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The Philosophy of Argument

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ABSTRACT: The paper argues that argument and argumentation deserve philosophical attention but do not receive it, and proposes some explanations. It then asks whether there is a field of philosophy, “philosophy of argument,” that might attract philosophers’ attention. A case is made that such a field exists. However, challenges to that case seriously undermine it. Thus those who want philosophers to pay more attention to argument must find other ways to make their case.

KEYWORDS: informal logic, Kvernbekk, logic, normative pragmatics, philosophy of argument, philosophy of logic, purposive practice, reasoning, self-contained practice

1. INTRODUCTION

Arguments are ubiquitous, and the activities of making extended arguments and of trading arguments (i.e., argumentation) are ubiquitous. Moreover, the practice of making and trading arguments is important. For one thing, arguments and argumentation seem in several ways essential to democracy. By using them to try to win popular support politicians and political parties seek power based on the consent of the people—one leg upon which democracy rests. Second, by figuring centrally in legal proceedings they are essential to the rule of law, which is another leg on which democracy rests. Third, since in democratic legislatures proposed laws are debated and expected to be based on evidence and good reasons, that is, arguments, they underpin democracy in yet another way. Arguments are also essential to science, since scientific theories are expected to be supported by arguments for their truth, consisting in part of the empirical evidence that backs them up. Arguments in fact figure similarly in every discipline of knowledge or enquiry. The claims made in all of the social sciences and humanities are expected to be supported by arguments, and the critical assessment of theories and the arguments offered in support of them are in turn expected to be backed by arguments. Arguments certainly figure prominently in philosophy, and if not every single philosopher proceeds by bringing forward arguments for his or her philosophical position, the exceptions (e.g., Nietzsche) prove the rule (e.g., Aristotle, Aquinas, Anscombe). Philosophical investigations typically proceed by examining the arguments for and against various alternative positions, and doing so by means of argued challenges or questions. Also, in their private lives people are routinely expected by their families and friends and

acquaintances to produce arguments to support their preferences, their choices or their beliefs. Arguments are everywhere and they matter.

Philosophy is, among other things, the activity of inquiring critically into the basic assumptions of human thought and understanding. Since argument is so crucial to human thought, inquiring critically into the assumptions about its nature and operations seems an obvious candidate for philosophical attention. It is, therefore, initially puzzling why (at least Anglophone, predominantly analytic) philosophers devote so little attention to arguments and argumentation.

Apart from the work on argument in recent decades by the small group of philosophers identified with what is called “informal logic,” the number of works by Anglophone philosophers on argument and argumentation is small. One thinks of Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument* (1958), now 50 years old and after being subject to negative reviews largely ignored in the general philosophical community, or of Johnstone, Jr.’s *Philosophy and Argument* (1959), also 50 years old and little studied. Hamblin’s *Fallacies* (1970), Wellman’s *Challenge and Response* (1971) and Rescher’s *Dialectics* (1977), each about different aspects of arguments and argumentations, were not influential in philosophical circles except among the informal logicians. Goldman’s devotion of an entire chapter to argumentation in *Knowledge in a Social World* (1999) is a rarity in the work of prominent Anglophone analytic philosophers. Others may add a few works to this list, but in the end, relative to the whole body of philosophical research in the past half century, it will be very short.

A possible clue to one explanation lies in Harman’s treatment of argument in *Change of View* (1986). Harman’s focus is reasoning, not argument, and he is at pains to distinguish reasoning from argument. His conception of argument is revealed in the title he gives to the section in question, “Reasoning Distinguished from Argument or Proof” (*ibid.*, p. 3), in which he equates argument with proof:

[...] reasoning in this [his favored] sense may often be conflated with reasoning in another sense, namely argument for, or proof of, a conclusion from premises via a series of intermediate steps (*ibid.*).

He goes on:

Rules of argument are principles of implication, saying that propositions (or statements) of such and such a sort imply propositions (or statements) of such and such a such other sort” (*ibid.*).

