

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 4

May 17th, 9:00 AM - May 19th, 5:00 PM

Descriptive theories of argumentation as part of Quine's project of "naturalized" epistemology

Menashe Schwed

Ashkelon Regional College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Schwed, Menashe, "Descriptive theories of argumentation as part of Quine's project of "naturalized" epistemology" (2001). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 104.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA4/papersandcommentaries/104>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

1. *Introduction*

The purpose of this paper is, first, to identify one of the sources for the attraction that descriptive theories of argumentation enjoy and, second, to examine the nature of the distinction between normative and descriptive theories of argumentation by focusing on the descriptive approach. However, this paper presents only a preliminary discussion of the subject, while the full argument is still to be worked out. epistemology'

The outline of my argument is as follows: The basic question any argumentation theory faces is a normative question: "What criteria for the notion of rationality ought the theory to adopt?" This way of phrasing the starting point of any argumentation theory is significant, since it is the point where philosophical skepticism becomes crucial as well as inevitable in discussing argumentation theory from a philosophical point of view. However, rarely do we find in the field of argumentation philosophical discussions on the nature of rationality and the implications of skepticism, although there is no doubt that the concept of rationality is more than crucial to the construction of any argumentation theory. This situation is significant when we compare it to the extensive discussion of this kind in the areas of philosophy of logic or science; discussions that contribute a great deal of insightful understanding of the nature of logic or science in general. However, there is yet no established and organized area called "the philosophy of argumentation." This talk is an attempt to contribute to such an area.

Many people in the field of argumentation might not see, however, the crucial and inevitable place philosophical skepticism has in the discussion of argumentation theories. The point is rather simple from a philosophical point of view: the fundamental dependence of any argumentation theory on the concept of rationality and its associated concepts, such as validity, soundness, acceptability and even truth, exposes the theory to the criticism of philosophical skepticism just as any other scientific area. The inevitability of skepticism is the key assumption to the whole argument introduced in this paper. What this paper seeks to do is to introduce some of those skeptical implications that I think argumentation theories should take account of.

2. *Rationality*

The concept of rationality is essential to any argumentation theory and part of its function in analyzing or reconstructing argumentative discourse. As Ralph Johnson has phrased it: "if the practice of argumentation is to be understood, it must be understood in terms of rationality" (Johnson, 2000, 1). The fact that argumentation theories differ in the meaning they assign to these concepts is the consequence of the diversity of conceptions of rationality, a situation that is more familiar in the philosophical discussion concerning the skeptical criticism of rationality and its rebuttals. Thus, the way to philosophical examination of the field of argumentation becomes obvious if not necessary.

One fundamental source for the diversity of concepts of rationality in argumentation theory is the distinction between the normative and the descriptive approaches to argumentation. The

difference between the two approaches is an epistemological one that draws from the philosophical discussions on rationality and theory of reason. The difference stems from the question whether the criteria for evaluation are *imposed on*, or just *extracted* by way of empirical observation from, actual argumentative discourse. The goal of the descriptive approach to argumentation is to be observational rather than evaluative or critical. However, this fundamental difference is not to be sought in the history of argumentation studies and especially not in its criticism of formal logic. The difference should rather be sought in the philosophical roots of such a goal, since its roots are deep in the general empiricist tradition.

As a consequence of this significant emphasis, the descriptive approach to argumentation stresses the pragmatical dimension of argumentation, following the philosophical and linguistical works of John Austin, H. P. Grice and John Searle. The idea behind this emphasis is well introduced in French philosophy. Foucault, for instance, defines ‘enunciation’ (*énoncé*) as the basic element of discourse, as opposed to proposition, which is a logical and epistemological element. An enunciation for Foucault is an undivided combination of four functions that define together a legitimate domain of discourse: the subject-speaker, the range of reference, the conceptual field that accompanies the enunciation, and the generating rules of the enunciation. The act of enunciation (*énonciation*) is, Foucault maintains, the concrete event, in speech, writing, metaphor and so on. In this way, Foucault describes a complex pragmatical situation, which might be illustrated as follows:

