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Argument as an Act of Friendship

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Abstract:
Those who are said to argue are typically seen as annoying, domineering types who treat conversation as a duel in which the goal is in the words of Gerry Spence's recent bestseller, "to win every time." The most immediate manifestation of this resistance to argument as both inescapable and healthful comes from our students; even when they learn to appreciate and evaluate tropes at an advanced level, they still often wonder aloud, "Should I engage openly in argument?" This paper aspires to paste a happy face on the practice of argument as a partial antidote to this resistance.

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> *... has read all my Darwin essays and his assessment is a profound act of collegial friendship*.
> -John A. Campbell (1997)

In an early stage of the *Lysis,* Socrates responds to a request for discourse by saying, "I *must* converse." (emphasis added) This devotion to argument is not generally shared. Those who are said to argue are typically seen as annoying, domineering types who treat conversation as a duel in which the goal is in the words of Gerry Spence's recent bestseller "to win every time" (1995). For those of us who teach, the most immediate manifestation of this resistance to argument as both inescapable and healthful comes from our students; even when they learn to appreciate and evaluate tropes at an advanced level, they still often wonder aloud, "Should I engage openly in argument?"

Whenever teachers stand in front of their classes and announce that the focus of the course will be the development and evaluation of argument, waves of tension roll through the class; merely mentioning the word "argument" creates mental imagery of interpersonal strife and hurt feelings. The presumed effect on participants is personality carnage (Eisenberg and Ilardo, 1972,1). The class struggles to catch their breath as they utter the universal student prayer: Please, oh please, don't call on me. Why does such an announcement create tension and concern in the classroom? Why, in general, are people so frightened of actively pursuing a more argumentative outlook on life?

This paper aspires to paste a happy face on the practice of argument as an antidote to this resistance. The objective is to reframe argument as a developmental opportunity or gift. The first brief section spells out the constitutive elements of friendship and suggests their link to human development or growth. The second reviews texts and popular treatments of argument, highlighting the war-like metaphors that can tarnish argumentation for those considering self-conscious engagement with argumentation. The concluding section illustrates the potentially friendly nature of argument by reviewing in Ed Damer's approach to "keeping the conversation going" in

Attacking Faulty Reasoning.

1. The Compatibility of Friendship and Learning

A. Friendship as Caring for the Other

Most people with no trouble at all can identify people whom they regard as friends. Similarly, we can identify people who are merely acquaintances or those who have graduated from the status of friend to that of best friend. Certainly, we make mistakes with the designations, but we continue to make them anyway. They serve as an efficiency device, summarizing predictable expectations. Friends behave differently than do non-friends.

What criteria are we using to make these distinctions among people? Laurence Thomas provides some guidance. Specifically, he outlined three main characteristics that must be present for deep friendships to form. First, the two people involved must choose to become friends—they must voluntarily seek out the company of the other (Thomas, 1993). This part of the definition seems obvious—our friends are not determined by fate, luck, or lottery. We choose our friends because they have interests and value preferences similar to our own. We observe their character and then accord them the trust that is intrinsic to friendship (Rotter, 1980).

Second, an absence of authority between the two parties involved is also essential to the success of the relationship (Thomas, 1993; Reisman, 1979). This characteristic precludes parent-child relationships from being considered this type of deep friendship because of the natural authority parents have over their children. Friendship is not hierarchical; power is shared.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Thomas addresses the issue of trust and self-disclosure (revealing to another person significant personal experiences, events, or problems in one's life). When two persons engage in an equal amount of self-disclosure, trust forms between them, which strengthens their relationship with each other (Thomas, 1993). Once trust is established, it facilitates further self-disclosure (Annis, 1995), which then increases trust present in the relationship, eventually leading to an intimate relationship between equals.

This type of friendship is what Aristotle would call "essential" friendship, one where each person selflessly acts with the good intention of maximizing the happiness of the other person (Schollmeier, 1994). The other person's happiness is the primary goal of the friendship and the actions of both persons reflect this goal. Aristotle required that such a friendship have a continuous element of reciprocity to it, meaning that each person performs kind actions for the other on an on-going basis (Schollmeier, 1994). His probable intent was to convey the message that mutual acts of good will should be shown to the other on a continual basis.

