

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

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Reason, Trust, and Relationships: Argument and the disposition to co-operate

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ABSTRACT: If we want reasoning to bridge cultural differences, argumentation theory has to show when and why to invoke a “disposition to co-operate.” But it is crucial to re-interpret co-operation as a function of relationships and processes, not as a disposition of individuals. Co-operative relationships and processes can then provide the vital path from individual scepticism to the mutual trust needed to work through difficult disputes.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, conflict management, co-operation, deep disagreement, reason, relationships, trust.

An argument is not an easy way to bridge a gap, between cultures or between individual people. It’s rather like a bridge built of toothpicks: amazingly strong when done right (even with those flimsy flat ones), but also easy to break unintentionally, and collapsible unless created with skill and a sound knowledge of all the forces in play. Because it seems so improbable, each bridge that breaks creates renewed doubt that the next one could succeed. Argument has the power to create rapport and understanding where they did not exist before; it can unintentionally break relationships, and it can fail to sustain a relationship whenever it is not designed to counteract other pressures on the relationship.

Two recent experiences with skilled arguers illustrate this. The first was a departmental debate: philosophers and political theorists attempting to find a unified position to present to the institutional negotiations about introducing a “rank and tenure” system into a university that was a unionized college with unranked faculty. The second was a personal discussion between two colleagues about the credibility of the claim that some cases of “mental illness” have purely physical causes. In both instances, the arguers started very far apart in their positions. In the department debate, some were in favour of the most traditional form of rank and tenure and others adamantly opposed to any action that might be construed as support for an archaic and dysfunctional hierarchy. In the personal debate, one favoured the traditional concept of mental illness as necessarily having a cognitive component: some area of disordered thinking that would have to be restored to rationality before the illness could end; the other favoured an empirical hypothesis that mental disorders could originate in any combination of disordered body

Kloster, M. (2009). Reason, Trust, and Relationships: Argument and the disposition to co-operate. In: J. Ritola (Ed.), *Argument Cultures: Proceedings of OSSA 09*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-10), Windsor, ON: OSSA.

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or thought and so in some cases could be adequately treated by physical means alone. I mention the specific debate topics because both could likely qualify as “deep disagreements”: rooted in different assumptions which would not easily be open to question or change.

In one of the two disputes, a bridge was built and the toothpicks can now be glued together more permanently. In the other, the bridge failed and the colleagues are now at the strained outer limits of collegial relationships. Yet in both we have as many of the skills as one could reasonably expect to be in place for effective reasoning. In both cases, the reasoners are academics trained in argument. In both cases, there was extensive use of written argument and the opportunity to read and reflect before replying. In both cases, the arguers began with good collegial relationships. It’s not obvious from any detail of the content of the arguments or the personal traits of the arguers why one debate should yield a surprising consensus and the other should leave the arguers further apart than they began.

Granted that anecdotal evidence doesn’t make a case, we still can still see that whether arguments bridge cultures or widen the gulf between them is not necessarily due to the reasoning or the arguers.

Argument can be both a force for unity and a force for isolation, and sometime both in an unusual combination. Consider, for example, the reasoning text *Logical Self Defense* (Johnson and Blair 1977). It’s still one of the all-time great titles. It is also the text I used most successfully with Asian students needing to make a transition to North American universities – a significant cultural gap for them, especially in reasoning styles. The title suggests an independence and individuality that is alien to their cultural practice. In their secondary education the teacher is never questioned – and yet the whole structure of this fallacy-based approach was easily accessible to them. The text facilitated an unusual mix of relying on their cultural tradition of co-operation with the teacher to make them comfortable with this alien practice of reason as open dissent.

When we use critical thinking texts, we tend not to focus on the disagreements in which arguments arise, but on evaluating arguments that have already been presented. Roughly speaking, we have two goals in argument evaluation:

1. to remain sceptical of an opposing arguer and focus only on the objective truth¹
2. to be able to resolve a disagreement through reaching consensus with the opposing arguer about what is true and what is not.