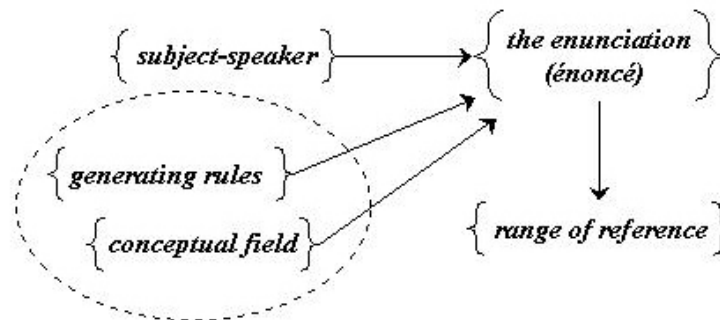


Figure 1: Argumentation as part of pragmatics

However, pragmatics is only part of the descriptive approach. The descriptive approach is better understood if we use Toulmin’s terms and see it as an anthropological approach. The descriptive approach in argumentation is not just the emphasis on empirical observation and description of actual practices of argumentation or a sub-field of pragmatics, which has to do more with the methodological way argumentation should be studied. It emphasizes understanding argumentation as a sociological and cultural activity that has to do with people and their goals in the interaction of argumentation. Furthermore, anthropology as a science rejects valuation and criticism and emphasizes description and comparative study of human forms of life. Argumentation is just one aspect of this study. This situation can be describes as follows (Based on Johnson, 2000, 13):

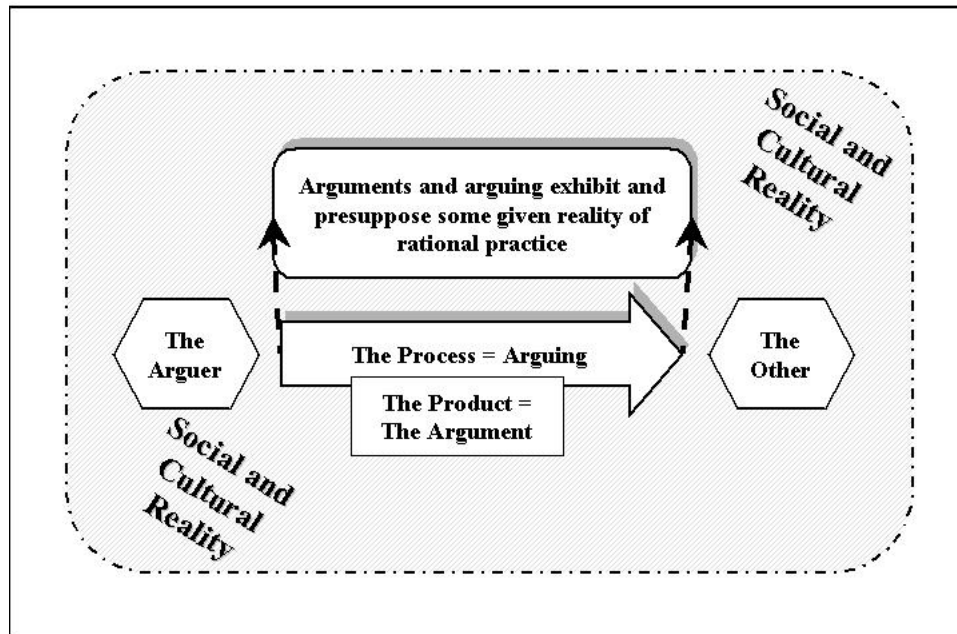


Figure 2: The Proper Dependence Relation between Argumentation and Rationality

The concept of rationality that corresponds to the anthropological study of argumentation must be based on relativistic standards or norms. The concept is supposed to be extracted out of the social and cultural reality and be part of a synthesis of theoretical knowledge produced by observing actual argumentation practices. The resulting concept must be, therefore, independent of any external restrictions that transcend the observable entities in the social realm of argumentation. This way, we get one of the characteristics of the descriptive approach, namely that rationality, and consequently, the extent of the act of evaluation in argumentation, is limited to the description of actual use of arguments. The model intends only to describe and explicate those arguments that appear in actual language use and those that are considered sound in these circumstances. In doing so, argumentation not only depends upon rationality, but exhibits rationality in a way that rationality is presupposed by argumentation. The descriptive approach is not just another theory of reason and rationality, but a decision as to the proper dependence relation between argumentation and rationality. In other words, arguments are not to be evaluated according to some given *a priori* concept of rationality, but things that exhibit and presuppose some given reality of rational practice. Introducing the descriptive approach in this way shows that one of the motives to such an approach is mainly epistemological and it is well represented in Toulmin's earlier works, *Human Understanding* (1972) and *Knowing and Acting* (1976).

