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THE RHETORIC OF ARGUMENTATION: A REJOINDER

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Abstract:

This paper responds to one by Ralph Johnson in which he explores the question, how do logic and rhetoric differ in their approaches to the study of argumentation? I begin by rejecting the categories Logic and Rhetoric as too abstract and argue for a focus on their specialized branches, *informal logic* and *the rhetoric of argumentation*. The rhetoric of argumentation shares an understanding of the nature of "argumentative space" very much like the understanding of informal logic. Once this is established, the differences between the two specialized fields do not appear to be what Johnson hypothesizes.

It is a pleasure to be asked to engage in discussion with Ralph Johnson (1997) by responding to his paper, "Argumentative Space: Logical and Rhetorical Approaches." [1](#) As one of the leaders of the Informal Logic movement, and especially in his efforts to see logic "naturalized," Johnson has done a great deal to help logicians and rhetoricians understand and appreciate one another's work. His paper today is another contribution to that cause, taking up the question as to how informal logic and rhetoric differ in their approaches to the study of argumentation. Johnson hypothesizes that the two fields see "argumentative space" in different ways, and this leads him to identify three differences between informal logic and rhetoric in respect to their approaches to the study of argumentation.

I am indebted to Johnson's paper for leading me to reconsider some of my thinking about the relationship of rhetoric to argumentation. Reviewing Johnson's thoughtful analysis leads me to one insight, in particular, that I think is worth sharing. Ironically, however, the fresh insight prompted by Johnson's paper leads me also to disagree with the main points he advances. The central point I wish to make is this: just as informal logic is a special branch of the broader field of Logic, so also is the "rhetoric of argumentation" (as I shall call it) a special branch of the broader field of Rhetoric. If one accepts that view, then a comparison of approaches to argumentation must be based on an understanding of the specialized branches rather than on general characterizations of Logic and Rhetoric. In what follows, I will explain what I mean by the rhetoric of argumentation and, on that basis, reconsider Johnson's comparison with informal logic. Such a reconsideration, I believe, must lead to a revision, at least, of Johnson's main claims about the differences between informal logic and rhetoric as they approach the study of argumentation.

The Rhetoric of Argumentation

I think we can all agree that both Logic and Rhetoric are broad disciplines or fields of study and, furthermore, that each field has sub-divisions or branches. (I'm using capitals for the broad fields of study, lower case for the branches informal logic and rhetoric of argumentation.) Thus, Johnson defines Logic as "the inquiry into or the

study of the norms for good reasoning," and he goes on to note that there are many logics. He defines informal logic more narrowly as "a branch of Logic whose task is to develop non-formal standards, criteria, procedures for the analysis, interpretation, evaluation, criticism and construction of argumentation in everyday discourse."

Fair enough. But, what of Rhetoric? Here, I would insist, a similar kind of narrower definition is required, for Rhetoric is also a broad field and not every sort of rhetoric is relevant to the study of argumentation. There are probably as many general definitions of Rhetoric as there are theories in the history of the field, ranging from Aristotle's "faculty of discovering the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric*, I, 2, 1355), to Kenneth Burke's dictum that "*rhetoric is rooted in an essential function of language itself . . . the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols*" (1950, p. 43). In other words, Rhetoric as a broad field seeks to understand all the uses of "symbolic inducement."

Presumably, it is the application of Logic to different problems and the consequent development of logical theory to address those problems that spawns different kinds or branches of Logic. In the same way, investigation into the varied uses of language as symbolic inducement has spawned many different kinds or branches of Rhetoric. There are, for example, the rhetorics of advertising and public relations which operate not so much in "rational space," to use Johnson's term for the domain of argumentation, but rather in a space defined by purposes and criteria appropriate to their commercial and social ends. There is the complex rhetoric of legal pleading that seems to require years of post-graduate education to master. There is the rhetoric of diplomacy wherein truth is often subordinated to expediency and the polite fiction is deployed to achieve important and desirable ends. (Diplomacy, by the way, is a nice example of a discourse domain where "premise acceptability" flies in the face of a truth requirement.) Thus, for both broad fields, Logic and Rhetoric, we could doubtless list many specialized branches which have evolved in response to particular problems. The special branches would exhibit differences in theory, practical applications and criteria for evaluation just because they evolved to accomplish different purposes.

