

May 22nd, 9:00 AM - May 25th, 5:00 PM

# Receptivity as a virtue of (Practitioners of) argumentation

Kathryn J. Norlock

*Trent University, Department of Philosophy*

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



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

Norlock, Kathryn J., "Receptivity as a virtue of (Practitioners of) argumentation" (2013). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 121.  
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA10/papersandcommentaries/121>

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at Scholarship at UWindsor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindsor. For more information, please contact [scholarship@uwindsor.ca](mailto:scholarship@uwindsor.ca).

# Receptivity as a virtue of (practitioners of) argumentation

KATHRYN J. NORLOCK

*Philosophy Department  
Trent University  
Peterborough, Ontario  
Canada  
[kathrynnorlock@trentu.ca](mailto:kathrynnorlock@trentu.ca)*

**ABSTRACT:** I rely on Nel Noddings' analysis of receptivity as "an essential component of intellectual work," to argue that receptivity is a virtue of argumentation (1984, p. 34), practicing the principle of charity excellently for the sake of an author and their philosophical community. The deficiency of receptivity is epitomized by the philosopher who listens to attack. The excess of receptivity is the vice of insufficiently critical acceptance of an author regardless of the merits of an argument.

**KEYWORDS:** adversariality, Nel Noddings, Phyllis Rooney, receptivity, virtue

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Some philosophers hold that a good starting point for explication of a virtue is to look at exemplars of excellent practice (Pettigrove, 2012, p. 134). Today, instead of an exemplar, I wish to start with a model of what I consider to be an exhibition of a vice. I offer the now well-known example recounted by Norman Swartz, in his online essay, "Philosophy as a Blood Sport."

It was back in the spring of 1965. I was a graduate student ... Robert Imlay read a paper, "Do I Really Ever Raise My Arm?" G\*\*\* B\*\*\* was in the audience. Immediately when Imlay had finished speaking, B\*\*\* was on his feet, usurping the meeting's Chair of his scheduled role. B\*\*\* fumed: "You have got it all wrong. I am going to tell you what you should have said. Then, when I have said that, I will leave this room because I do not care how you will reply." (Swartz, 1994)

There is more to say about this example than I will be able to address in this presentation. I confine myself to the following observations. I find this story clarifies, for me, that at least sometimes, argumentation is relational and interpersonal, and when it is, argumentation calls for ethical practices that support the endeavour at stake in the relational contexts. On this point, I suspect, so many of us agree. In this case, the speaker's particular choice of words, "I do not care how you will reply," reveals to me that *caring* (in both its general and technical senses) is called for as an ethical response.

In what follows, I shall explain what I mean by the technical sense of caring, drawing on the work of philosopher Nel Noddings. Noddings describes caring as an ethical approach, and *receptivity* as the precondition for ethical interaction; I rely on her analysis of receptivity as "an essential component of intellectual work" in order

to argue that receptivity is a virtue of argumentation (1984, p. 34). I develop an account of receptivity as the virtue which disposes us to practice the principle of charity excellently, rather than indiscriminately, for the sake of the argument's author and the philosophical community providing the opportunity for argumentation. I suggest Noddings' description of receptivity ultimately takes on the language of a virtue, and includes actions as well as dispositions.

If receptivity is a virtue, then it admits of vices, extremes of excess and deficiency. I suggest the deficiency of receptivity is characterized by self-absorbed attention to one's own reasons and an unwillingness to entertain those of others, an abandonment of the principle of charity in order to criticize any opponent into the ground, regardless of the aims or interests of the opponent or the community. This can sound like a relative of adversariality, which has been robustly discussed in argumentation literature, but it is possible that one can be adversarial and receptive at the same time. (At times, perhaps one ought to be.) My discussion of deficiency in receptivity is much more like overcritical defensiveness than adversariality; the philosopher in "Philosophy as a Blood-Sport," above, does not seem to be listening so much as outwaiting the presenter, and keenly watching for opportunities to attack a weakness and repel further advances. If the deficiency of receptivity sounds stubbornly fixed, maintaining one's original position and seeing other arguments as threats to one's stance, then the excess of receptivity will sound insufficiently rooted in any place. I suggest the excess of receptivity may be the vice of insufficiently critical acceptance of the statements of an arguer with whom one is determined to agree.

