necessarily fallacious. Most significantly, Gilbert (2007) and, following him, Carozza (2009) have proposed a radical revision of our account of argument which grants “emotional arguments” a legitimate role in argumentation.

In the present paper, I want to show that the emphasis that Gilbert and Carozza have placed on emotional argument has a precedent in ancient times. In making the case for this thesis, I will argue that ancient thinkers were engaged in a rich discussion of the relationship between argument and emotion. A complete account of ancient views is not possible in a single paper, but I will try to demonstrate that two central principles that characterize this discussion have something to add to the debate that Gilbert and Carozza have very usefully begun. In the long run, reflections on ancient thinkers may help us better understand how to expand or modify our theories of argumentation so that they

more successfully account for the role emotions can and should play in argument.

2. *The "Cognitive Account of Argument"*

In his recent book, *Arguing*, Hample (2005) explores the relationship between arguments and emotions. In trying to explain "the absence of emotions in argumentation theory," he surmises that "the most fundamental problem" may be "that our culture has inherited a persistent and bad idea, namely that rationality and emotionality are opposites. Arguing is identified with reason, which is held to be the opponent and discipline to passion." (pp. 126-127)

The split between reason and emotion Hample criticizes is tied to a view of reasoning, argument and judgment I will call "the cognitive account." It sees reasoning as an attempt to judge truth and establish knowledge in a manner which purposely eschews the emotions and the passions. In enunciating this view one might rightfully point out that there are many circumstances in which the whole point of reasoning is to provide reasoned evidence *rather* than emotion as the basis for belief.

This is especially true in informal contexts that are highly charged with emotion. In judging who is likely to win the world cup of football, for example, the cognitive account implies that the ideal reasoner proceeds by marshalling *evidence* for their conclusions. This evidence will probably consist of information about the earlier performance of players and teams, knowledge of their current condition and circumstances, and so on. In contrast, the poor reasoner is likely to judge the situation in a way that is unduly influenced by their loyalty to a particular side, their sympathy or antipathy toward particular players or home teams, and their hopes and desires about the outcome. In the world of sport, which naturally engages the emotions, the tendency to draw conclusions on the basis of emotional reactions rather than objective evidence is prevalent and pronounced.

In examples like this one, the cognitive account reasonably points out that emotions *interfere* with cogent reasoning. The problem is that this is much less clear in other circumstances. When arguing for a particular social policy or initiative, for example, empathy for others has a legitimate role to play in our considerations. Compassion for those in distress properly supports conclusions about the right way to behave and it is difficult to separate love and affection from attendant moral sensibilities which support some conclusions and mitigate against others. The most important contexts for argumentation include mediation,

deliberation, alternative dispute resolution, bargaining, and judicial review – contexts which are inherently emotional, and probably inevitably so.

It is difficult to see how the cognitive account can properly deal with such cases. When we assess an argument, it suggests that our concern should be a dispassionate judgment whether its premises are true (or likely true) and whether they imply the truth of its conclusion. This leaves no room for accepting or rejecting premises or conclusions on the grounds that they move us emotionally; by generating excitement, fear, anger, hope, happiness, and so on. Instead, the cognitive account suggests that emotions like these distract us from the real business of argumentation, which is the dispassionate assessment of evidence. It is this conviction that lies behind the traditional view that appeals to pity, fear, and emotion are inherently fallacious. Elsewhere it is evident in a common distinction between argument and persuasion which sees the former as the crux of reasoning, the latter as a questionable attempt to use emotional means to instill belief.

3. The “Emotional Mode”

It bears repeating that there are situations in which the cognitive account of argument points the careful reasoner in the right direction. In the course of making and judging arguments we are continually enmeshed in emotionally charged situations in which desires, fears, anxieties, prejudices, hopes, pleasures, etc. may interfere with our ability to judge what is true or false. In such circumstances, the crux of careful thinking may be an effort to distance ourselves from our emotional inclinations: to stand back and judge a situation “objectively.” This is the grain of truth in the cognitive account.

But we have already seen that the cognitive view of argument is also problematic. Even a cursory look at informal reasoning suggests that there are many circumstances in which the idea that we should remove emotion from reasoning is wrong headed. Whatever one makes of philosophical attempts to ground morality on purely rational grounds (attempts that are, at best, controversial), the suggestion that emotions have no proper role in moral, social, political and aesthetic arguments seems peculiar. It seems entirely appropriate to invoke the pity we feel for the victims of an earthquake or tsunami when deciding how we should respond to it. A studied lack of empathy is not a positive trait in thinking, but the characteristic feature of psychopathy, which we recognize as a mental disorder.