Harman regards such rules as the “logic” of proofs or arguments: “rules of deduction are rules of deductive argument” (*ibid.*, p. 5) and in the absence of a logic there can be no argument:

Rules of inductive argument would be rules of ‘inductive logic’ [...] however, [...] there is no well developed enterprise of inductive logic in the way that there is for deductive logic [...] (*ibid.*);

and, although he does not do so explicitly, Harman seems to infer from the lack of a well developed inductive logic that “it is not clear there is such a thing as inductive argument” (*ibid.*, p. 6). If Harman is representative of analytic philosophy in this respect, an argument is regarded as a proof or justification, and there can be proofs only when there are well-developed principles of implication worked out of the kind that are worked out

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for deductive logic. Even where the working out of such principles of implication is the objective of an ongoing task, as Harman hints might be the case with inductive logic (although it hasn't happened yet), such a task belongs to logic. Thus the idea of the study of arguments or argumentation being independent of the study of logic is foreign one to this way of thinking about them both. Since logic is a well-established branch of philosophy, and since there is plenty of activity occurring in attempting to establish all kinds of logics, there is no point to an independent study of argument or of argumentation, and in fact, from the perspective described here, it would make no sense at all to do so.

The sense of 'argument' of the kind of argument Harman was keen to distinguish from the reasoning of the kind he was focusing on in *Change of View* is—as he might agree—quite specialized. The arguments used in the practice of law are not proofs; nor are the arguments exchanged in political campaigns or on the floors of legislatures, or the arguments used in support of applications for jobs, or the arguments used in book or film or concert or any other kind of performance reviews, or the arguments offered in support of predictions of any kind (be they about the weather, product safety, the performance of the stock market, or whatever), or the arguments in support of choices or decisions about courses of action or about policies. These are just a few of the sorts of arguments that are not proofs; the list is very long indeed. It is not that these are failed proofs, or pseudo-proofs or quasi-proofs. They are not supposed to be or expected to be proofs and their exemplary instances are not proofs. What are the salient characteristics of these types of arguments? Are they all of a kind or do they belong in different categories? What norms ought to govern these arguments? What is their "logic" or what are their "logics"? One might have thought that philosophers would be interested in trying to answer these and related questions.

Possibly, the arguments that are expected to be used in the practice of philosophy are arguments that are proofs. Whether philosophers as a rule do use arguments that are proofs, proof might be the ideal to which philosophers hold themselves. Such an assumption would help to explain why philosophers, in reflecting on their own methods, do not pay attention to arguments that are not, and are not intended to be, proofs. It does not explain, however, why philosophers (with the exceptions noted) have not paid attention to those other kinds of arguments when not focused on their own methods.

Another possible explanation, consistent with the last one, is that philosophers have equated reasoning and argument, which seems to have been the worry that Harman was keen to guard against in the passage discussed above. If reasoning is identified with inferring, or at least if one kind of reasoning is inferring, then a passage from Copi's classic, *Introduction to Logic*, is pertinent:

The *process* of inference is not of primary interest to logicians. But corresponding to every possible inference is an *argument*, and it is with these arguments that logic is chiefly concerned (Copi 1982, p. 6).

In this connection it is noteworthy that Scriven's 1976 textbook is titled *Reasoning*, but when the four "aims of the book" are listed on its first page of text—the first two of which are

1. To improve your skill in analyzing and evaluating *arguments* and presentations [...] 2. To improve your skill in presenting *arguments*, reports and instructions clearly and persuasively” (p. ix, italics added)

—there is no mention of reasoning. If reasoning and argument are interchangeable, then everything philosophers have written about reasoning, a topic to which a great deal of philosophical attention has been devoted, can be applied to argument. In that case, there is no need for separate attention to be paid to argument.