The "rhetoric of argumentation" (as I shall call it) is the branch of Rhetoric that comes into play when speakers or writers commit themselves to argumentation as a method of problem solving or decision-making. In the public sphere, we are familiar with this branch as the kind of "deliberative rhetoric" which Goodnight defines as "a form of argumentation through which citizens test and create social knowledge in order to uncover, assess, and resolve shared problems" (1982, p. 214). But the rhetoric of argumentation appears in other forms of critical discussion, as well, e.g., in the debates of learned societies and in adversarial legal proceedings. What these rhetorics of argumentation have in common is an understanding of and commitment to the rational requirements of what Johnson has called "argumentative space."

Johnson wisely cautions us to beware of stereotypes of either Rhetoric or Logic, and acknowledging the rhetoric of argumentation as a special branch of Rhetoric helps us to do so. Just as informal logic does not want to be saddled with the baggage of Formal Deductive Logic as it undertakes the analysis and criticism of everyday argumentation, neither does the rhetoric of argumentation want to be branded with the stereotype of Rhetoric as the harlot of the arts. To be sure, the history of rhetorical practices includes moments marked by stylistic excess and moral defect. But the field of Rhetoric can no more be *defined* by those moments any more than the field of Logic can be defined by the applications of logically necessary reasoning from evil premises, e.g., the Inquisition, Auschwitz, and the collectivization of Ukrainian farming in the name of historical necessity. From the earliest systematic treatises, rhetorical theory has been concerned (among other things) with argumentation as a rational method of resolving differences.

Johnson remarks that "informal logic is the attempt to *reclaim* the practice of argumentation as a fit subject for logical investigation" (my emphasis). By contrast, rhetoric has no need to "reclaim" the subject, for rhetoric has been concerned with argumentation from the time of its origin. Aristotle, Isocrates, Protagoras, and even Plato in his more dogmatic way, concerned themselves with the kind of deliberative political rhetoric by which the problems of the *polis* were debated and resolved. And all understood it as a rhetoric of argumentation in which rational persuasion was the goal. (But, now I'm getting ahead of myself.)

Perspectives on Argumentation

There is one point of usage that I want to comment on, namely the tendency to use the adjectives "logical" and "rhetorical" as if these named classifications of different types of argument. There's nothing wrong with the adjectives when properly used—as I will use them later to distinguish perspectives on argument—but to speak of "rhetorical argument" and "logical argument" as if these were different communicative acts leads us into confusion. I think we will do better to realize that all argument is rhetorical inasmuch as it is addressed to an audience for the purpose of persuading them, and all argument is logical inasmuch as argument as a mode of appeal inherently invokes some standard of proof. There is a way to avoid the misleading usage, and that is to understand "logical," "rhetorical" (and let us now add "dialectical") as designating *perspectives* on argument, points of view that lead us to focus on different features of argumentation.

Like Johnson, I have also attempted to characterize the differences between Logic and Rhetoric in their approaches to argumentation (Wenzel, 1980, 1990). My approach was based on the notion that the study of argumentation could be advanced by taking Logic, Rhetoric and Dialectic as the sources of unique perspectives on argumentation. My account of those perspectives went, broadly, as follows.

The rhetorical perspective is concerned with *arguing* as a natural *process* of persuasive communication; all people use whatever skill they have to try to convince others, and it is the business of Rhetoric to understand those efforts with an eye to their effectiveness. The dialectical perspective is concerned with *argumentation* as *procedure*, that is, the methodical regulation of discussion for critical purposes. Dialectic, in this sense, comes into play when people move their efforts at mutual persuasion into what Johnson calls "argumentative space," striving for a discussion that is candid, complete, critical and ultimately cooperative. The logical perspective (I said then) is mainly concerned with *arguments* as *products*, linguistic/symbolic constructions that are reconstituted from ordinary talk in a manner that facilitates evaluation according to criteria of soundness. My use of the terms *arguing*, *argumentation* and *arguments* in this way reflects a belief that these terms signal (at least in a rough and ready way) an implicit awareness of the different concerns of the three perspectives. The "process, procedure, product" terminology is merely a handy mnemonic.

