

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindsor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 8

Jun 3rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 6th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Bailin & Battersby

Ralph H. Johnson
University of Windsor

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



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Johnson, Ralph H., "Commentary on Bailin & Battersby" (2009). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 10.
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA8/papersandcommentaries/10>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings 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.

Commentary on Sharon Bailin and Mark Battersby's "Inquiry: A dialectical approach to teaching critical thinking"*

RALPH H. JOHNSON

*Department of Philosophy
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Ave
Windsor ON
Canada
johnsoa@uwindsor.ca*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, Bailin and Battersby are interested in argumentation which they want to relate closely to inquiry and which they see as central to critical thinking (though they acknowledge that the two are not the same). They argue that the best way to characterize the purpose of argumentation is as inquiry whose purpose is reasoned judgement (rather than to characterize it as rational persuasion, as I have) and that the focus should not be so much on individual arguments but rather on the wider context of controversy in which the individual arguments are embedded. In this effort, they incorporate aspects of the characterization of argumentation that I set forth in *Manifest Rationality*. They take up my view that argumentation is dialectical, which view they ultimately wish to import into the context of teaching critical thinking—where, as stated above, they claim argumentation has a central role.

I want to thank Mark and Sharon for this very nice paper that makes excellent use of my idea of argumentation as dialectical and seeks to extend it, with a view to improving how we teach critical thinking. For the most part, they have correctly understood my views and have made an interesting application of them.

The main issue that appears to divide us how to characterize the *telos* of argument/ation. They argue that the *telos* that I assigned in *Manifest Rationality*—rational persuasion—is too limited. Their alternative suggestion is that the purpose be taken as “reasoned judgement” (p. 5).

I have some concerns about the proposal and their case for it, and also a question that I wish to put to them. In the next section, then, I lay out those concerns and following that, I pose the question which has to do with our apparent disagreement about how to best characterize the *telos* of argumentation.

Johson, R. H. (2009). Commentary on Bailin and Battersby's "Inquiry: A dialectical approach to teaching critical thinking." In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-7), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

Copyright © 2009, the authors.

2. SOME CONCERNS

I have two different sorts of concerns. One has to do with matters where I think some clarification and/or tightening up is needed. The second is a concern about a tendency Bailin and Battersby have to conflate notions that I believe need to be kept apart.

To begin: Bailin and Battersby regularly use both ‘argument’ and ‘argumentation’ (pp. 2, 3), and though I have a story in *Manifest Rationality* on how these terms are related, and they make reference to my views, I do not assume that they are using ‘argumentation’ to refer to the practice and ‘argument’ to refer to the product of that practice. They also refer to “argumentative discussion” (p. 6) and to other terms like “debate” (p. 7); to something they call “the dialectic” (p. 4) and what they call “a case”(p. 8). None of these terms is defined — and while I think their use of them is pretty clear from how they use it, I am not altogether sure.

Why would this matter? First, these terms are in wide use in Argumentation Theory (which I distinguish from the theory of argument—a distinction which, I believe, they have missed¹) and others use them use differently (notably, van Eemeren and Grootendorst in their pragma-dialectical theory), so there exists some danger of cross-talk and misconstrual. Moreover, if they take argumentation as practice, as I do, and if they embrace a MacIntyrean view of this, as I did in *Manifest Rationality*, then they might want to consider Kvernbekk’s criticism of my views (2007) and her attempt to offer an alternative that overcomes those limitations. On a different front, it seems to me to make a difference whether we are interested in the *telos* of the practice or the product or the process, for these would not clearly be the same. Now, as regards what I referred to as the *telos*, quite a range exists among argumentation theorists as to how it should be specified. Some theorists refer to purpose, others to goal, others to intention, others to end, others to use.² And at least one theorist (Goodwin 2002) denies that argument has any function whatsoever. Moreover, a great many such purposes/ends/uses have been assigned to argument. Blair (2004) mentions persuasion, quasi-persuasion, inquiry and deliberation, justification, collaboration, rationale-giving, edification, instruction, evaluation; and we could add that argumentation is often used for belief reinforcement. Hence, in this dialectical environment, various theorists have differently described the *telos*. The question I have is: On what grounds do they take reasoned judgement as primary?

My second concern arises from what seems to me their tendency to conflate where I think it important to distinguish. This conflation occurs principally in pp. 5-9. Here is one such text:

This is especially the case as we view argumentation quite broadly and would argue that much discipline-specific reasoning, including inference to the best explanation or the justification of interpretations of an artwork, constitute examples of argumentation. (p. 2)

*My gratitude to my former student Michael Baumtrog (a.k.a. Bommer) for his helpful questions and comments on an earlier version which led to several revisions in the final paper, and also for his help in formatting the paper.