B. Argument as Development

Why do humans argue? A first response might be that as scorpions sting, humans argue. We assert more or less reasonable claims because we cannot imagine alternative discursive formats. Try as we might, and some certainly do, most of us would be embarrassed were we to be exposed as bereft of reasons for those conclusions that come close to defining our essence.

If we are correct about the inescapable importance of conclusions and their dependence on a structure of reasons, broadly construed to include narrative, metaphor, logic, and facts (McCloskey, 1990), the *quality* of

that structure and its consequent inferences should be a near-universal fascination. We need to know how our reasoning can be more edifying (Rorty, 1979), fulfilling (Giddens, 1990, 150-155), or acceptable to the appropriate interpretive community (Fish, 1980).

Hence, the development of better arguments or applied liberal education should be a primary motivation. But how is this development to proceed? The answer depends, *inter alia*, on how we understand the self that is to develop. One model is presented by the atomistic, heroic self that populates neoclassical economic models, as well as numerous other modernist research programs (Grapard, 1995). In using reason to take action, we consult nothing outside of ourselves. In fact, the goal of proper deliberation in this modernist view is to extract ourselves from our immediate context, employ reason to find the correct path, and then use our will power in such a way as to act in accordance with this rule (Johnson, 1993, 67-68 and 126-127).

The solitary self would be capable of only a limited form of friendship, what Aristotle called an "accidental friendship". In accidental friendships, the other person's happiness is secondary to the primary goal of pursuing some self-serving end (Schollmeier, 1994). A friendship like this one might involve people who enjoyed each other's company but did not deeply care about the other person's welfare. The function of this friendship is to sustain the self, not to enhance our mutual understanding or interests. Argument, hence, would be pursued only to the extent that the parties found the activity merely self-fulfilling.

Mark Johnson is joined in his critique of the atomistic self as a self whose social and communal relations are presumed to be extrinsic to its nature by Michael Sandel who paints a similar portrait in his critique of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. Sandel (1982) pays much attention to Rawls' claim that we must put the self before its ends in order to have a worthy notion of justice. Rawls emphasizes this prioritization in order to put equal liberty on firmer ground. If the right is taken to be a means to an end, then denial of liberty for some people could be justifiable on grounds that it advanced some end such as the overriding good of others. This denial is unacceptable to Rawls (Sandel, 1982, 18).

In putting the self before its ends, Rawls attempted to defend individual liberty against the utilitarian ethic of pursuing the greatest good for all. However, Sandel argues that Rawls, in formulating this new non-utilitarian prioritization, also conceived of a radically decontextualized self, unencumbered by its surroundings. Sandel says that wanting to put the self before its ends derives from a "need to distinguish the subject from the situation" (20). In drawing this demarcation, the chooser comes before and is radically distinct from the choices he or she makes. This concept of the self, says Sandel, means that rather than being "a product of the vagaries of circumstance," every person is "always, irreducibly, an active, willing agent, distinguishable from [his or her] surroundings, and capable of choice" (19). That is, we are, to use Sandel's word, "irreducibly" decontextualized.

Johnson provides a conception of the moral self that is radically different from the atomistic agents. This self is not radically removed from its context; it is not, in Sandel's terms, the unencumbered self dominant in Rawls' work. At the same time, this conception of the self is not radically situated—i.e. it is not a materialistic conception of the self whose thoughts and actions are determined by the context in which it is immersed.

Rather than being either of the above, Johnson's conception of the self holds that we are "creatures-in-process" whose identities are linked to our social relations and historical contingencies. Johnson (1993, 33) states:

> I want to argue for a self-in-process, that is, a self that is neither completely alienated from, nor completely submersed in, its acts, but has instead an identity that is both revealed in and transformed by its experience as it develops over time.