Aided by Johnson's paper, with its stress on informal logic as a branch of Logic, I realize now that my description of the three perspectives was too abstract. It was based on general notions about the broad fields of Logic and Rhetoric, rather than on more precise ideas about informal logic and the rhetoric of argumentation. (I'll leave dialectic aside for now, though it is clear that some scholars are working on parallel developments in what might be called the dialectic of argumentation.) My previous descriptions of perspectives on argumentation are obviously in need of refinement. For example, as Johnson explains, the concerns of informal logic now extend beyond "arguments," merely, and take in considerations of audience and context. Likewise, although Rhetoric is always concerned (in some way) with effectiveness, the rhetoric of argumentation is concerned with effectiveness of a particular kind. Reflecting on the rhetorical criterion of effectiveness reveals another ironic twist to this

interchange, for when Johnson says that the *telos* of Rhetoric is "effective persuasion," he says just what I have previously written. Thus, in offering correction to him in what follows, I stand corrected myself. The correction lies in seeing the distinction between *mere* success in persuasion and success by way of rational persuasion.

The Norms of Argumentative Space

Johnson's essay and my previous work on perspectives are both driven by normative interests: we are both interested in explicating what constitutes a "good" argument, on the one hand, from the perspectives of informal logic, and on the other, from the perspective of the rhetoric of argumentation. And both of our analyses benefit from the differentiation between the normative interests of the broad fields, Logic and Rhetoric, and their specialized branches.

Perhaps because of Toulmin's influence, I have always taken the normative interests of Logic to be concerned with assessing the *soundness* of arguments. And, following Toulmin, I learned that the soundness of arguments was to be assessed in terms of *appropriate criteria*, that is, criteria appropriate to the field of discourse or the problem to be solved. The criteria of reasoning appropriate to a geometrical demonstration are not the same as those appropriate to the reasoning behind a weather forecast, the making of odds on a horse race or a moral decision. As a rhetorician, I have always understood the informal logic movement as an effort to understand and articulate the *appropriate* standards for the assessment of everyday arguments. I think I am right in believing that the informal logic movement has been motivated from the beginning by the realization that the standards of formal deductive logic were inappropriate to that particular class of arguments.

Similarly, different branches of Rhetoric employ different criteria of evaluation according to their objectives. Rhetoric in general has always been interested in what makes for effective persuasion. Hence, Rhetoric wants to know what "works" in advertising, in political campaigning and in diplomacy. But, where persuasion is undertaken by means of argument, and especially where arguers submit to the critical norms of a dialectical forum, the rhetoric of argumentation comes into play. And that special branch of rhetoric is concerned with *appropriate criteria* for measuring how well the rhetorical constructions of arguers serve the purposes of rational persuasion. Like informal logic, the rhetoric of argumentation seeks to understand how critical decisions can be achieved, not by cleverness, or by eloquence alone, but by the "force of the better argument."

It appears, then, that both informal logic and rhetoric share some understanding of "argumentative space," the metaphorical construct that Johnson employs to set up his comparison. So, let us review his description of that space before moving on to the specific differences he finds between informal logic and rhetoric.

First, the *telos* of argumentative space is "rational persuasion," defined as an end state "in which the parties agree that the force of the better reasoning, and that alone, has determined the outcome."

Second, argumentative space is dialectical which, taken seriously, means that there is a "real possibility that the *logos* of the other will shape one's own *logos*." A further implication of the dialectical nature of argumentative space, Johnson claims, is that the structure of the argumentation will have two "tiers." The first tier, presumably, consists of the straightforward advocacy of one's position by advancing claims and supporting them. The second, "dialectical tier" (as Johnson calls it) consists of answering objections and criticisms to one's own position. The *telos* of rational persuasion demands this second tier, Johnson suggests, not only because listeners may be aware of criticisms and objections, but also just because ignoring them would not be fully rational, even when the

objections or criticisms may be unknown to the immediate audience or interlocutor.

