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# Commentary on Moira Kloster's "Reason, Trust and Relationships: Argument and the disposition to co-operate"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bridges of toothpicks provide the metaphor Moira Kloster uses to suggest the frailty of argument across differences in circumstances of disagreement. My aim is to take a step back and consider what she takes to be the purpose of argumentative and toothpick bridges: what are the contexts in which we argue to resolve disagreement or build bridges out of materials so frail as toothpicks? I have never built a toothpick bridge, though as a matter of fact I have built a spaghetti bridge, as part of a night course in three-dimensional design at the Ontario College of Art. However, before I indulge myself in extending Kloster's metaphor, I will explain my understanding of her position that we must attend to the variable places that cooperation and trust have in argumentation, especially how these attitudes are sometimes institutionalized in such a way that a cooperative individual disposition becomes dysfunctional.

I think Kloster's considerations are quite sound for arguments in the institutional contexts that concern her. So, her observation about the dependence of an argument's value on the purpose of its institutional context will be considered in light of further purposes that argumentation serves inside and outside of institutions. I agree that we need to consider how social contexts and institutions affect the various successes of argumentation, but I think we need to consider also the range of purposes that arguments and argument forums may have, what values they may support, and what interests they may serve.

## 2. KLOSTER'S CONCERNS ABOUT SKEPTICISM AND COOPERATION

Kloster addresses arguments that have two particular goals: (1) "to remain sceptical of an opposing arguer and focus only on the objective truth" which enforces a consumer model of argumentation; and (2) "to be able to resolve a disagreement through reaching consensus with the opposing arguer about what is true and what is not," which amounts

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to a cooperative drive, a willingness to trust or resolve. Both values serve as procedural guidelines and as intended outcomes.

There is a clear opposition between these two goals of argumentation, scepticism and cooperation, and each of these values has substantial complexity even if no other values come into play. So, Kloster is helpful in directing us to consider the sensitivity of these argument functions to social context. The responsibility to be trusting that serves to bridge disagreement across distant perspectives cannot be placed wholly on individual arguers, as evidenced by labour negotiation, and in disagreements over PTR criteria, and over the foundations of mental disease. Individual arguers, Kloster suggests, are sometimes relieved of their obligation to trust interlocutors by procedural rules and guidelines. Although Kloster acknowledges that trust may be an outcome of argument, she maintains that interpersonal trust is not so necessary to successful or productive argumentation procedures as both arguers and theorists sometimes assume.

### 3. ARGUMENT FUNCTIONALISM

I wish to consider Kloster's position in the context of the multiple purposes that arguments can serve. Argumentation may aid other functions than the scepticism and trust she addresses. Consider a recent argument I had with an academic friend, JD, who offered me a recent piece of reasoning he'd concocted concerning how in extreme circumstances it might be morally justifiable to perform torture on someone who undoubtedly could provide information that would save undoubtedly innocent lives. I responded with the sorts of evaluation that Kloster recognizes. To begin with I indicated that JD's argument was not adequately sceptical as there is no reason to believe torture is an effective interrogation technique. While I was perfectly willing to suspend belief about the certainty of the availability of information and the innocence, I maintained there was a further implicit and unacceptable assumption. I also cooperated by sharing with JD that a very similar argument is available in a philosophy textbook that I use (Levin 2004), thus suggesting a number of ways in which his thinking was theoretically interesting, as seemed to be his point. My friend continued to explain the details of his reasoning, but I was not interested. My desire was to dismiss JD's argument because at that moment it did not serve purposes that interested me: it added neither to my scepticism about anything nor my desire to cooperate with anyone. I believed I had nothing to learn from JD's argument and I accepted that we already trust each other a great deal. He would not however be dismissed, and in the course of the matter I came to recognize that the argument was serving quite a different purpose for JD than I recognized.

Once I finally admitted the outside possibility that torture could be an effective interrogation tool, we were able to proceed into more mutually satisfying discussion. Yet, I'm still not sure what exactly what was JD's goal. I speculate that because he takes great pride in his reasoning that he simply wanted me to share the pleasure of it, or to receive affirmation from me of his cleverness, or at least that I should accept his own self-affirmation that I may not have adequately expressed.

What had been missing in our argumentation, the absence of which made the argument dysfunctional, was neither trust nor competition, however, but *any* purpose or function that was shared or at least that could be mistaken for being shared. This becomes comprehensible in light of Jean Goodwin's recent explanation of how arguments may

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have no intrinsic function and that instead they revolve around issues that are designed by individual arguers (2007).

In light of Goodwin's design approach let us consider Kloster's test case of contract negotiation. Clearly both scepticism and trust are involved in the process, but in what sense is either a function or goal? If the process is successful, it should relieve scepticism not increase it, and likewise the need for trust between the opposing parties should be relieved. So neither is a goal. Furthermore, as Kloster notes at the end of her paper we have no inherent obligation to trust the people on the other side of an argument but instead may fall back on laws and larger social institutions to enforce the resolution of an argument; thus scepticism becomes the operational goal though perhaps not the end goal or function of contract negotiation.

If argumentation does not have an intrinsic function, we need to consider that argumentative functions vary much more widely than Kloster's examples suggest. In turn, when we assume or identify set functions in the context of argumentation, such as in Kloster's examples, we should question the origins of those values, as well as whom and what these functions serve. Functionalist talk dominated much of social science in the mid-twentieth century but it is inherently conservative, failing to account for the open-endedness and flexibility that social roles and structures can have. Regarding social contexts of argumentation, therefore, we need to consider how arguments may be vehicles for social and cultural change as well as for conservation.