As Johnson (1993, 149) recognizes, the moral self so conceived is the sort of agent that is conceived in Dewey's pragmatic ethics. Here is Dewey: "Superficially the deliberation which terminates in choice is concerned with weighing the values of particular ends. Below the surface, it is a process of discovering what sort of being a person wants to become." (cited in Johnson, op. cit., 149). In his *Theory of the Moral Life* (Dewey, 1980,172), Dewey put this point even more succinctly: "All voluntary action is a re-making of the self."

This attached or connected self serves fittingly as the normative individual in the feminist literature on "caring" (Greene, 1990). As various voices in this discussion have argued, this kind of attachment would require us to recognize the intrinsic worth of those we encounter or, to align the prescription more directly to our project, those with whom we talk (Mayeroff, 1971). It would require rhetors to move away from restricted focus on only their own their own interests and toward the developmental interests of their audience (Noddings, 1986).

The embedded, emergent self discovers and constructs conclusions through talk, conversation that pulls and nudges in various directions (Nussbaum, 1990). In other words, argument is the source of creation for this conceptualization of the self. And while we will try to flesh this argument out more fully later, talk among friends has the most promise for robust, rewarding cognitive dissonance (Browne and Keeley-Vasudeva, 1992).

2. Metaphors and Argument[1]

Argument and persuasion are inescapable activities performed by each of us everyday, either as a conscious activity, such as a debate, or through more subtle prodding. "Whatever else he is, man is also the creature who argues" (Nathanson, 1965,10). Even the smallest local library contains a spate of books and articles promising to make the reader more proficient at this art. One might presume that argument would be packaged most attractively in those materials for they are hard at work urging improved discourse. Thus, we decided to look at those materials to gain a better sense of how argument is not only being bought, but is being sold.

That we will be especially curious about the metaphors integral to the conceptualization of these materials should be presumed. If the authors of the guidebooks present argument as an instrument for the glorification of the atomistic self, the potential meanness and frigidity of argument will color the message. If, on the other hand, argument is projected as a helping hand, a friendly process celebrating shared commitment, we would be forced to look to cultural norms or the psychological insularity of the communicatee as *the* causes of hostility to argument.

Most authors in this genre advocate critical thinking as a necessary skill for intellectual development. Various reasons are proffered to the prospective learners, viz., becoming a more discriminate consumer of information (Rudinow, 1994,iii), protecting against coercion (Gilbert, 1979, 4), and constructing better informed decisions (Damer, 1995, 1). Looking at these reasons by themselves provides little insight into the guiding metaphors. But as we look further, we start picking up distressing signs. For example, Michael Gilbert claims, "...through the continuous identification of maneuvers and tricks you will learn how to use them to your own ends" (11). Learning how to win an argument for Gilbert's reason is not necessarily laudable because it devolves so smoothly into behavior that is self-serving and potentially manipulative.

Equally disquieting is Gerry Spence's recent bestseller, *How to Argue and Win Every Time*. Spence sets forth a rigorous framework of argumentation that aims to teach the reader how to win *At Home, At Work, In Court, Everywhere, Everyday*. Again, as with Gilbert's book, Spence espouses excellent reasons for learning how to argue effectively (for example, see Spence's new definitions of "winning" an argument, 25), yet his language

seems to imply that an argument should always end in "victory." For example, in chapter eleven, Spence presents a scenario reminiscent of the football coach screaming at a group of athletes to pull from behind to win the game:

> Trying and winning: I warn you, a winning stance is never achieved by trying. I hear some say, 'I will try as hard as I can.' Trying is for losers. Trying implies the possibility of losing. I will try to win. I will try not to lose. If after trying they have lost, well, they tried did they not? Losers always try. Winners never try. Winners only win. (Spence, 195)

Spence's language of "winning" and "losing" becomes virtually impossible to untangle because "winning" occurs when the person actually "loses" the argument (Spence, 221). Therefore, the reader leaves with a message that a successful rhetorician is one who constantly strives for victory over the listener. The listener is a foe to be vanquished (Capaldi, 1987, 46; Crossley and Wilson, 1979, 201; Eisenberg and Ilardo, 1972, 79; Moulton, 1966, 4).