A third defining feature of rational space, Johnson claims, is what he calls "manifest rationality." By this he means that the argumentation must not merely be rational in substance, but the comprehensive rationality of the argument must be apparent. So, it is not enough for an arguer to advocate a position. One must also show that the demands of rationality have been satisfied by the construction of the "dialectical tier." To illustrate this point, Johnson invokes the manifest rationality of legal proceedings where it is not enough that justice be done, but it is necessary also that justice be *seen* to be done.

On the basis of these three features of argumentative space, Johnson posits three differences between Logic and Rhetoric in their approach to argumentation. It should be obvious by now that I will articulate my disagreement by appealing to conceptions of the lower-case constructs, informal logic and rhetoric of argumentation (although the convention of capitalizing or not may be difficult to sustain).

Logic and Rhetoric in Argumentative Space: First Difference

The first point of difference Johnson points out is based on the *telos* of argumentative space, rational persuasion. "Rhetoric," he writes, "sees argumentation as a route to *effective persuasion*, whereas logic sees argumentation as a path to *rational persuasion*". Johnson acknowledges that both rhetoric and logic see argumentative space as governed by rationality, but he explains the supposed difference as follows:

Rhetoric sees the shaping of the argument as rational, for the arguer must use Logos (reason and reasons) to develop the argument. But from the point of view of rhetoric, the rational force of the argument is not and should not be the only factor in determining outcomes in argumentative space. There is also the need to take into account the role of Ethos and Pathos. To be effective, rhetoric will insist that the argument takes account of the human environment and that it as well connect with human sentiment.

There are (at least) two ways to respond to this. One response, following an old line of defense, would be to say that the rhetoric of argumentation understands its *telos* as making rational persuasion effective with an audience of human agents. As Aristotle taught, it is often necessary to put the audience in the right frame of mind, to win their trust in the speaker, and so forth, in order to make them receptive to the arguments. In this view, *ethos* and *pathos*, as well as all artistic use of language, become ancillary to the communication of *logos*. The duty of rhetoric, on this view, is to make *logos* effective, keeping all other rhetorical features of messages subordinate to that purpose.

A second, stronger reply is one that I cannot do justice to at the moment—and certainly not in the limited space and time available for this response. Without developing the point, I would like to claim, simply, that the rhetoric of argumentation is based on a broader—and I would go so far as to say, more realistic-conception of reason and rational persuasion than that which is suggested in Johnson's analysis (and in the literature of informal logic, generally). In those sources, there is a tendency to equate the rationality of argument with *logos* alone. This, I believe is a mistake.

Rational decision-making is an accomplishment of human agents for whom *ethos* and *pathos* are inevitable factors in judgment, along with *logos*, for humans cannot become mere thinking machines. They cannot escape

their nature as social beings or as beings who respond emotionally to events. The rational judgment of humans, *qua* humans, must encompass their abilities to form relations of trust and confidence and to respond with sympathy to other creatures. Thus, to achieve rational persuasion, rhetorical artistry must be employed to manage *ethos* and *pathos* as well as *logos*, and to do so in ways that can (somehow) be warranted as rational or reasonable.

So, the first difference is not that informal logic and rhetoric understand the *telos* of argumentative space differently; rather, the difference is that they have different conceptions of what constitutes rational persuasion and what must be done through rhetoric to achieve it. Contrary to what Johnson says (in the long quotation above), the rhetoric of argumentation *does* stand committed to the belief that the rational force of the argument should be the only factor in determining outcomes in argumentative space. But, the rhetoric of argumentation recognizes that ethical and pathetic dimensions of symbolic appeal may have rational force, and it accepts the challenge of trying to figure out the conditions under which those elements contribute to rational persuasion and when they do not.

The foregoing discussion suggests one discernible difference between informal logic and the rhetoric of argumentation, namely, a difference in the scope of their normative, critical interests. Informal logic tends to focus on the critique of arguments, *per se*, whereas the rhetoric of argumentation undertakes the critique of ethical and pathetic appeals as well.