¹ I take Argumentation Theory as an interdisciplinary theory that focuses on argumentation (taken as a practice). The theory of argument has a narrower focus—argument as product—and has two parts: the theory of analysis and the theory of appraisal.

² In (2004), Blair outlines no less than eight uses of argument.

I worry about conflating argumentation and inference for reasons spelled out in *Manifest Rationality* (2000, pp. 21-26). The criteria for good inference are not, in my view, the same as the criteria for a good argument—no need for a dialectical tier in inference. The criteria for a good argument are different in turn from those for a good explanation, or for a good theory. A good (empirical) theory must enable reliable prediction, but no such expectation attaches to argument. One place where this tendency to conflate causes a problem is on page 13 where they are discussing my position: “An inquiry approach is also preferable to an approach based on rational persuasion because of the orientation to argumentation which it promotes.” An inquiry approach to teaching critical thinking? But I do not take rational persuasion to be the purpose of critical thinking. It is the purpose I assign to argumentation, but not the purpose or goal I assign to critical thinking, so here is one place where I believe their tendency to conflate gets them into a spot of trouble.³

A third concern has to do with the how they understand *inquiry*. This is a wide-ranging term, and it seems to me that the role of argumentation will vary considerably depending on the type of inquiry. There is the kind of inquiry that the individual engages in on his own — finding out the source of the leak in my basement, where it seems to me argumentation will have a limited role, if any. Then there is the kind of inquiry that one engages in collectively, as when the NASA had to determine the causes of the Challenger explosion. Here we may well expect that argumentation will have an important role, but so also with fact gathering. Inquiry in mathematics is, it seems to me, quite different: no fact gathering is needed, but one is often seeking something much stronger than an argument: one seeks a proof—as, for example, Wiles did in the period leading up to his proof of Fermat’s Last Theorem. This was largely a solo effort—though Wiles relied heavily on the results that have been achieved by others: the Shimura-Taniyama-Weil conjecture. A conceptual inquiry—on the other hand—such as Wittgenstein is engaged in the *Philosophical Investigations*, features argument occasionally, but much else besides this: reminders, invocation of possibility, grammatical jokes, and thought experiments. It seems to me that the role argument plays in inquiry will vary considerably depending on the kind of inquiry one is involved in.

A fourth concern has to do with the close relationship they portray between critical thinking, argumentation and inquiry. It seems that each of these involves arriving at reasoned judgement, but then how do they differ. Bailin and Battersby admit critical thinking and argumentation “are not synonymous” (p. 2) but I would like to hear more about the relationship. Likewise that say that “there is overlap between argumentative discussion and inquiry” (p. 6) which implies that these two terms have some common element (reasoned judgement) but then how do they differ?

As can perhaps be inferred from the above comments, in the ongoing debate between the lumpers and the splitters, I am siding with the splitters—preferring to maintain distinctions and keep lines of demarcation between, e.g., argument and

³ I take the purpose of critical thinking to be the evaluation of some rational/intellectual product: it could be a theory, a hypothesis, an argument, an explanation. The essential moment in this process is plus-minus evaluation of the product, one that takes into account both strengths and weaknesses (Johnson, 1992). The evaluation will take place in terms of the appropriate criteria. The criteria for evaluating an explanation are different than those for evaluating an argument.

inference, critical thinking and decision-making, etc (2000, pp. 21-26). So I am concerned about what I perceive to a tendency in this paper to lump things together.

3. A QUESTION

One of the main issues on which we appear to be at loggerheads is the purpose of argumentation. They argue for reasoned judgement and criticize me for assigning rational persuasion. The question I wish to put to Battersby and Bailin is this: How different is reasoned judgement from rational persuasion? Much will depend on how these are unpacked and I will come back to that shortly.

I realize that some react negatively to the idea of persuasion⁴—it connotes, for some, a kind of egocentric pressure on the Other, and to proceed from an attachment to being right. But that is not how I take it and I think that Bailin and Battersby have somewhat misread my position here. Let me cite the relevant text with commentary.