Illustrations of argument as war are abundant, e.g., (Fulkerson,1996). Similarly, Tompkins described an argument in the following manner: "In this David and Goliath situation — my slingshot against her can(n)on — surely I was justified in hitting her with everything I had" (589). Other examples might include, "cutting a person's argument off at the knees" or "slashing her argument to pieces." The list of war related metaphors is long and violently graphic. How we think of arguments is guided in no small part by the mental images conjured up by merely uttering the word.

The war metaphor is damaging on several different levels. First, if argument is a war, then the target, or listener, becomes the enemy. Construing the listener as an enemy is bizarre and misplaced for often we argue with those who are closest to us, such as friends or family (Spence, 7). When there is a disagreement, the warring parties are taught to "stand their ground" and argue even more forcefully. The listener is vilified and the speaker must do anything in his or her power to defeat the opponent (Woodbridge, 1995, 24). Second, when an argument is likened to an act of war, teaching students argumentative strategies can potentially become tainted with manipulation and coercion. If argumentation were conceptualized differently, then the ethical implications of the learning experience might also change.2

The only metaphor presented thus far, with respect to argumentation, has been war-related. However, a metaphor's object undoubtedly has multiple metaphors associated with it. For instance, arguments are also considered to be buildings, where we "construct" an argument on a "solid foundation" (Lakoff, 46; Fulkerson, 211). This building metaphor has a creative impetus lacking in the war metaphor, but its competitive possibilities permit its use as a cousin to the war metaphor. If we seek to build an edifice that can withstand all assault by wind, flood, and fire, we can easily be overly defensive when discourse suggests that the structure is not as impenetrable or protected from critique as we had initially supposed.

When an argument is framed as a competitive event where some will win and others will surely lose, it is clear why most people avoid verbal conflicts. Yes, as Corder (1985) claims, argument is so pervasive that we should remember that "Each of us is an argument" (18). But, just as we do not wish to go to war on a regular basis, we similarly do not want to openly interact with the arguments of others. Perhaps, a reason for the unfortunate minimization of self-conscious argument (Billig, 1987) resides in this generalized fear of conversational bloodshed.

This approach to argument forms an ugly partnership with the hesitancy of potential contributors to conversation and the memories we all have of the cultural counsel to "be nice." If argument is best described as a domination

exercise, a contest, a struggle, or any other metaphor of intense competition, why should we go through all the potential unpleasantness associated with it? The risk of participation is enormous: maybe I will lose and be humiliated. Silence and insularity protects me from such a fate. And anyway, fighting is not nice. Let's just get along.

This tension might be resolved were we able to think of argument in completely different terms. New metaphors might allow arguments to be tolerable, or even sought after, experiences. Not too surprisingly, some feminists have been urging us to reexamine the prevalence of domination themes in the literature discussing argument.

These feminists have been particularly aggressive in criticizing the potentially negative ramifications of argument. A few believe persuasion itself may be an "an act of violence" (Gearhart, 1979, 195). Such critics oppose formalized debate and argument because the speaker attempts to persuade his or her audience by way of leveraging power over the listener (Foss and Griffin, 1995, 2). Instead of persuasion, Foss and Griffin propose what they call an invitational rhetoric where everyone shares his or her views (5). Persuasion is not the goal of communication because persuasion is domination. Instead, participants change their minds of their own volition, not because someone willfully attempted to influence opinion (Foss and Griffin, 6).

Such analysis is glaringly confused. First, it posits the modernist self acting on its own volition, while embedding itself in a theoretical framework that usually starts by lampooning that view of the self. Then it denies by implication that such a thing as an essential friendship is attainable. But what it does contribute is an illustration of a widespread concern that rhetorical effectiveness is often just power politics (Hariman, 1989; Lakoff, 1990).Another objectionable quality of argument is the strain it may place on the relationship between the participants. An argument can escalate into an emotional debate where the participants risk hurting one another. Certain feminist linguists propose the maintenance of the relationship among communicants as a primary concern in female speech communities (Coates, 1988, 98). Debate and critical thinking represent forms of communication that can be flash points for dances of domination and consequent ruptures in relationships.