Identifying the descriptive approach as anthropological and stressing its epistemological decision regarding rationality places this approach within the empiricist tradition and classifies it as an instance of this tradition. This tradition includes an epistemological decision or preference as to the way to construct the criteria for appraising arguments. It stresses the traditional empiricist advantage of the method of translating vague concepts into more observable and accessible terms. It endorses the method of translating the vague concept of rationality into the

more observable terms of argumentative practices in the social reality. The concept of rationality and its derivative concepts are, because of their vagueness, inaccessible and controversial beyond any hope. The traditional empiricist method offers some kind of translation that turns these vague concepts into more accessible and empirically observable ones and, consequently, to concepts that can be used for the scientific study of the field of argumentation.

3. *Skepticism*

This identification of the philosophical nature of the descriptive approach emphasizes the epistemic origin of the concept of rationality. However, as a result, it also shows why philosophical skepticism is so threatening. Skepticism threatens the descriptive approach just as it threatens the traditional empiricist tradition.

In order to see how exactly the threat emerges, I will use the distinction made by Quine between two distinct studies, the conceptual and the doctrinal. Quine discusses this distinction in relation to his main concern with the empiricist project in philosophy with regards to skepticism. This distinction is part of his *naturalizing epistemology*, which is supposed to enable us to avoid skepticism although not refuting it completely.

Accordingly, the descriptive approach confronts the nature of the concept of rationality in two different ways, which are two complementary and exhaustive kinds of studies: the conceptual and the doctrinal study. The conceptual study of argumentation presents a decision regarding the appropriate research program; namely, the study is concerned with clarifying the concept of rationality by defining it or translating it into more basic and comprehensible terms of the actual practices of argumentative discourse in the various fields or disciplines. The goal of the conceptual study is to gain clarity regarding the traditionally obscured concept of rationality. Thus, the research program enables the maximization of clarity and sharpness of the concept of rationality. On the other hand, the doctrinal study of argumentation displays a different decision regarding the appropriate research program, in which the study is concerned with epistemologically justifying the concept of rationality clarified by the conceptual study. The idea behind the conceptual study is that a translation of the concept of rationality into some clearer and uncontroversial terms is possible and justified. The doctrinal study means that such a translation would constitute an adequate justification to the concept of rationality. The goal of the doctrinal study is to gain certainty and justifiability regarding the concept of rationality, as defined by the descriptive theories of argumentation.

<i>The two kinds of study</i>		
	<i>The conceptual study</i>	<i>The doctrinal study</i>
<i>The method of research</i>	To define the concept of rationality in terms of actual argumentative discourse.	To propose that such a translation would constitute an adequate justification to the concept of rationality.
<i>The goal of research</i>	Maximization of clarity and sharpness of the concept of rationality.	Gaining certainty and justifiability regarding the proposed concept of rationality.

Figure 3: *The Two Kinds of Study in Argumentation Theory*

Skepticism emerges when we move to consider what the descriptive approach has to offer in its doctrinal study. The reason for this is that parallel to the distinction between the conceptual and the doctrinal study there runs the epistemological distinction between 'internal' and 'external' point of view regarding the justification of knowledge. Barry Stroud, in his *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (1984), uses this distinction for analyzing the basic move of philosophical skepticism as well as of the basic moves that respond to this skeptical challenge. The expression of the distinction between 'internal' and 'external' point of view regarding the descriptive approach is the distinction between two positions in reconstructing argumentation.

On the one hand, there is the information or knowledge gathered from the actual practices of argumentation, collected from an 'internal' point of view of the theory. From the 'internal' position, questions about what we know about arguments are answered by appealing to other things of the same sort that are already known from the 'internal' position. It is a kind of knowledge from 'within' the theory of argumentation. On the other hand, there is the 'external' point of view from which skepticism questions the epistemic status of the knowledge claimed by the theory from its 'internal' position. It is the traditional move of skepticism, where it withdraws or detaches itself from the body of knowledge. Only from the detached philosophical viewpoint is it possible to face the whole body of knowledge and evaluate it. It is here that skepticism emerges as a critical viewpoint in its full power. However, this move is 'external' since it is taken from the 'outside' of the theory and, consequently, shifts the focus from the things believed within the theory to the reasons to believe. However, the philosophical question about what is known in argumentation in general, with its corresponding threat of philosophical skepticism, is a question that can never be answered from the 'internal' position. It is an 'external' question of justification that only a detached philosophical answer can do, just like Kant's philosophy formulated from an 'external' position to knowledge is an answer to Hume's skepticism.