In order to probe this point further, let us look at what Johnson has to say about his rationale for taking rational persuasion as primary: “I cannot argue it here but I believe this purpose [rational persuasion] is the fundamental one and others (like justification, inquiry, reinforcement) can be generated from it. My strategy would be to mount an argument that parallels Wittgenstein’s argument that first we learn to talk to others, then to ourselves. We justify to others, then to self. (Johnson 2007, 3, note 10). *We would, however, hesitate to equate justifying to others with rational persuasion.* (5)

My intention in the text cited was not to equate justifying with rational persuasion with justifying to others, or with justification *simpliciter*. And I do not think the text says that, nor did I mean that. Perhaps my position here would have been clearer had I said:

For example, first we learn to persuade others, then we learn to persuade ourselves. Or, first we learn to justify to others, then we learn to justify to ourselves.

Following on Wittgenstein’s view that the public precedes the private, that other directed activity precedes self-directed, persuasion (as other directed) would precede justification (as self directed). Thus, if we take persuasion as basic, we could then tell a story about justification along the lines suggested above.

Bailin and Battersby continue:

If you make an argument to someone, but the interlocutor presents you with sound criticisms and a more cogent alternative argument, then you ought to change your mind. (p. 5)

Response: I agree completely, and I think this is clear from what I say in *Manifest Rationality*. The arguer who puts the argument forward must be open to criticism, which means he or she must be prepared to change his position or withdraw it.

If one views the purpose of argumentation as rational persuasion, and you fail to persuade, then the argumentation has failed. This seems an unpalatable conclusion. (p. 5)

⁴ I do not here take up the distinction made by some (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969) between persuasion and conviction.

Response: I do not think this follows and in fact have argued against it. I argue that the reason argumentation, as I understand it, is a no-lose situation is that from the point of view of both the arguer and the Other (here the Critic), the situation will improve as a result of an argumentative exchange (2000, pp. 243 ff.)

If the outcome of the exchange has been to reach a reasoned judgment, then we would want to say that the argumentation has succeeded. It seems to us that the 'rational' in 'rational persuasion' is central and points to an underlying strata of inquiry. (p. 5)

Response: It points to having reasons and one of the ways (though not the only way) in which we acquire reasons is by inquiry, so, yes.

An inquiry approach is also preferable to an approach based on rational persuasion because of the orientation to argumentation which it promotes. One of the challenges in teaching critical thinking is to counter students' tendencies to

avoid challenge to their own beliefs, to ignore contrary evidence, to straw-person the beliefs of others, to refuse to concede points, to start with conclusions and then look for arguments to support them, to want to win at all costs. (Bailin 1992)

Thinking about argumentation in terms of rational persuasion may have the result of reinforcing students' tendencies to try to find support for and persuade others of positions they already hold (even though this is avowedly not the intention), and it may not provide sufficient conceptual antidote to closed-mindedness and a desire to win. (p. 13)

Response: I agree that the focus on rational persuasion may do this, but whether it does so is a matter requiring empirical study and so far as I know, there have not been any, as far as I am aware. Here much will depend on how the idea of rational persuasion is presented. I took great pains in *Manifest Rationality* to present that goal in such a way as to avoid the sorts of traps that Bailin and Battersby mention. (See pp.149-150 and 161 ff.)

At this point, I interrupt my commentary to pose a question which has been lurking in the background: how different is rational persuasion (as I understand) it from reasoned judgement?

Here is how they understand "reasoned judgment":

We mean not simply a judgment for which one has reasons, but a judgment for which one has good reasons, reasons which meet relevant standards. (p. 6)

Let us suppose I start in an inquiry into P—looking at the various positions, arguments, objections etc...and wind up embracing P as a result. Then it would have to be the case that I did not embrace P at the start and that the reasoning I had reviewed had led me to accept P. If the reasons are good reasons that meet the relevant standards, then it seems to me that I will have been rationally persuaded (by my own line of thinking) to accept P. Suppose now that I have given an argument that is rationally persuasive. If I have given the Other grounds that rationally persuade him of the conclusion, then his having accepted that conclusion will be justified; it seems to me that that same configuration will qualify as reasoned judgment for that Other. Thus it seems to me that a case can be made that reasoned judgment and rational persuasion are different sides of the same coin.

COMMENTARY ON BAILIN & BATTERSBY

I now resume my commentary on their paper.

Adding a dialectical tier is a move in the right direction in that it imposes a requirement to look beyond one's own arguments, as Govier points out: Thinking of argument as having a second dialectical tier links the practice of arguing with an open and flexible form of thinking in which we come to consider how other people think as well as how we ourselves think, and we attempt explicitly to consider and address alternatives to our own beliefs about the world. (Govier 1999, p. 207)

Nonetheless, the focus on rational persuasion limits the extent to which such open and flexible thinking is likely to be encouraged. (p. 13)

Response: Again I do not see how this can be asserted with confidence merely on the basis of speculation.