Emotions seem to play an essential role in making judgments in all kinds of circumstances: in arguments about a religious way of life, the performance of an opera, a political scandal, personal relationships, and conflicts in and outside the work place. As the cognitive account suggests, there is a danger that they may derail careful thinking and inquiry, but the notion that we should therefore banish emotions from the world of argumentation is a hasty conclusion. Instead, we might distinguish between proper and improper appeals to emotion, and proper and improper uses of argument in emotive contexts, by developing a more nuanced account of “emotional argument.”

In argumentation theory, the most direct call for a theoretical account of emotional argument is found in Gilbert (1997). He expands the traditional view of argumentation by defining four different “modes” of argument. Though he grants the importance of the “linear” mode studied in traditional logic, he proposes an expanded compass for argumentation theory which incorporates three other modes. One of these modes is an “emotional mode” of argument which employs emotion as a reason for a conclusion or invokes them as a way of expressing an argument. In the emotional mode, a lover’s outpouring of emotion may function as a good reason for accepting an entreaty to do what they desire. In such a case, the strength of an argument depends on “such elements as degree of commitment, depth, and the extent of feeling, sincerity and the degree of resistance.” (pp. 83-84)

Building on Gilbert’s theory, Carozza (2009) develops an “Amenable Argumentation Approach” to emotional argument. This approach suggests ways of administering, assessing and analyzing emotional arguments on the basis of personality theory, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms, and the methods of restorative justice. In dealing with disagreements between individuals – situations that frequently produce emotional arguments – an understanding of personality types (understood in terms of Myers Briggs or other personality dimension theories) of the interlocutors is, for example, proposed as a way of understanding the proper response to argument. The theory of argument that results is one that embraces emotional means of communication and recommends, in the analysis of argument, a broader focus on the emotions inherent in the situations and the character of the interlocutors in concrete instances of argument.

In an examination of real examples taken from alternate dispute resolution, Carozza (2009) shows how a satisfactory resolution of the differences of opinion

expressed in opposing arguments requires something more than traditional argument analysis. As she puts it, “the implications of setting out a theory of emotional arguments requires that the motivations, needs, wants, desires, backgrounds, contexts, experiences, and so on of interlocutors involved are considered as well, since emotions are inseparable from these personal and social dynamics which inherently affect argumentation dialogues” (p. 221).

Carozza’s (2009) work is grounded on contemporary philosophical and psychological discussion over such basic emotions as anger, disgust, fear, joy (happiness), sadness and surprise. As she recognizes, one might easily expand this list to include distress, guilt, shame, and other emotional states (p. 133). One might go still further, and include the so-called “social” emotions – sympathy, embarrassment, shame, guilt, pride, jealousy, envy, gratitude, admiration, indignation and contempt (Damascio 2003, p. 43).

This discussion of these categories quickly raises complex questions about the nature of emotions, their relationship to feelings, their status as behavioral tendencies or states of mind, and so on. While these are important questions, they are beyond the scope of the current paper.

In the present context it suffices to say that emotions are affective influences that have a significant, sometimes profound, impact on our decision to accept or reject particular claims: because these claims resonate with our admiration or dislike of a particular person, because they make us feel socially secure, because they make us happy or unhappy, because we find them humorous or clever, and so on. The key point is that this influence lies outside the dispassionate assessment of truth and falsity the cognitive account of argument embraces. It is a commitment to the inherent legitimacy and the consequent analysis of such influence which is the hallmark of the development of a broader theory of the emotional mode of argument.

4. Ancient Sophism and Rhetoric: From Emotions to Arguments

The kinds of examples one finds in Gilbert (2007) and Carozza (2009) suggest that there is no way to understand, unravel and resolve the issues raised by informal arguments without some understanding of the ways in which these arguments are enmeshed in emotion. Insofar as it dismisses such considerations out of hand, this makes the cognitive account of argument inadequate, or at least significantly incomplete. In building an alternative to the cognitive account, Gilbert and

Carozza have begun the construction of a theory that can account for the emotional mode of argument. Here I want to explore the formation of a theory of emotional arguments in a different way, by taking a preliminary look at historical precedents for their commitment to emotions.

In the remainder of this paper, I focus on ancient ideas that show that the notion of emotional arguments has a long history and is not (despite a general antipathy to emotional arguments in modern logic, philosophy and science) a recent phenomenon. In particular, I want to consider the ways in which they manage the tension between the role that emotions play in actual argument and the view of ideal argument propagated by the cognitive account. While the scope of this paper does not allow a detailed excursion into specific instances of the ancient views I discuss, I propose them as theoretical perspectives which are of interest, not only from a historical point of view, but as still relevant attempts to shed light on the theoretical issues raised by the emotional mode of argument.

