

# ISSA Proceedings 2014 - Some Considerations Concerning Pragmatism And Dialectics In Argumentation Theory

*Abstract:* As Argumentation theory's philosophical fundament stemming from Aristotle is scarcely capable to cover the dynamic and the subjective traits of today's argumentative practice, an update is advisable. The philosophies of Dialectics and Pragmatism allow to form some new basic concepts which on the one hand embed argumentation into general human activities and on the other hand relate it to the subjective views of individuals, which, however, need to be kept open (concept of transsubjectivity).

*Keywords:* Dialectics, dialogue, inquiry, objection, orientation, Pragmatism, rationality, reflection, subjectivity, transsubjectivity.

## *Introduction*

Pragmatism and Dialectics seem to be well considered in contemporary argumentation theory. Pragmatism is taken up in the general focus on the practice of argument, particularly in the attention to the relevant speech activities; and dialectics is present in the exercise to take the other person not only as an addressee but as a participant of the argumentative process and to care about differences of opinions. It is true, that in all the established approaches these traditions play a certain role; and in the "Pragma-dialectic" school of Amsterdam they are even exposed as the constitutive parts of the theory.

I think, however, that both, Pragmatism and Dialectics, deserve a more profound consideration.

Why: Because they can, if they are ingeniously combined, provide the appropriate philosophical fundament for argumentation theory, which we are missing. So here is my thesis: We have no sound philosophy of argument - we rather dwell in the remains of the Aristotelian theories, replenished with several other antiquated philosophies like metaphysical realism, naïve empiricism and cartesian dualism.

All this is outdated and can no longer work as a philosophical fundament for modern argumentation theory. The result of this lack is a remarkable uncertainty about the basics, hence, a variety of approaches and perspectives and opinions about all the fundamental determinations of aims and means, powers and limits of argumentation. Of course in the present short paper I can only give a cursory impression of the thought directions which I propose. I hope that it will at least raise some interest for these topics, whose elaboration can be found in my book.**[i]**

What I will do here is the following: I will first discuss the commonplace that good or reasonable argumentation has to be “rational”; and I will claim that the usual concept of rationality is insufficient for the determination of perfection in argument (Sect. 1). Then I will give a short characterization of pragmatist thinking by way of discussing the relationship between theory and practice. This leads to the concept of “orientation” and hence to the aim of argument as “maintenance and advancement of orientation” (Sect. 2). After this I will expose some elements of dialectical thinking. Argumentation is here to be taken as a reflexive activity. It proceeds on two levels, ground- and meta-level and between two parts of the arguing subject (Proponent and Opponent) and thus takes up a principally dialogical structure. The recognition of reflexivity opens up the theory for the additional dimension of change (Sect. 3). Finally I will propose to establish “transsubjectivity” as the constitutive principle of reasonable argumentative practice (Sect. 4).

### *Section 1 - Argumentation as a rational*

We will easily agree about the statement that argumentation is or should be a rational enterprise. Charles Willard spoke of rationality as the “Gold Standard” for argumentation**[ii]**, and by Ralph Johnson it was even described as “Manifest Rationality”**[iii]**. However, when it comes to the question what that means and whether we have a sufficiently clear and unified concept of rationality the agreement might rather vanish.

Obviously there are different areas in which the term appears, and obviously very different things can be referred to with the word “rationality”. In Logic it stands for consistency and precision, in technical fields it connects aims with appropriate means, in economics it refers to maximum benefit at given costs, in ethics it demands conformity with established norms and in science the recognition of evidence in the search for truth. Do we encounter here five different forms or

aspects? But of what? What is the connecting link between them? And what is their relationship to arguments?

Probably it is the assumption that the regard of rationality in one or more senses makes an argument universally acceptable. But this assumption is also far from being clear. I will only emphasize one problematic aspect. If the said forms of rationality are related to argumentation they are regarded as “criteria of rationality”. However, when these are applied to real problem situations, then a gap opens up between the abstract standards and the concrete material. In order to overcome this gap, there is more needed than the abstract criteria: The meaning of the term “rational” needs to be opened and possibly adjusted with elements of the particular situations. Yet the way to do this, cannot be completely standardized[iv].