Ideally, these goals will overlap, and students learning from these texts will be able to reach either goal. In practice, the goals often conflict. Of course, sometimes the same argument evaluation can meet both goals, and much of what we say, teach, and model about polite, respectful discourse is exactly what makes this possible. I may approach a debate with extreme skepticism about my opponent’s position and evidence, but if I remain sufficiently open-minded and fair in my comprehension and analysis, we have the hope for resolution. However, if my partner in argument does not match my performance, we could end the discussion further apart than we began.

¹ This goal appears closely linked to a “consumer” model of argument evaluation, in which the evaluator is not directly engaged with the arguer but is deciding whether to “buy” the product offered. More on this later.

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It is to this end, I think, that we have seen the move towards a “disposition to co-operate” as an important component of argument practice. In talks on dealing with dissent at OSSA 7, the conference with the theme of “Dissensus and Common Ground,” it was common to find that the precondition for moving beyond impasse was some form of “disposition to co-operate.”²

Relying on a “disposition to co-operate” to get from purely self-protective scepticism into group-oriented consensus-building is convenient, but risky. It is convenient because it supports the goal of sceptically evaluating the reasons of others – the individual arguer is free to engage or disengage as needed. However, it is also risky because keeping the focus on the individual gives us no easy transition to consensus-building. We can’t guarantee when or if the disposition to co-operate should trump the importance of standing one’s ground.

One advantage of looking to the individual as the source of co-operation is that the use of reason is within the individual’s control. Whether we picture a temporary mood or a permanent trait, the value of terminology such as “disposition” or “willingness” is that the existence of the trait should be discernible in the individual’s behaviour, and would be within his or her power to develop or acquire. In addition, one way to achieve both reasoning goals, sceptical evaluation and resolution to consensus, is to help each individual develop the necessary bridge-building skills to go with his/her reasoning and evaluation skills. Rational persuasion might encourage each individual involved in a dispute to acquire a willingness to cooperate: for example, they may realize why co-operation is preferable to intransigence. This is often precisely what mediators are brought in to do. They attempt to clarify for individuals why ongoing negotiation is preferable to refusing to co-operate and finding themselves in court. Another form of rational persuasion might come through studying the classic Prisoner’s Dilemma problem, where it can be shown mathematically why co-operation, over time, typically outperforms indifference or vengeance.

Unfortunately, using this “disposition to co-operate” as the bridge to resolution of a dispute is no guarantee of success. The two examples at the beginning of the paper illustrate this. In both examples, the disposition to co-operate was present in all parties, yet one dispute was resolved and the other was not. In one case, something more than just reason and individual dispositions to co-operate kept the parties going to consensus. In the other, the disposition to co-operate was not enough to facilitate a resolution.

The “disposition to co-operate” does embody my willingness to trust the other party, but does not necessarily produce that trust. I may still wait to see if the other party co-operates with me. Anyone can bring a resolution attempt to a complete halt by being able to stonewall or undermine the actions of others. If this happens, then I may have a positive incentive not to co-operate. For example, consider cases like those Jan Sobocan gave in her commentary on my previous paper (Kloster 2007), where trust has eroded or been violated in such a way that a single further instance of perceived misconduct can justifiably eliminate any willingness to co-operate. Her examples were of marital infidelity, where one proven incident breaks the trust of the faithful spouse, and of

² See, for example, P. Cantu and I. Testa, (2007) who postulate a “dynamic conception of Common Ground as a second order consensus,” indicating that the disposition to co-operate may be with respect to the debate process rather than with respect to subject matter of the debate.

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aboriginal-federal relationships where, after many failures to honour promises, even one minor incident becomes a “final straw.”