However, just as it is a mistake to assimilate all arguments to proofs, so it is a mistake to identify reasoning and argument, whatever their connection. It (typically) takes reasoning to solve a Sudoku puzzle, but in doing so one is not seeking to persuade or convince anyone or to justify any proposition, and there is no difference of opinion to resolve, so reasoning is possible without argument. As Harman notes, just as Strawson (1952, p. 12) did before him, one can reason that one proposition implies another, so that if the first is true, then so is the second, but that reasoning does not commit one to an argument in support of the second, for one could equally reason, and argue, that on that basis one should reject the first, or reject the implication. Also, one can (cynically) use arguments whose premises and support relation one does not accept to try to persuade someone to do or believe something, and in that case although one has argued, the argument does not express one’s reasoning, so argument is possible without reasoning corresponding to it. (To be sure, the cynical arguer *reasons* that the dupe will buy the argument, though he doesn’t present *that* reasoning as an argument to the dupe.)

Since far from all arguments are proofs, and since what’s said of reasoning cannot straightforwardly apply to argument, arguments represent a topic that has not been addressed by the philosophical attention that has been devoted to proofs and to reasoning.

Yet it seems that philosophers ought to pay attention to argument, if only because in almost every philosophy department or program in Canada and the United States (if not elsewhere) there is a course offered in which undergraduates are taught to recognize, analyze and evaluate arguments, and often also to construct and express them. Philosophers thus have an obligation not to mis-educate their students about arguments, and hence to be sure that what they are teaching is the state of the art. It is also possible that moral or legal or aesthetic or practical arguments are different from the proofs required in epistemology or metaphysics or logic, and in that case it is philosophically important in the fields of philosophical ethics, aesthetics, philosophy of law or any branch of practical (action-oriented) philosophy to discern the nature and norms of such arguments.

Given that philosophers have overlooked argument as a topic of philosophical attention, how might their attention to it be piqued? One possibility is to persuade them that argument is actually an overlooked topic of philosophy—that there exists a philosophical subject matter that qualifies for the label “philosophy of argument.” The situation might be thought analogous to the case that was made in the recent past that feminist philosophy is a topic of philosophy, as is the philosophy of feminism. Perhaps the philosophy of argument should be held out as a new field of philosophy and a campaign for its installation begun.

But is there such a thing as the philosophy of argument (even if it isn’t recognized)? Let us examine a possible case for the proposition that there is.

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2. A CASE FOR “THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARGUMENT”

For the purpose of this paper, I take philosophy to consist of (a) the elucidation, and (b) the critical assessment, of the basic assumptions of the human understanding of the animate and inanimate world, and ways of acting in it, and of proposed revisions of such assumptions. As such it is concerned with the elucidation and critical assessment of the basic assumptions of, among other things, significant human practices. “Fields” of philosophy will thus include the philosophical study of significant human practices. That may be the reason that there are such recognized and active fields of philosophy as the philosophy of art, of economics, of education, of history, of language, of law, of literature, of logic, of mathematics, of music, of politics, of religion, of science, of the social sciences, and of sport.

(By the way, philosophy so understood is not the exclusive prerogative of professional philosophers, and plenty of argumentation theorists who are not philosophers by profession quite properly engage in philosophical discussions about argument and develop philosophical positions on the salient related questions. The concern of this paper is that professional philosophers seem on the whole to disregard argument as a topic worthy of philosophical attention.)

As I have pointed out already, there can be no doubt that arguing is a significant activity, but what seems to makes something worthy of there being a “philosophy of ...” connected with it depends, beyond its importance, on whether it raises philosophical questions. Thus it has to raise a question related to basic assumptions about how we understand and act in the world. Does argument meet this test?

Some fields of philosophy, such as the philosophy of religion and the philosophy of science, are dominantly related to particular kinds of belief. Others, such as the philosophy of education or of law, are more related to particular kinds of social practice. The philosophy of argument, were it to qualify as an area of philosophy, would be like the latter rather than the former. There are religious and scientific beliefs, but there are not argumentative beliefs, whereas there are argumentation practices. So what kinds of philosophical questions get raised when a practice is the subject of philosophical inquiry?

In what follows, I list five indicators that seem to mark the philosophical significance of practices that are presently acknowledge as fields or areas of philosophy, and consider whether argument would satisfy these criteria.

(1) The nature/definition of the practice is problematic in ways that raise philosophical questions.

One feature of areas to which explicit philosophical attention has been devoted is that the very nature of the practice is problematic, and any characterization of it must contain contentious philosophical assumptions. Thus any view about very nature of art, or education, or law, or sport is controversial (subject to dispute), given that different views rely on incompatible philosophical assumptions (about beauty, about social ideals, about the nature of political obligation, or about work, leisure and play). In asking, for instance, what counts as an instance or episode of the practice, and how it is to be distinguished from similar or related activities that are distinct from it, such further questions emerge. Asking, “What is sport?” for example raises the question how sport is related to play, or

exercise, or commerce, or games, and thus leads to questions about what should be considered its defining norms. “What is education?” raises questions about how it is related to instruction, training, socialization or indoctrination, hence to questions about what its defining objectives should be, and thus to questions about the good for human beings. In short, questions about the nature of such activities are normative; while often framed as requesting a description—“What is X?”—the attempt to answer them reveals that answering them actually requires a prescription—“The best way(s) to conceive of X is ... ”

Similar questions apply to argument and argumentation. Does the concept of argument entail that of persuasion (or attempted persuasion)? Does it entail that of justification (or attempted justification)? Is argument essentially rational, and if so, of what does the pertinent sort of rationality consist? What kind of entity is an argument? Are there arguments independent of arguers—those who conceive them or create them or recognize them—or are they always and only constructs of those who use them. Is the practice of argumentation—that is, the exchange and argued critique of arguments for some purpose—basic to the conception of an argument, so that we should understand any argument as always and only the product of an episode of that practice? Is argumentation essentially a speech event, or, more generally, essentially a kind of communication? Is the objective of argumentation the resolution of disagreements, or the justification of beliefs, or something else? Answers to all of these questions have been proposed and argued for in the literature of the argumentation community over the past thirty years, and elaborate theories have been generated to incorporate those answers. As with the philosophical questions in other fields just mentioned, these ones can be recast as seeking normative rather descriptive answers. And the answers will presuppose philosophical positions. For example, if argumentation is (best conceived as) essentially rhetorical, then the argumentation of philosophers and philosophy is (best conceived as) essentially rhetorical.

(2) The norms applicable to the practice are in dispute and raise philosophical questions.

A second feature of practices to which explicit philosophical attention has been devoted is that the norms governing or applicable to the practice are matters of contention, and the debates about which norms are correct raise philosophical questions. If “What is art” is controversial, “What is good art?” is controversial in spades. Is beauty a norm that should apply to art? If so, what is to count as beauty? Should laws be assessed in terms of whether they are just or how just they are? If so, what conception of justice should apply? Is extreme fighting a bad sport? Should athletes be permitted to use performance-enhancing drugs? On what grounds are such judgments to be made? These practices matter to us, and as a result, the norms they may be expected to exhibit, or strive for, matter as well. And it is a topic of philosophical consideration what these norms ought to be.

There are normative issues about the assessment of arguments, and they are unresolved. Should deductive validity with true premises—“soundness”—be the criterion of a good argument? If so, is it a necessary, or even a sufficient criterion? Are the only good arguments sound ones? (If so, what is to be said of arguments of the form “ p therefore p ” where p represents a true proposition? It is a sound argument, yet appears to

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beg the question.) Should inductive strength (equally) be a criterion? And what of defeasible arguments, such as the presumptive arguments of morality or of law that are not inductive in any sense in which that term is applied to arguments used in science? Can they, or the best of them, count as good arguments? If so, on what basis? What makes for a good presumptive argument? All of these are norms that are appealed to as in some sense either logical or epistemological—although which of the two they are is a matter of dispute. However, various rhetorical and dialectical theories also claim norms that apply to arguments and argumentation. Some rhetoricians contend that arguments should “fit” or be appropriate to the circumstances, and by that they do not mean simply that arguments should be effective in the circumstances.¹ Some dialectical theorists contend that argumentation should satisfy norms of a reasonable discussion, one likely to result in a reasonable resolution of the disagreement that occasioned it (e.g., van Eeumeren & Grootendorst, 2004). Are these rhetorical and dialectical norms legitimate? Are they consistent with each other and with logical or epistemological norms? The answers to these questions belong to controversies that are far from being settled.

(3) The concepts needed for analysis and in evaluation are knotty and raise philosophical questions.

A third feature of areas of practice that have attracted sufficient philosophical attention to make them recognized sub-fields of the discipline is that the concepts employed in the analysis and evaluation of these activities are vexing; they resist clear and uncontroversial analysis. For example, in political philosophy, terms such as nation, state, sovereignty, obligation, rights, liberty, freedom, autonomy, democracy, fascism and totalitarianism (to list just a few) are so difficult to analyse in unproblematic ways that each has been the topic of shelves of books, untold numbers of doctoral dissertations, and separate courses of instruction.

The same conceptual or terminological problematicity holds true of the practice of argument. As noted above, the understanding of the very concepts of argument and of argumentation is itself in dispute. As well, logic, dialectic and rhetoric, as they relate to argument and argumentation, are subject to a variety of incompatible interpretations, as is the nature of their relationship one to another. In the fine-grained details of analysis, the concepts of argument structure, form, format, and scheme are unsettled—that is, they are given different interpretations by different theorists or theories. Premise, ground, data, evidence, rule of inference, warrant are given differing interpretations. Varying concepts of audience are at issue. The concepts of burden of proof and dialectical obligation are analyzed variously. And so on.

(4) The relation of the practice to neighbouring practices is problematic and raises philosophical questions.

Related to the feature that the nature of the practice is controversial is the feature that its relation to neighbouring practices is unclear. In philosophy of art, how is art related to

¹ For instance, the rhetorical theorist Michael Leff, in a lecture at the University of Windsor, 26 February 2009.

decoration or design? If photography can be art, what is the difference between photographic art and photo-journalism, which presumably isn't art? In philosophy of sport, how is sport related to play, to pastime, to work, to leisure activities? In philosophy of education, how is education related to instruction, to teaching, to learning, to "self-improvement," as well as to indoctrination and to training? Such questions about topical borders and overlap are common.

Analogous questions arise with respect to the practice of argument. How is it related to the practice of rhetoric, to persuasion, to reasoning, to logic, to negotiation, to quarrelling, or to decision-making? Argumentation theorists have taken positions on most of these questions, but not all their views are compatible with one another.

(5) There is a need for a philosophical foundation for the practice.

So far I have been listing features that qualify a practice for treatment as an area of philosophical study—features that also qualify argument and argumentation for treatment as *the* philosophy of argument. Arguably, a necessary condition of such a field is that it is a viable candidate for its own systematic philosophical treatment. That is, if *the* philosophy of argument is to be a legitimate field of philosophy, then there must be theoretical space for *a* philosophy of argument, and so for contending philosophies of argument,² just as there is theoretical space for contending philosophies of art, of education, or of law.

What does "a" philosophy of something, and of a practice in particular, consist of? Consider philosophies of education. Any philosophy of education will address the terminological or conceptual questions related to education, including what counts as education and how education is related to different but related practices such as training. A philosophy of education will contain a thesis about the (ideal) purpose(s) of education, and will include the elucidation and defence of norms of education, so that education proper can be distinguished from mis-education or propaganda. It will contain an account of the role of education in society and of its value to society. Such a philosophy will ultimately arise from philosophical positions on the nature of knowledge and of the good for humans, individually and socially. A similar story will be told about philosophies of law. Prescriptive analyses of the concepts of law, sovereignty, legal obligation and the relations of law to morality and prudence, among much else will be part of any philosophy of law. The (ideal) purpose of law in relation to human individual and social good will be proposed. A typology of kinds of law will be included. All will arise from theses about human individual and social nature.

A philosophy of argument will have analogous features. It will contain prescriptive analyses of argument and argumentation, typologies where appropriate, and accounts of logic, rhetoric and dialectic and how they (should be understood to) related to argument and argumentation. The role(s) or function(s) of argument and argumentation will be proposed, related to a conception of its purpose(s) in human society. It seems likely that such a philosophy will include a position on the nature of rationality, since argument on any account is purported to be a rational practice—an exercise of reason.

² I owe this point and the thrust of the following analysis to Henrique Jales Ribiero, in correspondence. He might well disagree with my handling of it.

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Since argument is also a practice—a kind of social practice, one that is learned and that varies from society to society and within societies—a philosophy of argument must make assumptions about the nature and possibilities for social interaction. A philosophy of argument will take a position on what kind of entity an argument is (Is it a collection of speech events? Is it a mental construct? Do arguments exist to be discovered, or are they only creations of human minds?); in other words, it will include an ontology of argument. And can arguments establish truths or reasonable beliefs, or only agreements or mutual commitments? A philosophy of argument will have to take a stand on such questions, and thus will include epistemological assumptions.

Like other fields of philosophy, a philosophy of argument will import applications from other areas of philosophy. For instance, it is possible to conceive of argument as playing a role in the construction and maintenance of certain kinds of societies, as some theorists of democracy contend that it does. A philosophy of argument will have to take a stand on this question, and thus will involve elements of a political philosophy. Philosophy of language offers tools such as speech act theory for the interpretation of arguments. At the same time, philosophy of argument should have implications for other areas of philosophy. For instance, if it is shown that there can be cogent arguments that are neither deductively valid nor inductively strong, then may be room for the argued justification of normative assertions, whether prescriptions or commendations, without being guilty of a naturalistic fallacy.

In sum, there does seem to be room for the generation of particular philosophies of argument, differing on the basis of variations in their assumptions about metaphysics, epistemology, moral and political philosophy, and perhaps even aesthetics. Conversely, one might argue that any particular theory of argument will carry with it the assumptions of an underlying philosophy of argument, whether or not these are made explicit.

The above considerations seem to lend support to the position that the philosophy of argument is a legitimate distinct special area or field of philosophy.

3. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

How might the critic respond to this case that the philosophy of argument is a legitimate field of philosophy? I will consider three lines of criticism. The first two take the position that the philosophy of argument is in some sense already recognized, but in a different guise; the third takes the position that the case just made rests on a misconception of argument and argumentation and implies that the idea of a philosophy of argument is a mistake.

(a) The first line of criticism is based on the claim that the philosophy of logic is the philosophy of argument and the philosophy of logic already exists. This point has considerable truth to it, but it needs to be qualified. On the one hand, some of the contentions made by some of the informal logicians against the standard conception of logic belong to the philosophy of logic. For certainly one topic for the philosophy of logic is the nature of logic, or how logic ought to be conceived. Some have held that logic is by definition formal, and the push against that contention by informal logicians, with argument in mind, constitutes a position within the philosophy of logic. Or, to take another example, the contention of some informal logicians that arguments can embody or exhibit legitimate principles of implication—as Harman put it, “saying that

propositions (or statements) of such and such a sort imply propositions (or statements) of such and such a such other sort,” in perfectly legitimate senses of ‘implication’ and ‘imply,’ which are not deductively valid, is to make a claim belonging to the philosophy of logic. So the philosophy of logic does take up some of the issues related to argument, and a separate branch of philosophy dubbed “philosophy of argument” to take up such questions would be redundant.

On the other hand, there are philosophical questions about arguments that are not about their logic. For instance, are the only legitimate criteria for assessing arguments dialectical ones, as the Pragma-Dialectical theory seems to assert (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004)? If rhetorical criteria conflict with dialectical criteria, does reasonableness require the dialectical criteria to prevail? And in the face of dialectical and rhetorical criteria, what is the role of logical criteria? And what is the precise nature of the rhetorical character of arguments? Or, are some arguments rhetorical and others not? And how is the dialectical nature of arguments and argumentation properly to be understood. Is the dialogue model the correct model for interpreting arguments? Does the Critical Discussion model of the Pragma-Dialectical theory adequate? These and many other questions about arguments and argumentation do not, for the most part, engage issues belonging to the philosophy of logic. So while the philosophy of logic does address some questions about arguments, it does not cover all of them. Thus there might seem to be space for the philosophy of argument alongside the philosophy of logic.

(b) The second line of criticism is that the philosophy of argument already exists, just under another name: “informal logic.” One might take comfort in this connection from the title of Govier’s collection of essays, *Philosophy of Argument* (1999), which are mostly on topics in informal logic. The difficulty with this contention is that it is far from clear precisely what informal logic is. If we take informal logic to consist of what people who call themselves informal logicians do, then the result is a mix of kinds of activity. For instance, in analyzing argument schemes, or in proposing ways to diagram arguments, or in analyzing informal fallacies, it looks like these theorists are engaged in logic, not the philosophy of argument. If their analyses take them in pragmatic directions, they are doing normative pragmatics. When they engage in disputes with the Pragma-Dialectical school about whether there are logical as well as dialectical fallacies, or when they argue that there are no fallacies, they seem to be engaged in the philosophy of logic, not the philosophy of argumentation, for their topic is the nature of certain kinds of logical mistake or miscue. So it seems far from clear that whatever counts as informal logic it is the philosophy of argument.

(c) The third line of criticism is that the very idea of the philosophy of argument is a mistake. How can that be, given the five criteria that seem to support this idea? The criticism I am imagining takes issue with the kind of practice that argumentation is. Recall that the alleged analogues of argument were practices such as law, education, art and sport. But is argumentation in fact a practice like these? In an insightful article about the kind of practice that Ralph Johnson’s conception of argument sets out in *Manifest Rationality* (2000), Kvernbekk (2008) makes a case that implies that argumentation is not a practice like art, education or sport.

Kvernbekk’s topic is whether the sense in which Johnson thinks argumentation is a practice is, as Johnson contends, similar to MacIntyre’s famous analysis of the concept of a practice in *After Virtue* (1984). Essential to MacIntyre’s concept is the property that a

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practice has an internal telos: it is engaged in entirely for its own sake (Kvernbekk, p. 271). Kvernbekk borrows Miller's (1994) distinction between self-contained practices and purposive practices:

Self contained practices are those where the whole point of the activity consists in internal goods and their achievements, and purposive practices exist to serve some end beyond themselves (Kvernbekk p. 274).

MacIntyrean practices are self-contained, whereas, Kvernbekk notes, argumentation on Johnson's conception is purposive. If Kvernbekk is right, and if Johnson is right about argumentation, then argumentation is not the same kind of practice as education, art or sport. These practices, while they may have some external purposes, are in an essential way engaged in for their own sake. Argumentation, even though it has an internal telos—namely, rationality—is essentially engaged in to serve other ends: to persuade or convince, to inquire, to justify, to come to a decision, to (try to) establish truth, or some such objective. So at the very least the analogies claimed in the previous section of this paper between these practices and argumentation are suspect, and as a result, so is the use of these analogies to argue that if the former were subjects of their own areas of philosophy, then argumentation should be too.

It might be thought that the analogy with law holds out hope for the philosophy of argument. For, like argumentation, law is a purposive practice, not a self-contained practice. Law is not practiced for its own sake, but for the good order of society, and, if possible also, for justice. Yet the philosophy of law is a well-established field of philosophy. However, law is a different kind of activity from argument or argumentation. Law is a set of complex institutionalized purposive practices in a way that argumentation is not. As a set of mechanisms designed to support the ordering of society and the access to justice, law raises moral and political philosophical issues that do not apply to argumentation. Argumentation is used in the service of the practice of law. It is a tool rather than a mechanism (or set of mechanisms). So, although argumentation and law are both purposive practices, they are quite different in ways that bear on the question whether there can be a philosophy of argument or argumentation.

The three objections just considered seem to make a strong case against the idea of a special branch or field of philosophy deserving the title "philosophy of argument." While the first objection overstates the claim that the philosophy of logic covers the ground claimed for the philosophy of argument, it does correctly note that many of the issues about argument and argumentation that have received and indeed deserve attention belong to the philosophy of logic, especially if logic is not restricted to deductive logic. While the second objection to some extent dissolves under scrutiny—there being no agreed-upon problematic that might be termed "informal logic"—that fact is cold comfort, since what is carried on under the rubric "informal logic" seems to be straightforwardly logic, albeit informal, or philosophy of logic, or normative pragmatics. The third objection provides an explanation as to why the philosophy of argument is not an established field, namely that argument and argumentation do not constitute the kind of self-contained or institutionalized practice that justifies a field of philosophy devoted to its analysis.

However, this conclusion does not imply that argument and argumentation do not deserve philosophical inquiry. A closer analogue of argument and argumentation than

law, art, education or sport is reason and reasoning. Like argumentation, reasoning has a vexed relationship with logic; and while it serves ends beyond itself, it too is a tool rather than a mechanism. And reasoning is instructive in another respect. Reasoning has received considerable attention from philosophers without there being a field of philosophy called the philosophy of reasoning.

While the analogies appealed to above in arguing for the philosophy of argument as a special field turn out to be suspect, the philosophical issues listed are not thereby dissolved. The nature of argument and argumentation are philosophical vexing issues. What norms ought to apply to argument and argumentation are at the present, *pace* Pragma-Dialectics, very much matters worthy of philosophical investigation. The concepts employed in the analysis and evaluation of arguments and argumentation require close philosophical analysis, as do the relations between argument and argumentation, on the one hand, and logic and reasoning, dialectics and rhetoric, to name some of the prominent neighbouring concepts, on the other. As to whether there can be a philosophy of argument (as distinct from a field of philosophy called the philosophy of argument), that is a question I will leave unaddressed.

4. CONCLUSION

This inquiry began by arguing for the premises that argument and argumentation deserve prominent philosophical attention yet they do not receive it, and offering a couple of possible explanations. Those premises led to the question whether these topics might receive more attention from philosophers if they were understood to belong to a recognizable field of philosophy, namely the philosophy of argument. That question in turn motivated an inquiry into whether such a field exists, or should be considered to exist, as a stand-alone field of philosophy, on a par with such fields as the philosophy of art, of education, or law, or of sport. Five properties of such accepted fields of philosophy were examined, and those properties appeared to belong also to argument. The analogies suggested that argument might also be a legitimate field of philosophy in its own right. However, upon critical examination, it emerged that many of the questions that are raised about arguments and argumentation belong either to the philosophy of logic, or to logic itself, or to normative pragmatics. Moreover, what made argument initially plausible as an independent field of philosophy like the philosophy of art, education, law or sport, namely that fact that it is a significant practice, turns out to be misleading. For argument is not, like art, education and sport, a self-contained practice with ends internal to itself, but a purposive practice with external ends. Moreover, unlike law, which is also a purposive practice, argument is not a set of institutional mechanisms, but simply a tool, like reasoning.

Although the prospects of an independent field of philosophy called the philosophy of argument are thus not advanced by the arguments considered here, it would be a mistake to conclude that argument does not deserve serious attention by the discipline of philosophy. The arguments for that position remain untouched by conclusion that the idea of a philosophy of argument does not seem to be supported. So those philosophers who think it important to gain more attention to the study of arguments and argumentation by the discipline of philosophy will have to find other approaches to make their case.

PHILOSOPHY OF ARGUMENT

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[Link to commentary](#)

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