## 2. WHY CARING? WHY NODDINGS?

The connotations of "caring" are not always associated with rigorous logic and argumentation; the proposal on the part of a feminist philosopher that we pursue a caring virtue may evoke associations with sentimental emotions, femininity, and inarticulate feelings of affection. Although I practice all of those things to varying degrees, I do not discuss them here. Instead, I aim to draw attention to the arguments of proponents of the ethics of care who consider relationships to be central to moral life. The disposition to care for particular others and the practice of caring for others are therefore considered both sources of morality and priorities of a moral person. Relations give rise to obligations, according to these philosophers, and a caring ethical behavior is one that maintains connection and fosters the well-being of someone to whom a moral agent stands in relationship. I have no settled position as to whether or not a relational ethic of care fits all moral situations (I assume it does not). However, care ethics helpfully directs attention to those times when we ought to take the relational and interpersonal aspects of a project as the priorities which should guide our conduct.

In the three decades since Nel Noddings famously articulated her influential care ethic, scholars within and without feminist philosophical circles have improved upon her account, criticized her conception of care, and developed arguably better ethical theories. Indeed, for my own purposes in this paper, I could draw upon scholars who have argued that caring, itself, is a virtue. More than once, Noddings

has explicitly rejected characterization of her “Caring” ethic as a virtue ethic (1984, 1990). Yet unlike later care-theorists, Noddings’ early articulations of care ethics were often centrally concerned with *receptivity*, which I find helpful in thinking about virtues of argumentation.

Noddings describes receptivity as a commitment and as the precondition for ethical action (1984, p. 30). The commitment is to at least one other person in a particular and interpersonal encounter; Noddings at times refers to this as a form of “engrossment” in which the receptive person lets go of one’s own interest in conscious manipulation of the contextual furniture to one’s own ends, and instead acts on an interest in the other’s well-being. (“But I can go to a conference session without any interest in the other’s well-being,” a colleague has protested. I will return to this point later.) Receptivity is not merely a passive state or a natural well-spring, but includes practices which require some cultivation, such as attending and respectfully responding to the content of others’ reasons for their projects. Noddings acknowledges its affective components, but says receptivity is “not necessarily an emotional mode” (p. 34). Receptivity is not to be confused with sympathy or identification with another. On the contrary, the practices of receptivity can include some distanced, objective, and instrumental thinking in the service of the relational project, “lateral moves” of valuing the person and her project, thinking about means to satisfy the project or solve a problem, and responding “characterized ... by absorption and sensory concentration” (p. 34). While the relation in any interpersonal encounter may not be equally positioned to care for each other, Noddings adds that all the members of an interpersonal encounter can reciprocate forms of receptive recognition and responsiveness (pp. 69-70). Receptivity is good for everybody, when done well. Noddings goes so far as to assert that receptivity “seems to be essential to living fully as a person” (p. 35), a statement suggesting the necessity of receptivity to *eudaimonia*; her description of the receptive state ultimately takes on the language of a virtue, and includes actions as well as dispositions: “Indeed, we must settle ourselves, clear our minds, reduce the racket around us in order to enter it” (p. 35).

### 3. WHAT DOES THIS HAVE TO DO WITH ARGUMENTATION?

I need not commit to valuing receptivity in every context in the scope of this paper. It is possible that some individuals are not worthy of receptive responses. However, I *am* interested in advancing a case for saying that argumentation, at least in philosophy, comes with a moral demand on its participants to engage in receptive practices. I take Phyllis Rooney’s characterization of argumentation as my guide:

While the term “argumentation” encompasses individual arguments ...it more generally refers to the *communal* practices of presenting arguments to others (orally or in written work), responding to the arguments of others, modifying arguments in light of others’ responses, and in many cases, presenting modified or additional arguments. These are normally taken to be the constitutive practices of philosophical discussion, debate, and development (Rooney, 2012, p. 319; my emphasis).

I recognize that appealing to Rooney's definition in no way prevents philosophers from bringing other motivations to contexts of argumentation. Perhaps one may come to a conference session purely for the purposes of trying out one's new sword, so to speak. But with Rooney and Trudy Govier, I argue that this sort of "ancillary adversariality" is out of place in most contexts of argumentation (Govier, 1999, p. 245). I reject any model which takes the primary purpose of argumentation to be the satisfaction of an individual's desire to see how deeply he or she can cut a participant engaged in "communal practices of presenting arguments to others." I grant that the primary purposes of argument are a matter for some debate, to put it mildly; for example, in adversarial legal contexts, winning may be a primary purpose at the expense of attending to some ethical practices in communal endeavour.<sup>1</sup> More generously, it may be fair to say that the agreed-upon communal endeavour in adversarial legal contexts is the respectful commitment to advance a client's case and defeat the opposition's. However, in philosophical contexts we are not entrusted with defeating our interlocutors to satisfy our contracts with clients who are paying us to win.