If trust has eroded or never been present, the disposition to co-operate could still be brought into play, but trust won't arise spontaneously in either party, and rational argument is not enough to create it. It is not an individual effort but a joint exercise to rebuild enough trust to re-open reasoned discussion. This joint exercise has to be completed before, not through, the reasoning. In the example of aboriginal-federal relationships, after trust had been lost through broken promises, a financial offer served as the starting point to re-open talks. What appeared to be crucial about this financial offer was that it came from the party who held the most power, and the recipients of the offer were free to refuse it. (They did.) The offering of new power to the recipient seemed to be the precondition for restoring some willingness to co-operate. Conversely, I know of divorce proceedings in which the husband suggested to the wife that they switch to mediation because their lawyers had so far been unable to reach agreement. However, since the husband had refused all previous settlement offers, and was not bringing any new offer to the mediation table, the apparently equalizing process of mediation would in reality only further disempower the wife, because she would have no legal force to defend her claims to equitable treatment. She was better off refusing to co-operate and trusting litigation to uphold her claims. (It did.)

Trudy Govier, in the same discussion of loss of trust, put this in terms of the need for “acknowledgment.” The party perceived as more powerful must acknowledge the existence and goals of the less powerful party. From her studies of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she noted that the victims' most important need by far was the need to have acknowledged what was done to them – that it was done, that it was wrong, and that their suffering was real. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission began where rational persuasion had failed or not yet begun: a measure of healing was needed before any discussion could take place.

In the absence of any signals that I am recognized as deserving of consideration, my disposition to co-operate seems only a well-intentioned vulnerability. I am better off with a rational scepticism about the arguer. Whoever would rationally persuade me, then, must first show me that I am as real and as worthy of respect as the persuader, and not at risk of being further manipulated, controlled, coerced, or ignored.

So far, this is non-controversial even for those who do see the disposition to co-operate as an individual psychological characteristic. Some level of reciprocity is assumed. It can indeed be irrational to persist in co-operating with an unfair opponent.

However, rather than go deeper into how best to develop the right individual approach to particular disputes, we have another option. Conflict management examines the various forms of dispute processes, such as discussion, debate, negotiation, mediation, and litigation, as practices that are not dependent on the parties' own individual traits. The practices themselves can build in levels of co-operation (or competition) and we can look to them for a source of enough co-operation to reach consensus, or conversely, for explanations of why consensus will be resisted.

These practices all require the participation of more than one party. The key difference between which of the two reasoning goals of sceptical evaluation or dispute resolution is achieved is the level of engagement the parties are encouraged or required to sustain. Where the goal is resolution, the parties are co-operating to preserve, enhance, or

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achieve some form of relationship. (“Relationship” is broadly construed here: examples would include friendship, collegiality, employment, being a guest, or being on speaking terms with one’s ex.-partner.) Dispute practices that might contribute to this goal would include informal conversation, negotiation and mediation. Where the goal is only sceptical evaluation, the parties may still have a relationship, but the relationship need not be one that continues even as long as the normal end of the interaction. Examples would be blind dates, customer sales and service interactions, and business deals, where one party could walk away and have nothing further to do with the other. Sceptical evaluation invites distancing, disengagement, pushing the relationship at least to arm’s length and perhaps even ending it. In fact, it is precisely this “arm’s length” distance that is usually required in order to trust a judge, mediator, or intervenor to be sufficiently objective in reasoning to make a fair decision for disputing parties.

If sceptical evaluation can be a force pushing the relationship to greater distance, while resolving a dispute can be a force sustaining the relationship, we can see why our attempts to build bridges sometimes need major engineering skill and other times can be achieved just by laying a few toothpicks across a small gap. The nature of the relationship and the type of process chosen to deal with the dispute will be factors as relevant as the dispositions of the arguers and the reasoning of which each is capable. The existence (or creation) of a relationship capable of resolving a dispute may not be within the power of even the most co-operative individual to will into being by personal effort alone. Nor will it just emerge spontaneously when a collection of such individuals come together.

We could take much better advantage of conflict management theory and its examination of the social relationship patterns that contribute to resolution or stalemate in disputes.³ Considering social relationships and practices enables us to move more easily into the realm of power struggles that is so often postponed when we focus only on the individual. It is always risky to assume that each individual has an equal chance of participating effectively just because reason is used in the interaction. As noted in the previous examples, aboriginal-federal negotiations and divorce proceedings are in practice not disputes between parties with equal power to be heard, or equal resources to stay in the dispute until satisfied with the resolution.