While we acknowledge the potential harm to relationships from argument, the link is tenuous. The role of empathy is especially important as we decide when it is appropriate to engage in verbal disagreement (Warren, 1988, 31). There may be specific situations when an argument should be encouraged. When we deeply care about another person, an argument may be the most effective device for persuasion(Mayeroff,1971, 336). When empathy and compassion are considered essential elements of argument, damage to relationships can be minimized.3

What do advocates of argument offer to offset this negative portrayal of argument? Although it must be granted that it can be satisfying to win a debate, there are some instances when the costs of winning outweigh the anticipated benefits (Damer, 1995, 3). The intent of the speaker for persuading an audience is, thus, immensely important. Although Eisenberg and Ilardo (1972) do not offer specific goals for argument, their advice to review one's intent before arguing is especially commendable (79). When the motives for learning how to argue are initiated by self interest, Richard Paul's strong sense critical thinking attitudes are crucial because weak sense critical thinking can serve as a legitimizing device for the students' pre-formed conclusions. Argument is thus replete with ethical issues, the resolution of which differentiate propaganda from caring counsel (Johannesen, 1990). The moral force of an argument depends on the freedom left to the listener (Meyer, 1994).

Paul brings attention to the potential harm of teaching critical thinking in the "weak sense" in his essay, "Dialogical Thinking: Critical Thought Essential to the Acquisition of Rational Knowledge and Passions":

> If simply taught as atomic skills separate from the empathic practice of entering into points of views that students are fearful of or hostile to, then will simply become additional means for rationalizing prejudices and preconceptions, of convincing people that their point of view is the correct one. They will be transformed from vulgar to sophisticated but not to critical thinkers. (Paul, 1987,140)

"Vulgar" students are a danger to their own development because the students are able to engage in "backwards reasoning" thereby defending those conclusions with which they began the discussion.

The skills of the strong and weak sense critical thinker are the same, but the distinction stems from the reflexive character of strong sense critical thinking. By applying the skills of critical thinking to both our own arguments as well as those of others, we make the largest possible contribution to the quality of the conversation. We carry argument to a higher level where public discourse is elevated (Simons, 1995). Argument becomes a gift, an act of charity that deserves a tax break, or a measure of our friendship for one another.

3. Argument as a Gesture of Friendship

Associating a behavior with friendship has potent rhetorical clout. Friendship, like any number of high-sounding abstractions is a virtue word, a premature universal,—an idea that receives immediate nonanalytical support. Reflective study of argument as a classroom and societal objective needs all the help it can justifiably enlist. Can its association with friendship be justified and then effectively touted? Can the association help convince more of us that we should be actively arguing as an avenue toward constructive assent (Simons, 1990; Booth, 1974)? The latter question reflects a Habermasian yearning to "bring about an agreement that terminates in intersubjective mutuality of reciprocal understanding, shared knowledge, mutual trust, and accord with one another" (1979, 3).

Fulkerson proposes a shift in metaphors designed to accelerate discursive assent. He recommends, without amplification, that an argument should be viewed more as a "partnership rather than a battle" (213). Jim W. Corder (1985) makes a like-minded point when he urges argument to "proceed, and end in love" (28). Even though adopting Corder's suggestion would be optimal, it is extremely difficult to remember to love a person in the midst of an emotional argument. Because of the inherent difficulty in "loving thy enemy," Corder recommends that the person making the argument must hold the other wholly in mind and yet cherish his or her own identity. Then, perhaps, the arguer and the other may be able to break into mutuality" (28).

What Corder urges is consistent with the behavior of those enjoying an essential friendship. Viewing the other as a compatriot compels greater identification with the elements of the dialectic. The speaker and listener approach a unity of purpose, unattainable when seeing each other as adversaries (Ozick,1986, 68). Argument, then, signifies mutual respect and concern. Corder's metaphor extends our gaze beyond partnership when he suggests we should place ourselves in the listener's frame of reference (20).