### 4. CONCLUSION: ARGUMENT FUNCTIONALITY

Goodwin is sceptical that there is any reason to view arguments as serving institutions because of the nebulous nature of the suggested institutions (2007, 74). However Kloster shows us that speaking of institutions has a lot of explanatory power, and Kloster's examples are excellent cases in point. Her examples demonstrate how institutions give arguments functions. Being members of an academic department explains the origination, procedure, and resolution of the argument about PTR criteria. Being employers and employees also explains the origination, procedure, and resolution of arguments about contracts. Regarding mental illness, I assume that neither of the two academics debating over mental illness had relevant expertise. Therefore, the usual hierarchy and established means for resolving disagreement could not settle the matter. The *absence* of an appropriate institutional role explains the *failure* to reach a resolution. Professional pride can thus be an obstacle to cooperation, as Kloster notes; autonomy is prized among academics far more than cooperation. So the functioning of an argument depends on its institutional context, including the context of being academic colleagues in an arena governed vaguely by competition and complemented only tenuously by norms of collegiality.

Kloster presses us to recognize and not take for granted how social contexts orchestrate the cooperative means and goals of argumentation. Contract negotiations and departmental meetings serve cooperative functions in ways that are beyond the intentions and sway of individual participants. Thus Kloster's analysis challenges some common assumptions in argumentation theory that cooperation and trust are implicitly valuable, and I agree with Kloster about the dependence of the cooperative function of argumentation on social context. Yet with Goodwin (2007) I want to encourage us to

interrogate the assumptions we have about *any* intrinsic functions of arguments. Guidelines and goals such as scepticism and cooperation depend on particular social contexts and vary accordingly. This means not only that cooperation is not always argumentatively valuable at the individual level, but also that in some cases it may not be valuable at all. Consider a bullying colleague, or a contrary child. We may neglect our own needs and goals if we allow them to impose cooperative norms on our arguments with them. Such decisions about what will and won't be discussed are a matter of designing issues that must be negotiated among the discussants (Goodwin 2007).

Goodwin's design approach leads us to recognize how a functional analysis such as Kloster's assumes a social context for argumentation, in her case the two functions that she initially identifies: scepticism and cooperation. Institutions are generally cooperative and sometimes may lift the burden from individuals of adopting a cooperative trusting approach. We delegate to the institutions in which we participate a certain amount of the design of the issues that guide our discussion and the functions that can therefore be served. Kloster says:

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 maximum protection in a competitive environment.

In Kloster's cases, we are already collaborating in institutions. Therefore we sometimes succeed only by forgoing personal inclinations to cooperate; such abdication allows the institution to function according to its design.

Institutional contexts limit the range of functions argumentation can serve and may or may not foster cooperation and trust in other people. Sometimes institutions take over to such a degree that they foster trust only in themselves. Kloster continues:

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 participants.

I suggest that Kloster's institutional analysis thus shows some limits on Goodwin's design approach to argumentation (2007). Goodwin acknowledges that people in positions of power have the ability to set the goals of an argument. Yet, that impact of hierarchy imbues institutions with particular argument functions. Neglecting to scrutinize the functional design of institutions yields a falsely libertarian picture of argumentation that Kloster's approach begins to remedy.

I suggest further that just as competitive argumentation produces cooperative results in contract negotiation, cooperative argumentation can produce competitive results. Consider the case of coaching. People work together and argue cooperatively for the most part over strategies with the purpose of making one person competitive. Relationships such as contract negotiation or coaching may impose competitive and sceptical or cooperative functions on individuals, and they also may take on separate purposes themselves, of a variety of sorts. These values include pleasure as well as many other more specific goals such as validating hypotheses or resolving a course of action.

To return to the toothpick bridge analogy, the functionality of a bridge may be difficult to judge without knowing what functions it is intended to serve. Kloster

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mentions being small enough and sturdy enough. My spaghetti bridge competed on the basis of the lowest weight. The specifications were that it be large enough to span the length of two bricks, able to sit between two bricks, support the weight of a brick, and be wide and tall enough to drive a cannelloni through.

Although my spaghetti bridge was quite robust and could support the weight of not just one but two bricks, it was quite heavy. I lost sight of the functional goal to be lightweight. Likewise the procedures of Robert's Rules only serve well in some contexts, not for instance on family members. They can get in the way of cooperation because they limit our flexibility in designing issues as our argumentation and reasoning progresses.

My spaghetti bridge ultimately broke under its own weight. Perhaps this is an analogy for institutional red-tape? Yet I learned a lot, which was the ultimate purpose, but not one that could be directly sought by the students. As much as I reasoned and debated with myself as I designed and constructed the bridge, and much as I fumed after the evaluations that the specifics of the assignment had not been adequately clear, I never considered how to educate myself, and it would have been dysfunctional to do so. That function would have been undermined had it been a direct goal of my reasoning; it had already been abdicated to the instructor when I signed up for the course.

One could just build a bridge for fun. Consider that when I play blocks with my two-year-old niece, I try to build bridges but she keeps changing the purpose of the game. She has the position of power to do so. Thus, my bridge of blocks becomes a tower, but no less a success. The goals are not institutionalized but guided by our mutual pleasure.

Admittedly, such libertarian delights are rare in institutions. So, the lesson I take from Kloster's analysis is that effective argument requires consideration the various purposes at hand and how our institutions enforce them and sometimes lift our responsibility to take them on personally.

[Link to paper](#)

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