Yet the assumption of equal access to argument as a tool is often used in teaching reasoning, probably because it does have application to a reasonable variety of contexts. Think of standard mercantile negotiations, where one party offers the other some goods at an absurdly high price, say \$150. The other counters with an equally absurdly low price, say \$50. Reasoning through their options separately, they ultimately settle on \$100. They independently reach a reasoned decision that it makes best sense to split the difference. A classic text, Howard Raiffa’s *The Art and Science of Negotiation* (1982) is full of examples like this, all illustrating numerically rational outcomes. These outcomes can all be accepted even if neither party trusts the other to follow through on the deal once signed: the courts can be appealed to for enforcement. Here, we do have reasoning and dispute resolution. However, the dispute proceeds in the absence of trust and with

³ See, for example, J. Rubin et al., *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement* (1994), M. LeBaron, *Bridging Cultural Conflicts* (2003), or *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: theory and practice*, eds. M. Deutsch and P. Coleman (2000), which are all use sociological examination of conflict patterns to predict when disputes will or will not reach consensus. The last-named includes a paper on “Trust, trust development, and trust repair” by R. Lewicki and C. Wiethoff.

minimal regard for truth, because much of the reasoning is not based on what the buyer or the seller actually says. What is said could be wildly untrue: this is the only one I have; it cost me far more than I am asking you to pay me for it; my children will starve, and so on. Evaluation of the seller's argument is sceptical and self-protective. The reasoning the buyer uses for a decision is based at least as much on what the buyer can deduce might be true for the seller (he's desperate) and on what the buyer knows to be true of him or herself (I can afford to walk away). Logic becomes a safeguard in place of trust here – the reasoning is not mutual, on the basis of shared knowledge, but a calculation of odds and recognition of when an inference is not valid.

Argument evaluation as competitive negotiation is a useful model in a business context, as the original publication date of Raiffa's text and its longevity (a revised edition is in print) suggests. This "consumer" model is also one of the models used for what a reasoning relationship should generally be. Certainly *Logical Self-Defence* (Johnson and Blair 1994) has appealed consistently to the consumer model, and it is not alone.

Groups and individuals incessantly vie for your adherence to their way of seeing things, for your acceptance of their view of what is true, important, or worth doing. The list of topics will vary, but the point is that you are a consumer of beliefs and values, no less than of products. Which raises an important question: how good are your buying habits? (op. cit., p. xviii; wording unaltered from 1983 edition)

When we can see a reasoner as a consumer in situations of "Buyer Beware," we are at the skeptical end of the spectrum of reasoning and argumentation. This approach works where trust is either minimal or completely absent. Any trust likely won't survive the discovery of misleading logic or any violation of procedure. The equality here is the equal opportunity to walk away, not an equal chance to reach a deal. If we start from this model of reason, we will have to add a disposition to co-operate if we want to keep argument going when it seems at risk of breaking down.

However, for difficult disputes, or for disputes across epistemic or cultural boundaries, as with the breakdown of aboriginal-federal relationships already mentioned, the disposition to co-operate is not enough to rebuild trust. We also need to look at what it takes to create a relationship of sufficient trust to give reason a foothold. Much as we'd like to have both good reasoning and good relationships, it's not at all clear we can achieve both through the reasoning itself.⁴

Dispute resolution procedures, whether formal or informal, are practices used to constrain both the permissible reasoning and the nature of the relationship between the parties. The aim is to facilitate resolution by preventing withdrawal or non-co-operation by either party. For example, an academic appeal is highly structured with strict protocol, in order for both parties to be willing to trust the panel's judgment, and, ideally, not see their relationship deteriorate any further than it already has. If I chair an academic appeal panel, I cannot befriend either of the parties, even though I may be friendly in tone.

⁴ The debate about whether logic is or should be consistent across cultures is interesting because cross-cultural discussions are the ones where trust is least likely to pre-exist, and the ones where trust is least likely to be a necessary outcome of reason. As I argued previously (Kloster 2007), the apparent differences in logical reasoning that have shown up in cross-cultural studies could be explained by differences in cultural reasoning practice – what may be asserted and challenged, and by whom, in what contexts.