Thus, for the skeptical challenge to be launched, skepticism needs to point out that the knowledge in the area of argumentation is something that arises from the 'internal' position. The reason is that the particular cases of knowledge within the area of argumentation seem unproblematic only from the 'internal' position, like the everyday and simple practices or cases of argumentation. However, these cases are only seemingly unproblematic because they are

investigated from within the area of argumentation and from within a theory. What seems to be true within a theory describing everyday practices of argumentation is found after an ‘external’ investigation to be open to doubt, in fact not to express something we know about the essence of argumentation.

4. *Quine*

However, the skeptical challenge is not constantly present. Many researchers in argumentation value the descriptive approach because they feel it enjoys the advantages of the empirical study. This feeling exists since the focus is usually on the conceptual study of argumentation, which shows important results in constructing the empiricist translation that yields a general definition of the concept of rationality. This translation yields a definition much acclaimed since it gives the translation in terms of some observable argumentative practices. What is more, its appeal stems from its affinity with a respectful research tradition in psychology and sociology, such as behaviorism or physicalism, which emphasizes the observable as the appropriate point for research while rejecting any “hidden” entities not accessible to observation. Thus, giving rise to a research program in argumentation as part of a general research program in the social sciences. It is a kind of reduction, part of science’s legacy, i.e., reduction of vague concepts into clearer ones.

However, Quine shows in his work that although he favors the empiricist tradition, this tradition does not refute in any sense the skeptical argument as long as the ‘external’ position is a legitimate one from the epistemological point of view. His naturalization move against skepticism is to insist upon maintaining an internal position within the boundaries of a theory and at the same time to reject the skeptical move from the external position as a kind of extremism.

I proposed to name the descriptive approach to argumentation as *naturalized argumentation* since it tries to do exactly what Quine’s naturalized epistemology does and, thus, it is an instance of Quine’s philosophical project.

The primary goal of the descriptive approach to argumentation is to reinstate the adequacy of the theory as a descriptive theory based on observation of the social reality. However, just like Quine’s ‘naturalized epistemology’, the descriptive approach rests on the rejection of the normative standpoint and, thus rests on the denial of any ‘external’ position so essential to the skeptical argument. Any normative standpoint contains a move of *imposing* something from the outside and thus, opens the way to the skeptical argument. Everyday use of argumentation and the linguistic process in which it is expressed are to be seen as natural phenomena that should be studied in scientific methods just like any other part of the social world; there is no fundamental difference between social science and argumentation theory. In a like manner, epistemology or the theory of reason and, consequently, the concept of rationality and its derivative concepts needed for an argumentation theory, are nothing more than the study of what arguments are and how they function in social reality. And just as for Quine’s naturalized epistemology, for the descriptive approach there is no reason to suppose that the study of argumentation requires a fundamentally different sort of investigation from the study of sociology or psychology or animal behavior. All attempts to find out about ourselves and the social reality of argumentation discourse must be made from within the conceptual and scientific resources we have already developed for finding out about anything. Even those questions traditionally regarded as

especially philosophical, such as the concepts of rationality and reason, can only be pursued from within what we now take to be our knowledge or our best hypotheses as to how things are. We have no alternative, claims Quine. Whatever the proper role of philosophy might be, then, it cannot require an investigation of the social reality or of science or of our conceptual resources by something that even momentarily stands outside them. From the viewpoint of *naturalized argumentation*, there is no sense of investigating rationality and our conceptual resources in argumentation by placing ourselves outside their actual use, namely the 'external' position, since there is no such detached position from which such a philosophical inquiry can be conducted.