What are we entrusted with, instead? To borrow from the priorities of care ethics, the relationships created and maintained by processes of argumentation include the relationship between arguer and receiver, and the relationships of both to the wider philosophical community that provides the opportunities for argumentation. Arguably, all argumentation, on the Rooneyan model, is discursive in the minimal sense of being communicative and social; even when one sits in the library, reading an article in silence, it is likely that one engages in imagined dialogue with the author. Dyadic relationships in discourse call for intellectual virtues such as exercising the principle of charity, and may be done with attention to what is said rather than who says it. I can imagine having a breezy disregard to the well-being of an unknown author when one is merely silently reading a text to understand its content, because in such a case, the discourse is dyadic but only flowing in one direction, from author to reader. The principle of charity is called for in order to sort out the truth and advance one's understanding, but this can be done for intellectual and not moral reasons. Charitability in philosophical reading comprehension is an intellectual virtue. I suggest this intellectual virtue is contained in receptivity, which is not just an intellectual virtue, but a moral virtue.

In other words, my normative argument in this paper is that some argumentation is not just discursive in the minimal sense, but interpersonal, and the interpersonal context brings with it the greater demand that we exercise the moral virtue of receptivity, in addition to the intellectual virtues incumbent upon us. In the language of Noddings, particular human encounters call for responses to the apprehended other which take the other's interests and one's ability to respond to them as priorities; "taking relation as ontologically basic...the focus of our attention will be on how to meet the other morally" (1984, p. 4). I return to my parenthetical

---

<sup>1</sup> Even here, adversarial methods are rejected by thoughtful critics; see the rejection of models like Alan Dershowitz's in *Best Defense* here: Menkel-Meadow, C. (1996). Trouble with the Adversary System in a Postmodern, Multicultural World, *The Wm. & Mary L. Rev.*, 38, 5. Retrieved at <http://scholarship.law.wm.edu/wmlr/vol38/iss1/3>

note of a colleague's objection: "But I can go to a conference session without any interest in the other's well-being." Indeed, we do often enter interpersonal contexts without high attention to the relationships therein, and I have joined conference sessions after a long day of travel without caring much who the speaker at the front of the room is. Sometimes I am unfamiliar with the speaker; sometimes I am familiar and I already know that I dislike the speaker. An ethic does not prevent actualities. But if it is all the same to the session attendee whether the presentation at the front of the room is by a junior scholar or a senior scholar, a student or a professor, a human being or a robot, then the attendee is not morally virtuous, and is instead operating in a morally risky way, at high likelihood of moral failure. Moral failure in philosophical argumentation is not the worst of wrongs, but it is a failure nonetheless. If the implication of this view is that a great deal of our conduct at conferences is morally risky, I'm fine with that, too.

I add to this picture that one's caring and relational ties are multiple and simultaneous in interpersonal and philosophical argumentation. Not just author and recipient but the philosophical community enter the encounter with interests in the goods of argumentation. This web of relationships informs the complex practices of receptivity, and provides the justifications for my next section.

#### 4. HOW IS THIS COMPATIBLE WITH ADVERSARIALITY?

I said earlier that adversariality could be compatible with receptivity. To illustrate this, I must shift attention away from the deficiency of receptivity and talk now about the vice of excess, characterized by an absence of adversariality. I believe that the deficiency of receptivity is much more of a problem in professional philosophy, but I worry about a form of excessive receptivity which is easy to find in popular culture. I have in mind the audiences of American programs such as *The O'Reilly Factor on Fox News* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. To differing extents, the presenters on both shows are explicit that they proceed polemically from value-laden positions. To differing extents, each show offers some attempt at social commentary and occasional deliberate ridicule of the other. The recipients of their messages are self-selecting and tend to demonstrate an enthusiastic readiness to endorse much of the content. Of course, especially in the case of *The Daily Show*, it's hard to blame the audience for enthusiastic endorsement of the content; if the aim in this context is comedy, then the comics would hope the audience is receptive, even uncritical. Jokes work best when we all agree on the value of the project we've assembled for: having fun. I rarely watch *The Daily Show* with an eye to the points at which analogies break. To be honest, I'm usually watching *The Daily Show* for the same reasons a lot of people watch *O'Reilly Factor*, that is, for the high enjoyment of confirmation of my views. When this is accompanied by a few laughs, so much the better. I'm not tuning in to criticize Jon Stewart. I'm a fan.

There is a parallel to this in philosophical argumentation. It is possible to imagine the halo effect that prestige can give an eminent philosopher. It is possible to imagine going to The Eminence's public presentation to beam at him or her, writing a review of The Eminence's book which is totally uncritical, and even reconfiguring arguments offered by The Eminence so that they are stronger than

they initially appeared. Perhaps the philosopher isn't even an eminence; given the parallel with being a fan, I can imagine being overly disposed to anyone I'm tasked with reviewing, and having a preponderance of affection for a philosopher that makes me reluctant to hold the work up for rigorous inspection. Surely many of us have had the inner qualms when asked to comment on the work of someone we'd prefer to praise. This could be further complicated when we know it's hoped that we will praise. (Praise me, Phyllis! See? Awkward.)