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Reasoning presented at the appeal must be limited to what the parties have already each submitted in advance, even though they may clarify or discuss it. Even casual discussions and informal dispute resolution methods are often quite structured in their setting, purpose, and procedures, as both rhetoric and pragma-dialectics typically reveal.⁵

The key structural element relevant to this paper is the contrast between competitive and collaborative processes. Competition and collaboration could be described in terms of disposition: in fact, one common preliminary to instruction in mediation is the *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* used to determine one's primary and secondary tendencies in negotiations. (Thomas and Kilmann 1974)⁶ However, the aim of the instruction in mediation and negotiation is not just to improve one's personal skills and vary one's dispositions, but to understand the structure and aims of each process as a specific route to resolution of a dispute.

Some dispute structures are intrinsically competitive and some are collaborative, independent of the dispositions of the participants. For example, even the friendliest of labour negotiations for a collective agreement puts employer and union in competition to get the maximum advantage for their own side. In contrast, labour mediation, even the most hostile situations, where negotiation has broken down and the parties can no longer meet in the same room, has a fundamental element of collaboration: please, let us both get out of this situation without having to go to arbitration where a resolution will be unilaterally imposed on us. I have experienced both of these situations, and although the participants' dispositions may have contributed to how each dispute played out, the respective elements of competition and collaboration were dominated by the nature of the dispute process itself.

Our union was bargaining a new collective agreement. Reasoned argument was serving us well: employer and union each understood the other's position and rationale. The management negotiator was friendly, win-win in his solutions, and well-trusted by both management and union. I was the union negotiator, less experienced but equally solution-oriented. At one point the management negotiator used a classic bargaining strategy to force a decision: "If you don't decide by the end of the meeting, this offer will have to be withdrawn." I fell straight into the trap – under time pressure, my team and I decided we would accept. Months after the contract was signed I realized that the language we had agreed to was open to an interpretation much more favourable to the employer than the interpretation we had believed we were agreeing to. Sure enough, management acted on its interpretation, not ours. I had let myself abandon one key tenet of making difficult decisions: never agree to something disadvantageous to you at the meeting in which it is suggested. I had also failed to be sufficiently sceptical of the wording: I didn't look for other possible interpretations. I could blame my reasoning skills, though I don't think they're that bad. Alternatively, since my score on the Thomas-

⁵ What I am saying in this paper is likely not new to anyone whose primary training is in either of these fields, or in media and communications. Yet the argumentation field does seem to make remarkably little reference to dispute resolution or conflict management theory, other than references to political persuasion or to legal reasoning.

⁶ This instrument uses five options, not just two: competitive, collaborative, avoiding, compromising, and accommodating. These are seen as dispositions rather than permanent character traits. Which one a person is disposed to use will depend on the type of conflict. The test is used to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of each disposition in conflict, in order to encourage a much greater willingness to use whichever strategy is the best fit for the other people and the conflict.

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Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument identifies me as principally disposed to collaboration, I could say my disposition to co-operate was counter-productive. However, it is only when I recognize the inherently competitive structure of bargaining that I understand *why* my skills and disposition weren't enough for good argument practice here.

In the contrasting situation, I was again the union negotiator for a collective agreement, but this time in negotiations for a first collective agreement with our own union's office staff. Their bargainer was from the head office of the union of which our two staff were to become a local. The bargainer was inexperienced, and had been instructed by head office to bargain for an agreement very different from what our employer-union wanted. (Our union includes both faculty and staff, and wanted the agreement to stay close to what our own members in comparable jobs received.) My collaborative strategy failed utterly against their negotiator's highly competitive strategy. After a year of talks we were at an impasse. We appealed to the Labour Relations Board to arbitrate but instead, they sent us to mediation. It was a "facilitated mediation": each party met independently with the mediator, first at the workplace and then in separate rooms at the Board offices, where the mediator shuttled between rooms, listening and suggesting. It was a very strange feeling to offer arguments to the mediator, with absolutely no sense of how the other side was reacting, or what the mediator was saying to them in their room. Yet we did reach agreement. In this case, once again my disposition to collaborate was not working well, but nor was the other negotiator's competitiveness. Perhaps the mediator succeeded in cajoling or coercing that negotiator behind closed doors into a disposition to co-operate. However, there is another possible explanation: the mediation process put us into a collaborative structure. It set us up to see if we could collectively to make resolution possible, without sacrificing the key concerns of either side or increasing the time and costs of reaching a settlement.