Lawyers do, after all, anticipate objections to their own arguments, but they do so in the service of the effectiveness of the case they are making for their client. It is unlikely that in so doing, they are seriously considering changing their commitment to their client's position. (p. 13)

But I have explicitly rejected the adversarial conception of argumentation (which is what is in place in courts of law) as a fitting analog for argumentation as I presented it in *Manifest Rationality* (see p. 49). Though I did not say so explicitly, I would instead take the view that argumentation is based on some form of cooperative principle (a la Grice).

We would argue that an open-minded, fair-minded, and flexible attitude is much more likely to be encouraged by an approach which puts less emphasis on the persuasive function of argumentation (rational though it may be) which focuses on the evaluation of competing cases rather than on the evaluation of individual arguments. (p. 13)

I have two points here. First, I do not understand the "rather than" clause. Our students need to learn to do both, and my belief is that they can do the former better once they have practiced the latter. Indeed, the evaluation of competing cases is an exceptionally demanding undertaking for students who have no practice whatsoever in evaluating individual claims and arguments. But that the aim should be this broader unit—call it what you will—I agree. Second, the question of what is the best focus for teaching critical thinking is an empirical one. Their recommendation may well be correct, but they cite no evidence to support their position; and neither can I, for mine.

4. CONCLUSION

The thrust of this paper is to suggest that if we wish to teach argumentation for the purpose of critical thinking, then we would do better to assign the goal of reasoned judgement than that of rational persuasion, and it would be better to focus our efforts on the evaluation of groups of arguments rather than on individual arguments. Bailin and Battersby also argue that a more explicit focus on argumentation as inquiry will work better in the long run to help students to think critically. In other words, they accept the idea that seeing argumentation as dialectical is an advance but they are here arguing that it needs to be better implemented.

While I have mentioned some concerns about their position, on the whole and for the most part, their development is certainly one that I welcome.

[Link to paper](#)

REFERENCES

- Bailin, S. (1992). Argumentation as inquiry. In: F.H. van Eemeren, R. Grootendorst, J.A. Blair, & C. Willard (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Argumentation* (pp. 64-69), Amsterdam: International Society for the Study of Argumentation.
- Blair, J. A. (1998). The limits of the dialogue model of argument. *Argumentation* 12, 325-339.
- Blair, J. A. (2004). Argument and its uses. *Informal Logic* 24, 137-152.
- Blair, J. A. & Johnson, R. H. (1987). Argumentation as dialectical. *Argumentation* 1, 41-56.
- Finocchiaro, M. (2003). Dialectics, evaluation, and argument. *Informal Logic*, 23, 19-49.
- Goodwin, J. (2004). Argument has no function. In: David Hitchcock (Ed.), *The Uses of Argument: Proceedings of conference at McMaster University*, Hamilton: OSSA.
- Govier, T. (1985). A practical study of argument. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Govier, T. (1987). Problems in argument analysis and evaluation. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Johnson, R. H. (1992). The problem of defining critical thinking. In: S. P. Norris (Ed.), *The Generalizability of Critical Thinking* (pp. 38-53), New York: Teachers College Press.
- Johnson, R. H (2000). *Manifest Rationality: A pragmatic theory of argument*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Johnson, R. H (2003). The dialectical tier revisited. In: F.H. van Eemeren et al. (Eds.), *Anyone Who Has a View: Theoretical contributions to the study of argumentation* (pp. 41-53), Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Johnson, R. H (2007). Anticipating objections as a way of coping with dissensus. In: H.V. Hansen, et al. (Eds.), *Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground*, CD-ROM (pp.1-16), Windsor, ON: OSSA.
- Johnson, R. H (2009). The implications of the dialectical tier for critical thinking. In: J. Sobocan & L. Groarke (Eds.), *Critical Thinking Education and Assessment: Can higher order thinking be tested?* London, ON: Althouse Press.
- Kvernbekk, T. (2007). Argumentation practice: the very idea. In: H. V. Hansen, C. W. Tindale, J. A. Blair, R. H. Johnson, D. M. Godden (Eds.), *Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground. Proceedings of the seventh OSSA conference*, CD-ROM, University of Windsor: OSSA.
- Perelman, C. & Tylteca, L-O. (1969). *The New Rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation*. (J. Wilkinson & P. Weaver, Trans.) Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press. (Original work published 1958.)