However, as said above, I hold that our relations in interpersonal argumentation are not limited to the dyadic one of author and an individual audience member; I include the relationships of both to the wider philosophical community that provides the opportunities for argumentation. One could argue that even in the dyadic relationship, it is not *really* caring to refrain from robust criticism, but this is a hard sell depending on the context; if my friend and colleague mentions during a long car ride that she is absolutely devastated by writer's block, then I will probably not take this opportunity to point out every weakness in her current project. However, if I am writing a book review for publication, or engaging in a question and answer period during a conference session, I must consider the philosophical aims of my hosts and fellow guests. Generally, philosophers provide arenas for argumentation to advance understanding or ascertain the truth; if one is engaged in a community whose members hold that truth is best tested by some rigorous argumentation designed to experiment with whether a counterargument succeeds or fails, then adversariality of a sort is a receptive practice.

This means that how or whether one goes about the adversarial project depends upon *which* philosophical community provides the opportunities for argumentation. One with the explicit goal of ascertaining through analytical methods whether an argument is nearer or further from the truth will require a different sort of rigorous inspection from an organization dedicated to investigating the historical accuracy of a translation, or a workshop exploring the interconnections between new scholars' related research for an anthology. I frequent feminist conferences in communities that have quite publicly committed to a reduction of adversariality and offered alternative models of engagement. There, what receptivity demands of me is different. This picture of the philosophical aims of communities is complicated when one enters general gatherings populated by people with different commitments, some of whom value adversarial methods highly and some of whom deplore the same methods. Although one's task in such plural communities is more difficult, it is not a reason to discount receptivity. Sometimes the golden mean is hard to hit. We should still try

## 5. CONCLUSION: RECEPTIVE TO PERSONS

Noddings holds that although we can care *about* ideas, we care *for* persons (1984, p. 21). Because her view takes particular encounters between individuals to be the very basis of caring, she emphasizes that we are receptive to persons, not to acts, and appeals regularly to Martin Buber's conception of "I and thou" (73-74). Noddings reminds us that in the course of caring for another, we should remember that they are a subject and not an object, a distinctive individual with their own

well-being, goals, and interests. I think about these cautions as I consider Rooney's suggestion that we may do well to disagree with arguments rather than persons, to say, "I disagree with your view," rather than, "You are wrong" (Rooney, 2010, p. 221).

I resist Rooney's suggestion, and I think I do so for reasons compatible with Noddings' view, but this could be argued in either direction, and so I end on an uncertain and unsettled note. One could argue, in the spirit of Rooney's suggestion, that precisely because the other is an individual subject and not a mere means, one ought to refrain from using their identity as a vehicle for disagreement, or reducing their personhood to that of an opponent. Yet I find myself thinking that philosophy has not always been well-served by treating arguments as separable from their authors, and analyzing language in an acontextual way. There may be some occasions when it is best to do this anyway; I may offer a hypothetical argument that anyone could make, ask a philosopher what she thinks of it, and have no personal investment in the outcome when she states that she sees problems with the hypothetical argument. But at those times when I earnestly offer my own view, a worked-out philosophical position that I hold with conviction, I don't want to know what my community members think of just any possible argument. I want to know what we think of my argument. I believe Noddings is right that we are receptive of persons; to know how best to be receptive in contexts of argumentation, perhaps we need to exert practical wisdom regarding when to scrutinize a view in abstraction, and when to scrutinize the author, her reasons, her position in the world as she formulates it, and her goals in entering a philosophical community to engage in argumentation.

I invite you to disagree with me. Do it for my sake.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: My thanks are owed to Daniel Hanneman, Moira Howes, and Byron Stoyles for helpful and critical conversations about this paper.

#### REFERENCES

- Gilbert M. (1994). Feminism, argumentation and coalescence. *Informal Logic*, 16(2), 95-113.
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Noddings, N. (1990). Review: A Response to Card, Hoagland, Houston. *Hypatia*, 5(1), 120-126.
- Pettigrove, G. (2012). *Forgiveness and Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rooney, P. (2010). Philosophy, Adversarial Argumentation, and Embattled Reason. *Informal Logic*, 30(3), 203-234.
- Rooney, P. (2012). When philosophical argumentation impedes social and political progress. *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 43(3), 317-333.
- Swartz, N. (1994). Philosophy as a Blood Sport. Retrieved from [http://www.sfu.ca/~swartz/blood\\_sport.htm](http://www.sfu.ca/~swartz/blood_sport.htm)