Therefore reasonable argumentation must be conceived in such a way that its characteristics exceed the static and abstract general criteria of rationality. Classical German philosophy made a distinction between “Verstand” and “Vernunft”. “Verstand” stood for the human capacity to recognize and follow general rules and criteria. It was seen that these were bound to the limits of the present understanding of the social and natural world. “Vernunft”, on the other hand, was the capacity to transcend these limits. It was, as Hegel has put it, the “Capacity of the Unconditioned”.[v]

The English speaking world, however, did not so much ponder over this distinction and therefore there are no equivalents established in English. I have here taken “Reason” as a translation for “Vernunft” (because of the English title of Kant’s opus maximum: “Critique of pure Reason”). Hoping that the meaning of this distinction can reach my audience I would now state that “Reason” is the heart of the philosophical fundament of argumentation theory. Consequently it is clear that no strict criteria can ever be sufficient to define reasonable argumentation. What can be done to specify reason in argument, if not in a criterion or rule, so at least in a principle of attitude, is exposed in my last section about “transsubjectivity”. But in order to set the ground for its understanding I must first expose the main ideas of pragmatist and dialectic philosophies.

### *Section 2 - A flashlight on pragmatism*

The pragmatist way of thinking is, in my opinion, the silver bullet to solve the problems around the question of how to determine the status of claims and

conclusions in relationship to mere opinions on the one side and true knowledge on the other. If claims were no more than opinions (“standpoints”) then why do we engage in arguing about them? – Why not simply state: “This is what I mean and if you don’t like it, let it be”? And if conclusions were truths – How could we achieve them by mere talking, i.e. without carrying out a specific investigation about the issue?

Indeed I think that the argumentative thesis is located between the two. It is more than opinion and less than knowledge. This can be clarified when taking up pragmatist thinking. With ‘pragmatist thinking’ I do not mean a non-specific reference to practical life or to the performance aspect of speaking. I rather refer to the great and revolutionary ideas of the philosophy of pragmatism, as they were present in the thinking of e.g. Kant, Vico, Nietzsche; then Peirce, Mead, Dewey and finally Dinger, Lorenzen and Janich.

The essence of philosophical pragmatism concerns the relationship from practice to theory: All the relevant qualities of theory, but in particular the meaning of concepts and the truth or falsehood of sentences, are clarified with regard to human practice[**vi**]; i.e. with regard to the practical circumstances of the issue that is named by a concept and the sentences that are taken to describe or prescribe the issue. In short, the fundamental insight of pragmatist thought puts practice as primary to theory.

This leads to a specific way of viewing: All sorts of theory, i.e. distinctions, concepts, sentences, theoretical systems, are taken as “orientations” in practice. Their usefulness and their possible truth are defined by their orientation value. And this seems realistic: We have accepted certain distinctions (such as e.g. the distinction between day and night) and certain theories (such as e.g. classical mechanics) as “true”, insofar as we conceive our actions within the restrictions, that they demand; and we trust these actions to be successful in the respective areas of practical life.

Now the pragmatic term of “orientation” allows to determine the area of human life in which argumentation is located. This area is inquiry; inquiry in its widest sense – from usual problem solving to scientific research, from juridical questioning to philosophical reflection. Inquiry is the condition of the alert human being. It is a twofold activity with a cognitive and a practical layer. In the practical layer it is test and exploration. In the cognitive layer, however, it is

argumentation: Here we pose claims which, if they are taken seriously, become theses that are to be justified with reasons and defended against objections.

Hence, argumentation typically occurs, when orientation is lacking; i.e. when there is not enough knowledge and experience to be oriented in some new situation. The orientation gap can appear in different forms: As a question, a doubt, as a problem, or as a difference of opinions (however, only when this is not interesting and enriching, but disturbing).

In this view the specific function of a thesis becomes evident: It is meant to reconstruct orientation. And the subsequent argumentative process of justifying and critically examining the theses is a unique method to find out whether that thesis is suitable to function as “New orientation”. If the argumentation comes to a successful end, it results in a conclusion that has passed the intellectual test. After this we can dare to act upon it viz. proceed in the practical layer of our inquiry.

A thesis which is in this sense “valid” is no longer a mere opinion. It has been reflected (through possible objections), i.e. it has immersed into instances of “the other” and it has come up as “the same” (which can imply that it has been modified) but more stable and better understood.

On the other hand a valid conclusion is not yet knowledge. Knowledge, in the pragmatist sense, must be anchored in successful human practice which shapes the world. (Therefore the question whether a conclusion, that is argumentatively valid, can be regarded as “true” or as “knowledge” has to be determined not in argumentation but in future praxis.)

### *Section 3 - A flashlight on dialectics*

The essence of philosophical dialectics is the insight into the reflexive structure of human thinking. Aristotle spoke of “Noesis noeseos” [vii]. Mind is able to bend back to itself, objectify itself and produce the amazing relationship of self-identity and non-identity.

I have taken argument as aiming at the advancement of orientation. If this is meant to be an *autonomous* endeavor it must comprise not only a performing but also a supervising instance that cares for keeping on tracks. Thus, argumentation is basically reflexive. If this is understood, some features become obvious which seem to be blurred to date. I will shortly highlight three of them.

The first is, that argument proceeds simultaneously on two levels - in modern terms: On object- and metalevel. Some scholars have been more or less aware of this. The Amsterdam school shows a certain presentiment of it in the relationship between opening stage and argument stage. A lot more distinctive is Maurice Finocchiaro's notion of meta-argumentation**[viii]**. But even there the relationship between ground- and metalevel is not yet completely understood because the two layers are regarded as separable. In argumentation this is not so. The practice of arguing cannot be separated from constructing the theory in which we seek to comprehend that practice. The only way to secure argumentation theory is via argumentative practice. In usual examples of the theory-practice relationship this is different. Take e.g. boxing. (I refer to this example because the Amsterdam school has several times chosen a picture of two men in a fistfight as a cover illustration of their books - which may expose, in an innocent manner, their view of theory and practice of argument.) Boxing has become a real discipline because it has been theorized. Certainly the theory has been build up and improved through inquiry - comprising the observation and the analysis of relevant boxing episodes, of tentative variations of those episodes etc. Any conclusions of such inquiry, however, are not determined by boxing but by argument. Insofar practice and theory are separated here.

The second consequence of the reflexive structure is, that argumentation is in principle dialogical. We have to admit not just one agent in the arguing subject but always two. I have named them "proponent" and "opponent". These names describe only roles, they do not stand for any personal or emotional attitude between the partners; not the slightest adversariality is meant.**[ix]** The two roles can be taken over even by one person in his or her reasoning process. The central point in assuming a dialogical structure is, that argumentation is always done by two agents - one, who carries out the steps of a justification and another one who critically supervises the performance.

Again this is not comprehended by all argumentation theorists. Here the Amsterdam school is simply right, but others have criticised them for various reasons. I will shortly flash on two positions which try to evade the demand for principally assuming a dialogue in argument. First there is the often cited article of Anthony Blair, criticising the ubiquity of the dialogical structure**[x]**. This position works with a concept where a dialogue is a two parties' exchange of utterances, guided by certain fix rules. Certainly these dialogue games exist. And

that they cannot serve as models for all argumentative practice is evident - but this evidence is due to the narrow concept of dialogue which is here presupposed. A somehow contrary position is presented by Christopher Tindale in the wake of the Russian scholar Michail Bakhtin[xi]. Here the word 'dialogue' stands for a communicative endeavour that is carried out in mutual acknowledgement. With such a wide concept argument is indeed (or should be) always dialogical; but now this ascription is no more specific for argumentative practice - instead for any serious and good willing human encounter.