5. *The Failure*

This reconstruction of the descriptive approach as naturalized argumentation can gain much influence in the philosophical investigation of argumentation, just as Quine's naturalized epistemology gained much influence in philosophy. It definitely has many merits. However, Stroud, in his *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism* (1984, ch. 6), shows in detail why any naturalized tendency is doomed by skepticism. An application of his basic argument to the descriptive approach to argumentation, originally aimed at Quine's naturalized epistemology, would run as follows:

- 1) Naturalized argumentation would study the relation between our actual 'norms of rationality' and their proper or improper use in actual argumentative discourse by studying how these norms cause the generation of pieces of argumentative discourse in a given field or discipline.
- 2) This kind of conceptual study is based on the empiricist assumption that argumentation and the linguistic process in which it is expressed are to be seen as natural phenomena that should be studied in scientific methods just like any other part of the social world; there is no fundamental difference between social science and argumentation theory.
- 3) However, such investigation would not provide an explanation of how we come to be *justified* in adopting precisely those norms of rationality in a given field. It would not show by what 'justified inference' we come to choose them.
- 4) Adopting a specific concept of rationality does not *imply* the justification of this concept. It does not logically determine what should be a correct or justified concept of rationality. Many different concepts of rationality are logically compatible according to naturalized argumentation, since they all suppose to be field or discipline dependent and can be discussed only within a given field or discipline. Logical incompatibility is possible in this case only from a field or discipline *independent* point of view.
- 5) This gap between the act of adopting a concept of rationality (the 'internal' position or the 'conceptual' study) and the need to justify it (the 'external' position or the 'doctrinal' study) is what gives rise to the epistemological problem naturalized argumentation faces.
- 6) Therefore, without bridging this gap, naturalized argumentation would be nothing but a contingent explanation of various uses of rationality in actual or real argumentative

discourse. Thus, such an approach does not answer or even address itself to the philosophical problem of skepticism.

This result is not accidental, since any attempt to naturalize the concept of rationality and soundness cannot avoid the skeptical challenge launched from the 'external' position. Quine was well aware of this crucial point and expressed his philosophical helplessness even in one of his last philosophical works, *Pursuit of Truth* (1990). All he could offer was to say that the skeptic's position is a form of extremism. However, Stroud shows that there is nothing extremist or over-reacting in the skeptic position (Stroud, 1984, 231ff).

6. *The Collapse*

The above skeptical argument has one further consequence regarding the nature of the descriptive approach. The classification of argumentation theories as either descriptive or normative is considered fundamental to the nature of the theories. However, even this aspect of the descriptive approach is endangered by philosophical skepticism.

Part of Quine's helplessness is because of the radical relativism resulting from his holism. It is rooted in his claim regarding the inability to maintain the analytic/synthetic distinction between statements that have empirical content and those that do not. Accordingly, a statement would be regarded as descriptive or normative not because of its meaning or by determining which experience counts as evidence for or against such a statement. Instead, experience counts for or against the entire body of statements that constitutes a theory in a holistic manner, and little that is systematic can be said about the meaning of particular statements of the theory. Quine's skeptical holism eliminates the possibility to maintain a clear distinction between descriptive and normative statements. Consequently, as the normative/descriptive distinction is unattainable, thus so is the idea that normative theories have a status radically distinct from that of descriptive ones.

Instead, the only thing left is some gradualness between two points. Thus, one argumentative theory is more normative or descriptive than another theory, but not purely normative or descriptive. Theories that tend to the more descriptive end of the descriptive/normative continuity focus on analyzing the actual argumentative discourse and the whole practice that wraps such pieces of discourse. Theories that tend more to the normative end focus on the requirement for sound argument and enable the evaluation and criticism of actual argumentative discourse. However, it is all a matter of gradation, since no empirical survey and analysis can avoid the question of evaluating an event of argumentative discourse, and thus assuming tacitly some normative concept of being a sound argument.

Understanding the descriptive approach as an instance to the empiricist tradition and as naturalized argumentation places this approach, together with the normative approach, as another thesis regarding the nature of rationality and reason. Thus, the former controversy between descriptive and normative concepts of rationality turns out to be a purely normative controversy from a philosophical point of view. Consequently, the descriptive approach to argumentation collapses into the normative one.

Bibliography

- Johnson, R. H. 2000. *Manifest Rationality: A Pragmatic Theory of Argument*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Quine, W. v. O. 1969. Epistemology naturalized. In *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 69-90. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Quine, W. v. O. 1990. *Pursuit of Truth*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Stroud, B. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Toulmin, S. E. 1972. *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts*. Princeton University Press.
- Toulmin, S. E. 1976. *Knowing and Acting: An Invitation to Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan.