Commentary on Blair

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Commentary on J. Anthony Blair’s “The Philosophy of Argument”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Let me begin with an anecdote: One day, an earnest young yeshiva bucher, an aspiring Torah scholar, interrupted the rabbi who was studying intensely. “Rebbe, why should you spell ‘shalom’ with an aleph?” The rabbi replied, “Don’t bother me with your nonsense. You shouldn’t spell ‘shalom’ with an aleph.” But the student persisted, “Then why shouldn’t you spell ‘shalom’ with an aleph?” The exasperated rabbi shrugged, “Nu, why should you spell ‘shalom’ with an aleph”—to which the student shouted, “But that was my question!”

I offer this anecdote because it reveals something important about why-questions, and Professor Blair has raised just such a question: Why isn’t Philosophy of Argument a recognized and established subfield of philosophy? It is worth a brief digression to rehearse the logic of why-questions in order to appreciate what Blair has actually done here. Otherwise, it might appear that he has merely argued for the importance and legitimacy of philosophical investigations of exactly the sort that all of us are already engaged in. Everyone here is already on board. This is not a case of preaching to the converted, however, because the heart of this paper is not about preaching. It is about a challenge.

2. WHY-QUESTIONS

Whenever we ask why something is so, we make two assumptions and assume three responsibilities. First, we assume that the target explanans is indeed so. Second, we assume that the target explanans is something that is in need of an explanandum. We do not ask, for example, why the sky is green. Neither do we ask why three is greater than two or why Canada did not invade Portugal yesterday. Ever since Galileo taught us to ask why objects in motion come to rest, we no longer ask Aristotle’s question as to why objects in motion sometimes stay in motion. That is the norm. Only departures from the natural state—rest for Aristotle, but continued motion or rest for Galileo—need explanation. Of course, to ask that new question, Galileo had to redraw the boundaries of physics and overhaul much of the discipline. The difference between natural and constrained motion had to go, but so too did the continuity between efficient and final
causation. The irony is that the path to Newton’s elegant solution to the difficult problems of periodic pendular motion and parabolic projectile motion required a detour through apparently unrelated problems like free-fall and elliptic planetary motion. Sometimes things have to get more complicated before they can get simpler.

The three responsibilities of would-be explainers are, first, to establish the facticity of the explanans, should anyone choose to question or deny it; second, to justify the need for an explanation, should anyone challenge that; and finally, to provide a satisfactory explanation. The third responsibility is by far the largest because it may include several parts, like arguing for the veracity of the proposed explanation, or at least arguing for its adequacy, or maybe just arguing for its superiority vis à vis any rival explanations out there. The third responsibility is also the most prominent because it is what typically occupies most of an explainer’s efforts and attracts the most attention. That may be the case here, but Blair’s signal contribution is at the more important but often-overlooked second stage. He has brought the question of what does and does not need explaining to the foreground. What I would like to do for a moment is play Aristotle to Blair’s Galileo and Newton.

3. ARGUMENT IS NOT A NATURAL KIND

The rabbi in the story above heard the student’s question—“Why should we spell ‘shalom’ with an aleph?”—as resting on the assumption that we should indeed spell ‘shalom’ that way, but his own utterance of a word-for-word identical question—“Why should we spell ‘shalom’ with an aleph?”—rejects that assumption. It is with that second kind of reading that I want to respond to Blair’s explanation of why there should be a philosophy of argument with the contrary, but word-for-word identical question, “Why should there be a philosophy of argument?”

After insightfully identifying relevant constitutive criteria for subfields in philosophy and noting that the philosophy of argument would satisfy them all, Blair tempers any urge we might have to embrace the philosophy of argument with several counterarguments against its claims to existence as a legitimate subfield in its own right. It already exists under the guise of informal logic. It is part of philosophy of logic. Or maybe it is the wrong sort of practice to sustain the right kind of integrated sub-discipline.

Here is where my inner Aristotle chimes in: What’s missing is a single telos for arguments. Argumentation theory is a gerrymandered district with bits and pieces from logic and epistemology and linguistics and even sociology, ethics, psychology, and criticism. Not all reasoning is arguing; not all proofs are arguments; and not all difference resolution is argumentation. Sometimes even arguments are not really arguments. The best argument against the philosophy of argument is that arguments do not constitute a single natural kind.

This objection arises because of a crucial gap between the reasons Blair offers in support of the philosophy of argument and the reasons he offers for hesitation. The positive reasons involve approaching the complex subject of argument from a variety of different perspectives, focusing on different aspects of arguments: their nature, norms, relations, goals, and foundations. The key point to keep in mind is that these diverse approaches converge. The questions and perspectives are related. As with the philosophy of law or the philosophy of religion, there is an overarching unity to the subfields. We
might say, borrowing terminology from Thomas Kuhn, that there are disciplinary paradigms informing them. Now, by this standard, philosophy itself does not qualify as a discipline: ethics, logic, metaphysics, political philosophy, et al. are just too diverse a collection of discourses for any single paradigm to cover them all. And yet, paradoxically, many of philosophy’s subfields do qualify. The philosophy of education, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of science are all more disciplined than philosophy in general. Each has a measure of unity that the whole lacks. But—and here’s the kicker—that unity is not the unity of a found natural kind. Rather, it is an emergent unity that is partly constituted by the existence of that constructed complexity. We might say, in Scotistic terms, that it is a real, less than numerical unity but more than a merely formal unity.

Here is where Blair’s Galileo has to step up and redraw the boundaries of argumentation theory to include greater diversity in the service of creating greater unity. I am suggesting that, just as for Newton, the pathway to simplicity and unity may well travel through complexity and multiplicity. In order to see how the varied questions converge and the different perspectives relate, it might be necessary to raise yet more questions and approach arguments from yet additional perspectives. To answer our questions about how we should argue, maybe we also need to ask why we should argue; to get conceptual clarity about what an argument is, it might help to juxtapose that question with when and where we should argue—and when and where we should not; perhaps insights into the normative principles for arguing well can be found among the normative principles for arguing at all: what should we argue about and with whom should we argue.

4. CONCLUSION

The diversity of questions—of the kinds of questions—that can be asked about arguments is staggering. There are ethical, epistemological, aesthetic, and psychological approaches to argument, as well as logical, dialectical, and rhetorical ones. And yet, they are more that just tangentially related. They can be followed until they converge, or until they are made to converge, and I am confident that the critical mass that results can indeed sustain the philosophy of argument.