Logic and Rhetoric in Argumentative Space: Second Difference

Johnson hypothesizes a second difference, but states it in two significantly different forms. In the first instance, he opines that the *telos* of rational persuasion (held by logic) leads to the requirement that an arguer construct the "dialectical tier," whereas the *telos* of effective persuasion (held by rhetoric) will not generally require a dialectical tier. Having argued (I hope convincingly) that the rhetoric of argumentation accepts rational persuasion as the *telos* of argumentation, I think I can set aside this way of claiming a difference. Both logic and rhetoric understand that effective rational persuasion demands attention to the dialectical tier. But, we may ask, what sort of attention?

Johnson's second way of expressing this differentiation suggests that logic and rhetoric attend to the dialectical tier differently. "From the perspective of Logic," he writes, the obligation to deal with dialectical stuff is unconditional; a dialectical tier is required. From the perspective of rhetoric the obligation is conditional." By the last point he means that rhetoric sees the need to answer objections and criticisms only to the degree necessary to win over a particular audience on a particular occasion. In contrast, under the demands of manifest rationality, logic sees the need always and in every case of argumentation for the arguer to construct the dialectical tier. Such a requirement *seems* to call for the arguer to counter *every conceivable objection or criticism* that might be raised to a position. Yet, I cannot believe Johnson means that.

Let us imagine a legislative debate about the causes of drought in certain western provinces or states. It is conceivable that someone will propound a theory that aliens from space descend on the region's waterways by night and use great siphons to draw off water for use on their dry planets. (Well, of course it's absurd, but think about how often such crazy scenarios are actually injected into public discussion and debate.) I cannot believe that Johnson means that every argument of that kind would have to be answered in order to achieve manifest rationality. So, an important question arises: Just how far does an arguer have to go in order to demonstrate

manifest rationality? Or, perhaps better: How can/should an arguer responsibly go about the requirement of manifesting rationality? I would like to essay an answer from a rhetorical perspective.

The rhetoric of argumentation historically has attended to some conception of manifest rationality on two levels. The first level has regard for the integrity of the subject matter under discussion and poses the question: what would constitute a comprehensive analysis of this subject? Ancient rhetorical handbooks offered help to the arguer seeking to answer that question with the doctrine of *stasis* (Conley, 1990). *Stasis* systems consisted of sets of stock issues on which to base the analysis of a controversial question or proposition. So, in a legal dispute, for example, the advocate was instructed to break down his subject matter, exhaustively, by identifying all the points of potential conflict (*stases*) under the headings: issues of fact, issues of definition, issues of quality (value), and issues of legal procedure. With such an outline before him, the legal advocate could prepare arguments and evidence responsive to each and every possible issue. Thus, the objective of these handbooks was to prepare the legal advocate to deal with any issue or argument that might arise in trying his case. In short, it was a way of constructing the dialectical tier, not as actual discourse to be presented, but as rigorous preparation to be drawn upon as needed.

A similar version of exhaustive analysis in the contemporary rhetoric of argumentation can be seen most clearly in textbooks on argumentation and debate. Typically, one finds in those texts chapters devoted to "The Brief." Early in this century, teachers of argumentation adapted the model of the lawyer's brief (which, in turn, had roots in ancient *stasis* doctrine) to teach a method of analyzing propositions for debate. In contemporary textbooks, one finds model briefs which endeavor to include everything that might be said about a controversial question, including: the history of the controversy; definitions of key terms and special vocabulary; a systematic outline of issues underlying the controversy; all the reasonably relevant arguments; and (sometimes) a reasonable sampling of the evidence available to support each argument. In this way, generations of students have been prepared to satisfy the demands of manifest rationality—when called upon to do so—by mastering the controversial topics that present themselves. A properly briefed debater is in a position to assert, "Given proposition X to be debated, here are all the issues that must be resolved in order to come to a decision on X; here are all the important considerations that bear on those issues; here are my arguments and the evidence to support them; and here are my opponents' arguments and my answers to them." This, I submit, is about as much manifest rationality as anyone can expect, and it has been at the heart of the rhetoric of argumentation since antiquity.²