While it is impossible to fully describe ancient views in a short paper, a useful summary can begin by noting that the ancient discussion most relevant to argumentation theory tends to assume, illustrate, or build upon the principles that (i) emotions influence arguments and/or (ii) arguments influence emotion. Unlike the traditions built around the cognitivist account, the thinkers in question do not see this situation as something to be deplored, denounced or rejected. Rather, they view the implied connections between emotion and argument as an opportunity that should be explored, cultivated and properly seized upon. In doing so, they develop descriptive and normative accounts of the relationship between arguments and emotion.

The most obvious example of this ancient attitude is found in the notion, characteristic of ancient sophism and ancient rhetoric, that an adept arguer uses emotions as a vehicle to promote particular conclusions and in this way harnesses their emotional power in providing reasons for conclusions. Tindale (2010) provides a relevant reading of the sophists' views. Among them, Gorgias (1990) most clearly champions the emotional power of argumentative discourse. He claims that it accomplishes, with the least substance and the most secret means "miraculous works; for it can stop fear and assuage pain and produce joy and make mercy abound," producing "fearful shuddering and tearful pity and sorrowful longing" in its account of other peoples fortunes (sec. 9). Elsewhere he compares words to drugs, "For just as different drugs draw off different humors

from the body, and some put an end to disease and others to life, so too of discourses: some give pain, others delight, others terrify, others rouse the hearers to courage, and yet others by a certain vile persuasion drug and trick the soul.” (sec. 14).

In a variety of famous arguments, Gorgias demonstrates the power of words by showing how they can be used to convincingly argue for the most unlikely conclusions. He defends Helen, proves that nothing exists, and is able to take on any topic (see Kerferd 1981 for a good overview). He obviously rejects the strictures on argument imposed by the cognitive account of argument, his own arguments suggesting that we cannot establish truth and falsity, undermining cognitive criteria for argument evaluation. One might compare Protagoras, who uses a similar commitment to the power of *logos* as the basis for a theory of truth which also undermines the cognitive account, rendering true whatever seems true to the individual, allowing no clear distinction between those claims that appear true for emotional and for cognitive reasons.

While sophism successfully demonstrates the power of emotions within argument, it does not provide a clear way to resolve the tension between cognitive and emotional considerations inherent in particular instances of argument. In ancient rhetoric, Aristotle (1996) provides a more mature resolution of this tension. In pursuit of ‘persuasive speaking,’ the rhetorical tradition he initiates develops detailed means of harnessing emotive power (and the “rhetorical force” of arguments). A recognition that someone who wants to successfully engage an audience must negotiate the emotional as well as the logical territory their arguments occupy is especially clear in the role it assigns to the *pathos* of an argument, a role that requires that the successful speaker skillfully invoke the affections (the *pathe*) of one’s audience. One might locate other elements of emotion in the role that *ethos* plays in persuasive argument.

In making room for emotion, Aristotelian rhetoric devises one compelling way to reconcile the tension between the cognitive account of argument and its endorsement of the principle that emotions influence arguments. It does so by adopting an argumentative ideal that aims to be successful from the perspective of *logos* as well as *pathos*. The ideal argument is an argument that satisfies the criteria for good argument proposed by the cognitive account of argument *and* successfully invokes emotions in a way that speaks to one’s audience (and establishes the *ethos* of the speaker).

Looked at from the point of view of argumentation theory, one might understand the core issue that this raises about emotion in argument as an issue of “premise acceptability.” The latter has, within informal logic, been proposed as a key criterion for judging premises, in part because the uncertain nature of informal arguments makes it difficult or impossible to rely on premises that are clearly and definitively true. The contemporary debate about the emotional mode of argument raises the question whether a further element of acceptability should be “emotional acceptability.”

This suggests a radical change in the way informal logic looks at argument, but one implicit in the rhetorical demand that one construct an argument with premises that are in keeping with the *pathos* of one’s audience. Adopting this perspective, one might see a successful argument as a way of transferring the emotional acceptability inherent in its premises to a conclusion that follows from them. One might compare this “transfer” to the logical function of an argument, which transfers cognitive credibility from premises to conclusions – a comparison which is worth exploring from an empirical and a theoretical point of view.