To make the attempt to see what others are seeing is hard work, made all the more tolerable when the other person is a friend (Miller, 1996,467) . Part of the fun of *being* a friend is the joy of giving. For those of us who see argument as that most promising of exchanges, discourse can be the ceremonial and substantive equivalent of birthdays and Valentines Day.

When a relationship is operating smoothly, friends spend their time helping one another. To understand how Americans conceptualize friendship, Zotan Kovecses sampled 500 sentences from 17 adults (317). In his

investigation, Kovecses found friends try to help one another through difficult times (Kovecses, 332). One subject stated, "It [a friend] is someone who will be there to help you through bad times not just someone who wants to go out and have fun" (Kovecses, 332).

Friendship, of this level, reaches beyond self interest because there is little evidence to suggest that one person will benefit from helping the other. Another subject, in her statement, recognized the essential importance of self-sacrifice (Kovecses, 332). According to the study, a "true" friendship is one that helps both parties involved, even if there is not an immediate benefit for doing so. The self-sacrificial nature of argument should not be overdrawn, however. Each participant emerges richer as the questions flow (Mayerhoff, 1971, 347).

A genuine concern for another person's values and conclusions is not necessarily enough to ensure that an argument leads to higher understanding. Unfortunately, people do not like to be criticized and rarely, if ever, do we like to admit to being wrong. An argument, even between the best of friends, with the most admirable intentions, can still go awry. However, the worst outcome of an argument involving friends is still more sustaining than the best result of an argument as war. Friends are able to forgive one another, whereas a war creates enemies and leaves long-standing resentfulness.

4. Conclusion

Argument can be abusive and akin in intended impact to an AK-47. But there is no reason why that caricature of what we encourage among learners should set the tone for argument. While those engaged in argument have a special responsibility to prevent argument from heading down rough streets, the streets will be less dangerous once we acknowledge the immense promise resulting from argument.

The embedded self is both cause and effect; the process of self-construction is especially enhanced by rhetorical interaction. Otherwise, each of us is thrown back onto personal resources to guide our decisions. Argument permits us to replace the unilogic of the epic poem with the heteroglossia of the novel as our platform for commitment.

The cause of communicative rationality (Benhabib, 1992; Orr, 1990) requires our coming together as friends, building on joint curiosity, intellectual courage, and mutual concern (Quinn, Browne, and Reed, forthcoming). Resulting knowledge claims, achieved by what Nozick calls *explanation*, minimize the coercive impetus of an argument. They yield greater self-respect for they have been created after having been pushed to a deeper vision through the communicative efforts of others (Borradori, 1994).

Others will contribute to our development, whether we acknowledge their impact or not. In this vein, we persistently overestimate our autonomy because we must use the categories, tropes, and rules of evidence that preceded us (Foucault, 1980). In light of the inevitability of these interactive effects, we should attend to their quality. Awareness of the growth potential of good argument can open us to a wealth of fresh perspectives, otherwise closed off by our relative narrowness. The responsibilities of friendship therefore extend to sharing and evaluating arguments too full of potential reward to be hoarded. The icon for argument is the open palm, not the clenched fist (Billig, 1987).

Notes

1. While the literature on argument and that discussing critical thinking often advance independently of each

other, we will discuss them as if they are a unity. Both are focused on the deployment of reason to sustain sensible belief.

2. Those who have taught business students, for example, soon learn that the very skills and attitudes that we encourage in a critical thinking class can become, in the hands of an ethical wanton, a road to potential riches. That persuasion can be used for ill is hardly a criticism of rhetoric, but those of us excited about sharing evaluative criteria with learners must repeatedly remind ourselves of Aristotle's caution that everything, except virtue, is capable of being misused.

3. The idea that relationships are to be universally strengthened and maintained contrasts with our collective experience. Who has not had relationships continue longer than was developmental for both parties?

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