

Introduction

“For every human presupposition and every enunciation has as much authority as another, unless reason shows the difference between them. Thus they must all be put in the scales, and first of all the general ones, which tyrannize over us.”

Montaigne, “Apology for Raymond Sebond”

John Dewey, in *Experience and Nature*, writes that “language is specifically a mode of interaction of at least two beings, a speaker and a hearer; it presupposes an organized group to which these creatures belong, and from which they have acquired their habits of speech. It is, therefore, a relationship, not a particularity” (1925, 153). The same may be said more specifically of argument: it is always a relationship, an interaction between at least two participants who possess or assume more than one view on a matter of controversy; it cannot adequately be conceived of as a “particularity,” the isolated ruminations of the individual grappling with uncertainty. Put another way, the locus of argument is in the exchange of ideas, the bi-play of opinions that invariably attach themselves to controversy. Which is not to say that a single individual cannot engage in argument, cannot ponder a problem in the sanctity of her own study; when she does so, however, she will always mimic the presence of another interlocutor in some form of internal *prosopopoeia*, or impersonation.¹ The presence of a simulated “other” in such a case is merely the acknowledgment of the relational dynamics that are central to the argumentative process.

Perhaps all this seems obvious in a scholarly arena that includes Bakhtinian dialogism, social construction, Burkean dramatism, philosophical hermeneutics, paralogic rhetoric, pragma-dialectics, deconstruction, and a myriad of collaborative theories. And admittedly, the relational basis of

argument is hardly a new idea. In 1958, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca introduced their “new rhetoric” with the assertions that an argument develops “in terms of an audience” and that “intellectual contact” among participants in argument is therefore crucial (5, 14). Thirteen years later, Richard Johannesen inaugurated the discussion of “communication as dialogue” by arguing that the process of interaction between interlocutors takes precedence over the formal elements of argument (the structure of claims or standards for rationality) and that a theory of dialogical communication would foreground the contact among interlocutors (1971, 375-80). Perelman’s emphasis on the rhetor/audience relationship is by now almost universally embraced in rhetorical studies, and the concept of discourse as dialogical has become wide-spread in rhetorical theory and composition studies (see Ward). And yet, despite this theoretical interest, I remain unconvinced that our general conception of argument and—of particular importance to this study—the brand of argumentative discourse presented in contemporary classrooms is truly “relational” in the sense that Dewey promotes.

Consider, for example, Deanna Kuhn’s comprehensive study of the actual argumentation skills of a group of Americans (160+) drawn from diverse age and ethnic groups and spanning the educational spectrum from high school students to college professors (1985, 18-20). The study revealed that only a small minority of the test group (9-22%) could mount a complete argument, meaning that they could generate a thesis, provide supporting evidence, compare one thesis with other positions, form a reasoned judgment, and meet objections (265). Especially interesting with regard to the relational dynamics of argument is the fact that Kuhn’s subjects were generally unable to imagine arguments opposed to their own (139-44). If we conceive of argument as the interaction of alternative views in controversy rather than simply a self-generated claim supported by some accompanying justification, then the reasoning that follows from the independent, monological process will invariably be myopic and incomplete, the result of what Kuhn refers to as the “my-side bias” (282). Kuhn’s study indicates that our capacity to evaluate our own positions is “at best limited” when we operate in isolation, without the benefit of counter claims that inevitably arise in the process of dialogue (265).

Consider also the general conception of argument held by the public at large. Lakoff and Johnson’s famous indictment of “argument as war” as one of the “metaphors we live by” is now two decades old. But as Deborah Tannen indicates (in 1998), the popular conception of argument continues to be characterized by “unrelenting contention” and a “lust for opposition” (3). In other words, the relationship that distinguishes argument in the public mind is thoroughly agonistic and certainly without pretense of

understanding, much less accommodating the other side (25). Tannen documents the prevalence of this degraded conception of argument in the press, on television and radio, in political discourse, in modern litigation practices and developing trends in electronic communication, in conventions of gender, and in educational traditions. She notes, however, that “smashing heads does not open minds” and argues that more constructive ways of expressing opposition and managing difference can be achieved by replacing the debate model with a model of argument as dialogue (26, 288-90).²

Or consider finally the way we present argument in college composition courses. I take as representative examples two American textbooks that advertise themselves as the most popular of their kind and that introduce tens of thousands of college students annually to the process of argumentation. Ramage and Bean’s *Writing Arguments* (4th ed.) is an unusually sophisticated text, particularly alert to contemporary trends in rhetorical theory. Nonetheless, this textbook defines argument as the “justification of claims,” it emphasizes argument as a formal product rather than a dynamic process, and it posits “truth seeking” and persuasion as the twin aims of argument (3). All of these elements serve to subordinate the role of dialogical exchange: “justification” implies that a claim has been established by the writer and is to be defended against modification by others; the precedence given to a formal product consigns interaction with others to something we do after the claim itself has been crafted; and the goal of “truth seeking” (despite authorial scruples) gives the false impression that most arguments can be resolved with certainty. As for “persuasion,” the authors note that their goal is to help the student become “a more powerful arguer” (3); but power over whom and for what purpose? If power is the aim of argument, we remain in the eristic mode that Deborah Tannen claims runs counter to the interests of dialogue.

Our second textbook, Annette Rottenberg’s *Elements of Argument* (5th ed.), is designed, says the author, to teach students how to “defend” their claims “as directly and efficiently as possible” (v). Student writers are asked to assume that “there is a reader who may not agree with you” and, in response, to “persuade the unconvinced, to acquaint them with good reasons for changing their minds” (13, 4). Given such a model, dialogue becomes a method for engineering conciliation on the part of a passive listener; it is certainly not a means by which rhetors acquaint themselves with opposing positions in order to enhance mutual understanding or transcend limited preconceptions. Indeed, the goals of “defense” and “justification” both invoke the metaphor of confrontation. In 1979, Daniel O’Keefe, in his well-known classification of argument as “something one person makes” and, alternatively, “something two or more people have,” noted that “the emphasis of textbooks and coursework in argumentation” is on teaching

students *to make* effective artifacts rather than *to have* productive argumentative encounters (121, 126). My own survey (with Neil Lindeman) of contemporary textbooks in written argument corroborates the notion that we have yet to pioneer pedagogical procedures that successfully shift the balance of attention from a single person making a claim to a group of people engaged in the give-and-take of argumentation (2000).

This brief sketch of general practice, popular attitudes, and contemporary pedagogy implies that, despite recent efforts to develop productive theories of dialogical exchange, much contemporary thinking about the process of argumentation continues to be founded on the eristic, monological model. Such resistance is hardly surprising, however, because the image of argument as “something one person makes” is deeply entrenched in the tradition of Western Rationalism. This tradition has its theoretical base in the Cartesian, Enlightenment conception of the independent, objective subject who, by following the methods of formal logic, is able to achieve an impartial assessment of the “truth”, an assessment independent of the persons and circumstances involved in any particular argumentative situation (see Bernstein 1985, Bineham 1990, Toulmin 1995). That is, we begin the thinking process alone, and having once codified our own propositions in response to a matter of controversy, we then (and only then) engage in argumentative interaction with others in an effort to uphold the primacy of our own position and debunk the alternatives.

According to this “traditional” conception, the function of argument is what Douglas Ehninger has called “correction” (1970, 101); i.e., having taken possession of the truth through the formal rigors of logical reasoning, we are in a position to correct the mistaken opinions of others whose thinking deviates from the universal, objective standard which governs carefully reasoned judgment. This monological, debate-oriented model can only be called “relational” in the most tangential sense: we are related to the social matrix out of which the controversy grows (Dewey’s “organized group”), and we have an adversarial relationship with anyone who would maintain a different position from our own. When it comes to interacting with others in the process of investigating a controversy and generating a proposition in response, there is no real relationship at all. Like Athene, daughter of Zeus, argumentative propositions appear from the heads of their makers full-grown and armed for combat. The eventual conflict between opposing positions may unavoidably entail contact; but the interactive process begins only after one’s own argument has been invented, refined, and readied for debate.

This sequential conception of the argumentative process (independent reasoning followed by the rhetorical adjustment to circumstances) has become a defining feature of the modern rhetorical tradition, a tradition with

very deep roots. Indeed, Cicero ascribes the process of thinking first/responding later to Socrates and the dialectical effort to arrive at abstract truth as a prelude to rhetorical exchange (*De Oratore* 3.160-61). Throughout antiquity, of course, the dialectical model shares the stage with other, less formal approaches to argumentation, approaches that feature practical reasoning and contextual relations, the rhetoric of *pros to kairon* or reasoning according to the situation. At the dawn of the early modern era, however, a more purely logical model begins to dominate educational practice, most notably perhaps in the influential curriculum of Peter Ramus (1515-72), who separates logic from rhetoric, confers on the former the responsibility for critical thinking, and confines the latter to matters of style and delivery. Shortly after, with Descartes (1596-1650) and the Port Royal educators, logic takes on new dimensions as a quasi-mathematical practice whose procedures are guaranteed by their assumed congruence with the underlying structure of the world itself. In the process, the methods of formal logic assume pride of place as the accepted standard for serious thinking. To paraphrase Stephen Toulmin's terse description of this watershed moment, with the advent of Descartes and the Rationalist tradition, logic is in and dialogue is out (1988, 139).

In the classroom, the legacy of formal reasoning is confirmed in the influential rhetorics of the English Enlightenment, most notably Thomas Campbell's *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) and Richard Whately's *Elements of Rhetoric* (1828). For Campbell, the process of critical reasoning remains the province of logic, while the work of rhetoric is to find the means by which discourse achieves persuasive effect. Whately reinforces this categorical division not only by considering the "elements of Logic" and those of "Rhetoric" in separate volumes (1826 and 1828, resp.) but also by insisting that rhetoric is "in truth an offshoot of Logic" and that the "Rhetorician must labour under great disadvantages who is not only ill-acquainted with that system, but also utterly unconscious of his deficiency" (*Elements of Rhetoric* 284). Whately's distinctive contribution to argument and its pedagogy is to provide what James Berlin calls "explicit principles for demonstrating propositions which have been established outside of the rhetorical process," i.e., developed without the benefit of contact among the people involved in controversy (1980, 13-14).

This circumscribed conception of rhetoric was advanced in the United States in the late 19C by academic reformers in the growing field of composition and rhetoric. Scholar-teachers such as Adams Sherman Hill, Barrett Wendell, and John Genung not only perpetuate Enlightenment epistemology they also promote a significant transfer of pedagogical attention from argument to exposition. With the consolidation of English Departments in American colleges between 1885 and 1910, and with the

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Mendelson, M.

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