The third consequence of the reflexive structure of argument is a specific kind of change due to the deepening of reflection. This possibility is, in my opinion, the most significant of those consequences. I mean the following: When a seemingly selfevident presupposition is questioned and put up to consideration, then reflection becomes intensified - it gets deeper (or higher). And now, in the deepening of reflexion all the relevant instances and factors of argumentation can change. Theses can change, arguments can change, and so can issues and even the arguers themselves. They can lose their shapes viz. transform themselves in mutual influencing. (I have developed the "square of dimensions" in order to cover as much as possible of these happenings[xii]).

It is amazing that the circumstances and possibilities around this dynamics are hardly recognised in contemporary argumentation theory. My explanation for this fact is the ongoing imprint of the old logical paradigm viz. the unmitigated opposition between logical and rhetorical approaches. I believe there is quite some effort necessary to give philosophical dialectic its appropriate place in the theorising of argument.

#### *Section 4 - Reason in argument: the principle of transsubjectivity*

In a last section I will try to shed a little light upon what I consider the most important element of the philosophy of argument. Argumentation is not only instrumental but requires a specific attitude and education in the personality of the arguer: It is the firm conviction that one's subjective certainties (i.e. prejudices, vested interests and even the contemporary knowledge) have to be subordinated under the aim of truly understanding and shaping the human world. This conviction is the secret spirit of reasonable argumentation. It is only partly externalisable in prescriptive norms or rules. The most explicit instruction may be the hint to respect objections to one's own theses and arguments. (Still it is clear that even this can be done within the limits of subjectivity, i.e. as a mere habitual

reaction.)

As far as I know, the best articulation of this spirit, is Paul Lorenzen's "Principle of Transsubjectivity". Lorenzen was the founder of Operative Mathematics and Dialogue Logic in Germany during the 50ies and 60ies. This is well known. Less known is, that in his late work he engaged in constructing a framework of concepts and principles for reasonable ethics and politics. Very soon he realised that all the specific norms which could be considered, had to be based upon the willingness to work upon one's subjectivity. This willingness he proposed to articulate in a general principle: "Transsubjectivity".

*"Transsubjectivity is not a fact, but it is not a postulate either. Transsubjectivity is simply a term characterizing that activity in which we are always already involved if we begin to reason at all... Transsubjectivity... is still subjectivity, but a subjectivity which is aware of its own limits - and tries to overcome them.... No person can do more than try to overcome his/her subjectivity"* (Lorenzen 1969, pp 82f)

Please note that here we envisage something like a middle course between the sheer acknowledgement of subjectivity and a complete self surrender. I will not go into further considerations about a more conscious implantation of this principle into argumentation. I would only like to finally state:

Without a commitment to the principle of transsubjectivity (of course not necessarily under this name) all arguing will be no more than sophistry.

## **NOTES**

**i.** See Wohlrapp (2014)

**ii.** See Willard (1989), p 158.

**iii.** See Johnson (2000).

**iv.** See Wittgenstein's argument against the demand for rules to guide the rule application, Wittgenstein (2009), §85 (see also Wittgenstein (1967), p. 154).

**v.** See Hegel (1830), § 45.

**vi.** See Peirce's famous pragmatist maxim: "Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object." Peirce (1965), 258, Collected Papers 5.402 (How to make our Ideas clear).



- vii.** See Aristotle (1935), *Metaphysics* 1074b 34.
- viii.** See Finocchiaro (2013).
- ix.** See Govier's considerations about a kind of adversariality between Opponent and Proponent in Chapter 14.2. (Adversariality and Argument) of her book Govier (1999).
- x.** See Blair (1998).
- xi.** See Tindale (2004), 94-98.
- xii.** See Wohlrapp (2011) and, more extensive, Wohlrapp (2014), Chapter 6.

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