If these can be taken as examples of collaboration or competition built into the structure of an argumentative process, then we have a new way to view "co-operation," and "trust" without making them hit-or-miss prerequisites to (or results of) the use of argument. Do we have mediation, or do we have contract negotiation? Do we have a pre-trial settlement conference, or a meeting for discovery? Do we have a department meeting, or an interpersonal discussion? In all but the last, there will be practices and protocols in place to establish the required tone: collaborative for the first in each pair, competitive for the second.

Arguments themselves do not necessarily have to be structured differently according to their context, though protocol might set some limits. Nor does the evaluation of competing arguments necessarily use different standards, though again protocol may set limits on evidence or how it is weighed. Reaching resolution is not entirely a function of the dispute resolution practice. We are back to something much closer to the "disposition to co-operate," but in what seems to me a much more achievable form. Regardless of what takes place within each individual, the arguments may be used and weighed according to whether the goal is a collaborative solution, or whether the goal is maximal protection in a competitive environment. A collaborative process itself, independent of the parties, will have methods built into it to develop trust at least in the process (to deliver a fair enough outcome) and perhaps also trust between the participants. For example, mediation uses a mediator who is chosen by the parties as sufficiently disinterested to be uninfluenced by either side; this mediator typically sets

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ground rules for mutually respectful treatment within the sessions, and the communication is presented so that evaluation will be constructive. The outcome must satisfy both parties before it is binding. To the extent that the parties are actually pleased with the process and outcome, they may even have the first step back towards trust in each other. (This is the “transformative” potential of mediation to reform relationships, as championed initially in *The Promise of Mediation* (Bush and Folger 1994).)

The difference between the two initial examples, the rank-and-tenure debate and the mental-illness debate, can now be explained much more easily. The department discussion took place within a collaborative process: a “parliamentary procedure” meeting structure (informal, but still relying on “Roberts Rules”). This meeting structure is designed precisely to maximize dispute resolution, through all of its components: from advance notice of agenda and corresponding opportunity to prepare, through to resolution by majority vote. It facilitates defensible decision-making through reasoned individual vote. This process does not force resolution. The department members could have abandoned the attempt to put forward a joint position; they also could (and did) consider presenting two positions, one in favour and one opposed. However, the consultation process both during and between two meetings did produce a consensus, and a single document went forward. In contrast, the discussion about theories of mental illness took place with no formal guidelines for process. It was a debate between colleagues who each had strong motivation to remain sceptical of the other. (Both likely saw their reputations at stake.) Nothing in either the level of collegial relationship or the careful exercise of reasoning skills provided a force sufficient to draw the dispute towards resolution; the result was greater disengagement.

When we look only to the individual bridge-builders for success in getting their toothpick bridge to bear the weight of traffic across a gap, success is chancy. Maybe the gap is small enough and their design sturdy enough; maybe not. To predict or understand the success of a bridge, we need to look at the width of the gap, the footings available on each side, the bridge design, and whether the builders each have enough toothpicks and glue.

The advantage of a relationship-based interpretation of co-operation is that it links argumentation more clearly with the well-developed field of conflict management and its analysis of the goals and methods of dispute resolution processes. It offers us an added dimension to the understanding of which argument goals can be met in which disputes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: I would like to express my great appreciation to Jan Sobocan and Trudy Govier for their comments on my paper at OSSA 7; those comments played a significant role in the development of this paper.

[Link to commentary](#)

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