By endorsing both *logos* and *pathos*, rhetoric allows an intriguing marriage of cognitive and emotive accounts of argument which provides some legitimacy for the emotional aspects of informal arguments. Overall, there is no doubt that this can help us construct a more complete account of effective argument than the cognitive account, but it also raises questions. Can all the emotional aspects of argument be reduced to aspects of the *pathos* of an audience? Are there aspects which cannot be accounted for in the ways that rhetoric suggests? Certainly the analysis of *pathos* one finds in texts in rhetoric must be developed further to fully account for all the factors that play a role in emotional argument. More deeply, one might ask whether the rhetorical marriage of emotive and cognitive demands can always be a happy one. Will there be times when these demands pull in different directions? In such circumstances, how does one choose between them? In trying to understand emotional arguments, it is especially important to determine when emotive considerations should trump cognitive considerations. Mediation situations of the sort Carozza 2009 discusses (see, e.g., pp. 303-315) may provide a case in point.

Ancient rhetoric provides the most obvious ancient source for ideas on the relationship between argument and emotion. These ideas are built upon the recognition that one will be a more effective arguer if one learns how to manage

the emotional elements that arise in argumentative situations. This is an important precedent for the contemporary recognition of the role of emotion in argument, but one cannot appreciate the depth of ancient discussion without turning to other thinkers that turn this approach to the issue on its head. In rhetoric the interest in emotion is founded on the conviction that emotions can be a route to successful argument. In other circumstances, the interest stems from the conviction that arguments can be a route to successful emotions. The most obvious trends in this direction are found in some of the strands that make up ancient moral philosophy.

5. Ancient Moral Philosophy: From Arguments to Emotions

Sophism and rhetoric revel in ways that arguments influence emotion. In this way, they exemplify a commitment to the first of two principles I identified as foundational in ancient discussions of argument and emotion. The second principle is the notion that arguments influence emotion. It is an important principle insofar as it recognizes that the relationship between arguments and emotions pushes in both directions: i.e. that emotions shape arguments and conclusions, and that arguments and conclusions shape emotions. In some contexts of argumentation, this means that the adept arguer uses arguments as an essential mechanism for producing, modifying or eliminating particular emotions.

In ancient rhetoric, this second principle is evident in the attempt to use argument, to instill, not only *beliefs* within audience, but specific emotions that strengthen, secure and embolden these beliefs. Especially in a context in which the aim is to rouse an audience to action, sympathy, anger or patriotic sentiments may be a key means of instigating it. In arguing that war should be waged, the rhetor's aim is, therefore, not a cognitive, dispassionate acceptance of the proposition that war should be waged, but the fostering of patriotism, pride and indignation. Insofar as the aim of the argument is action, the emotions this implies may be the most important element of the argument.

As significant as this aspect of rhetoric is, one finds a much more direct attempt to use arguments to shape emotion in ancient moral philosophy, which frequently champions *logos* as a route to the good life. It does so because it sees argument as a tool that can be used to build the emotional profile essential to "happiness." In contexts such as these, the end of argument is not a simple assent to the truth of some proposition, but an emotional disposition that instills the

emotional perspective essential to a good life.

In ancient times, one classic illustration of this idea is the life of Socrates' follower, Phaedo (whose name became the title of one of Plato's famous dialogues). He was as famous for his life as his "philosophy," their integration demonstrating extent to which it can be difficult to separate ideas and action in ancient moral philosophy. The standard story is that he fell into a dissolute life in a brothel and then met Socrates, who changed his life by introducing him to philosophy. In the aftermath, he established a school at Elis, writing a book called *Zopyrus*, in which he argues that the Socratic logos can overcome even the most rebellious natures and the strongest passions. This is precisely what his own life is supposed to illustrate, the account of it serving as a parable for the moral that argument can change our passions, desires and emotions (Reale 1987, pp. 286-287).

Phaedo's famous treatise, *Zopyrus*, was named after an ancient physiognomist who was said to be able to judge the moral and intellectual character of a person from their physical appearance. In a famous incident Zopyrus examined Socrates and found him dull-witted, dissolute, and profligate. While others laughed, Socrates himself is said to have defended Zopyrus, saying that these vices were his natural tendencies, but he managed to reverse them by applying *logos* and philosophy.

From Phaedo's and Socrates' point of view, argumentative investigation is the proper way to overcome, eliminate and modify the kinds of emotional states which precipitate the negative tendencies Zopyrus claimed to see in Socrates. The Emperor Julian has this connection between argument and emotion in mind when he writes that: "Phaedo maintained that anything could be cured by philosophy, and that in virtue of it, all could detach themselves from all kinds of lives, from all habits, from all passions, and from all things of this kind" (Reale 1987, p. 288).