Realistically speaking, an advocate seldom is required to present everything that might be demanded, in theory, to satisfy the demands of manifest rationality—indeed, advocates are seldom *permitted* to make such exhaustive presentations. Instead, arguers find themselves in rhetorical situations marked by practical constraints on what they can do. And, here, the rhetoric of argumentation has been concerned with "manifesting rationality" as a rhetorical problem. The problem is multifaceted, and it is undeniably a practical problem—not an abstract theoretical question. At the core is this question: How can I honestly and without sacrificing rigor convince this audience of my position while assuring them that I've covered all the important issues and have answered every reasonable objection? In short, how can I manifest rationality with this particular audience in this particular situation? Now, consider the myriad practical questions that underlie the core concern: How much time have I got? Will they sit still and listen? How much do they know already? What are their commitments on the topic? Will there be other speakers and with what positions? Etc.

Historically, rhetoric has taken the position that arguers simply have to wrestle with the realities of the argumentative situations in which they find themselves, draw on the analyses and materials they have previously prepared, and do their best. Implicit in a rhetorical understanding of manifest rationality, perhaps, is the

realization that manifesting rationality is an on-going, continuous process. Arguments—at least arguments of any consequence—are not one-time phenomena. They flare up and simmer down (as many communication theorists have observed); they shift from one forum to another; different arguers become involved; and so on. Consequently, the rhetoric of argumentation has never tried to theorize about manifest rationality as an attribute of a particular encounter in argumentative space.

Insofar as the burden for achieving a rational outcome falls on the individual arguer, it is a requirement that one prepare oneself as carefully as one can to play a constructive role in argumentative encounters. Insofar as the requirements of rationality mean achieving a decision based on a candid, comprehensive, and critical examination of the subject, however, the burden is shared by all who enter into argumentative space.

Logic and Rhetoric in Argumentative Space: Third Difference

Johnson's discussion of the third perceived difference between our two specialized fields is brief, more suggestive than developed, and I will also be brief. Johnson puts the supposed difference starkly: "Logic requires, rhetoric does not, that the premises of an argument satisfy the truth-requirement." It seems that he is concerned that informal logicians, like rhetoricians, have weakened their standards for evaluation of arguments by shifting from a truth requirement to a requirement of premise acceptability. He believes that "a viable theory of evaluation must include both truth and acceptability." In the end, Johnson explains that he is "arguing for the more limited doctrine that truth should be included among the criteria that we use when we evaluate argumentation."

I'm not sure whether there is a difference of opinion here between informal logicians and rhetoricians as distinct groups. Rather, I suspect that there are many differences about the concepts of truth, premise acceptability, premise adequacy, and the like, and that these differences cut across disciplinary lines. I, for one, am inclined to agree with Johnson that *some* conception of truth is necessary in the criticism of arguments. Many of us who are committed to the rhetoric of argumentation take "truth" to mean something like "warranted acceptability." But, the introduction of each such explanatory term merely calls for further unpacking of meaning. Consequently, I think we'd best leave this topic unsettled until there is occasion for a prolonged and systematic discussion of the troublesome concepts.


Conclusion


In this brief response to Ralph Johnson's thoughtful essay, I have been led by his arguments to re-think some of my own. In the process, I've taken issue with particular claims about differences between our special fields of study. At the same time, it's important to note that Johnson and I agree on fundamental ideas about argumentation as a critical method. We agree about the *telos* of rational persuasion; we have different conceptions of what constitutes the substance of rational persuasion. We agree on the importance of some regard for manifest rationality, though Johnson sees it as an unconditional logical requirement while I see it as necessarily conditional because of the constraints of particular argumentative situations. Perhaps we will even agree on some role for truth in evaluation—when we get around to the next opportunity to discuss the issue.

In the end, the difference in our views is merely a reflection of the different perspectives in which our fields have trained us. Exchanges like this one will continue to be useful, not only for allowing each of us to apply his own

special viewpoint, but also for encouraging us to take the perspective of the other.

Notes

1. Page number citations refer to the paper presented at the Second Conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation, Brock University, St. Catharines, May 1997. 

2. In his note 26, Johnson raises the question of how to specify the contents of the dialectical tier. One available answer is to be found in the chapters on "Briefing" and "Case Construction" in argumentation textbooks grounded in the rhetorical tradition. 

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