In ancient moral philosophy, such views are commonplace, especially in Hellenistic philosophy, in which various versions of scepticism, Stoicism and Epicureanism embrace personal contentment as a moral goal. In the pursuit of this goal, argument is an essential ally. It is not too much to say that it is the major weapon Hellenistic philosophers use in shaping their emotions. The most influential ancient text in this context is probably Epictetus' *Enchiridion*, which continues to enjoy a popular following (see Epictetus 2005). It is, quite literally, a

soldier's "manual" which instructs the Stoic recruit on the way to think about their life. The aim is to use argument to inculcate a view of things that will ensure that they are not perturbed by events and circumstances that others find disturbing. The result of all this argument is supposed to include some conclusions, but the real aim is the strength of character and the constancy of spirit that made Stoicism famous.

Philosophies like Stoicism promote radically different values than those that tend to characterize ancient rhetoric, but they share with the rhetorical view of argument a stance that embraces the link between argument and emotion. In both cases, this link is purposely exploited, making argument a tool to use in shaping our emotions. In the present discussion, in a study of the emotional mode of argument, the important point is that such views provide a radically different perspective than the cognitive view, which sees argument as a vehicle to be used in a dispassionate quest for truth.

6. Conclusion (and Forward)

I want to finish this discussion with an example from ancient moral philosophy which can illustrate the extent to which ancient philosophy can be predicated on a commitment to the relationship between argument and emotion. It is found in Hellenistic philosophy, which is notable for its pronounced skeptical tendencies. In keeping with our own tendency to understand argument and philosophy in cognitive terms, we tend to characterize these skeptical trends in terms of their commitment to a set of arguments for the conclusion that claims to truth cannot be justified.

It goes without saying that this is a central component of ancient skepticism, but its goals are much broader, encompassing emotional as well as cognitive conclusions (for an overview of ancient scepticism, see Groarke 1990; Mates 1996; and Inwood & Gerson 2009). Looked at from this point of view, one of the goals – at times the central goal – of scepticism is emotional quietude. This facet of skepticism is most clearly seen in ancient Pyrrhonism. According to our most authoritative source, Sextus Empiricus, it is a method for attaining a peace of mind which is founded on the skeptical ability to oppose arguments for belief that disturb one ("I am dying, which is a terrible thing") with equally forceful arguments to the contrary ("I cannot be sure, I have lived a good life, and everyone should accept death with grace"). This opposition establishes *isosthenia*, the equal force of opposing points of view, which forces one to suspend judgment

on the correctness of the belief that disturbs one's peace of mind. This undermines its emotional effect and produces the tranquillity (*ataraxia*) the skeptic seeks.

Sextus explains the psychology that lies behind this method in the first book of his *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, where he writes that:

...the man who opines that anything is by nature good or bad is forever disquieted: when he is without the things which he deems good he believes himself to be tormented by things naturally bad and he pursues the things which are, he thinks, good; which when he has obtained he keeps falling into still more perturbations because of his irrational and immoderate elation, and in his dread of a change of fortune he uses every endeavour to avoid losing the things which he deems good. On the other hand, the man who determines nothing as to what is naturally good or bad neither shuns nor pursues anything eagerly; and, in consequence, he is unperturbed." (1933, lines 1.26-29).

I don't give this example as a prelude to a discussion of the details of the Pyrrhonian point of view, but to illustrate how detailed and refined the ancient discussion of argument and emotion can become. In this and other cases it is much more than a general commitment to a relationship between argument and emotion, propounding very detailed strategies that exploit this relationship for specific emotional ends. In this case, opposed arguments become a method for instilling an uncertainty which precipitates a *laissez-faire* emotional state which brings with it the peace of mind the Pyrrhonian seeks. The care (not a lack of care) with which the sceptic calibrates his response to emotional upset is seen in Sextus' explanation "Why the Sceptic Sometimes Purposely Employs Arguments Lacking in Persuasiveness." Sextus answers that he does so on purpose, since they are frequently what is called for in an attempt to balance weak arguments which favour the beliefs that upset us (1933, lines 3.280-281). Here argumentative discourse functions as a refined mechanism for inducing a particular emotional effect.

The Pyrrhonian use of argument is a prime example of the second principle that characterizes ancient accounts of the relationship between argument and emotions, i.e. the principle that argument influences emotion. It goes without saying that there is a great deal more to be said about both principles I have discussed in the context of the issues raised by a renewed interest in the emotional mode of argument. Now that Gilbert and Carozza have raised the

broader issues associated with arguments and emotions, one of the compelling tasks for argumentation theory will be the extension of the discussion they have begun. One fruitful way to do so is by re-engaging with those thinkers in ancient philosophy who move in the same direction.

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