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Moira Kloster

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# Commentary on Paola Cantù and Italo Testa: “Is Common Ground a Word or Just a Sound? Second Order Consensus and Argumentation Theory”

MOIRA GUTTERIDGE KLOSTER

*Department of Philosophy and Politics  
University College of the Fraser Valley,  
Abbotsford, B.C. V2S 7M8  
Canada  
Maira.Kloster@ucfv.ca*

It's a truism that there's "nowt so rare as common sense". Authors Cantu and Testa construct a parallel insight for common ground: it will be rare to find a "there" that can be the comfortable space we hope for. Generally, common ground implies a peaceful place, where disagreement is mercifully – even if only temporarily – absent. It contrasts with the spaces of disagreement, where points are contested and procedures are challenged. Cantu and Testa's crucial claim is that we will actually be better off if we look in a different direction – if we see common ground as a moving target instead of a fixed location. We will be better able to understand how consensus and dissensus can co-exist, instead of being two separate arenas for action. In addition, the authors' proposed concept of common ground includes a specific interpretation of rationality which they propose as a valuable source of insight in comparing theories of argumentation.

The title of the paper, "Is common ground a word or just a sound?" invites us first to consider the possibility that there is no "there" which is "common ground" at all. As the authors indicate, the concept of common ground can be used in such different ways within theories of argument and argumentation that it's hard to be confident there is a single shared concept. For example, can common ground be seen equally plausibly as the starting point for argument, as the end point, or as one of the resting points in between? Cantu and Testa attempt a classification of theories according to where the common ground is located in each but quickly conclude that such a classification is not going to work. Common ground and the consensus it implies cannot be unequivocally located. One consequence might be that there is no such place as "common ground". Consensus can neither be situated there nor proved to need any such resting place.

However, Cantu and Testa step back from the troubling prospect of eliminating the concept of common ground entirely. Instead, they salvage the value of the concept by making it "second order" – a way of reaching agreement on how rules or procedures might reasonably be changed as the "first order" argument progresses. If I follow their proposal correctly, "common ground" is metaphorically neither the starting point at the bottom of the cliff of argument, nor the viewpoint achieved at the top, nor even any of the ledges in between that would have been wide enough to rest on. Instead, common ground is analogous to a good climbing hold – something climbers can grip firmly until they have safely moved to their next position, and then let go of, as a new hold becomes the fixed point for making the next upward move.

The authors argue that the lack of such a second order notion of common ground is a deficit in some theories of argument. If a theory of argument cannot account for how arguers move away from common ground, the theory is going to have to presume that arguments must be abandoned under certain conditions of dissent. Such a limitation would be serious: in general, we want the maximum number of arguments to be capable of being carried to resolution.

One particularly appealing consequence of adding a “second order” consensus is, as they note, that it permits us to identify common ground without being forced into imposing the acceptance of any particular points of view or particular practices from start to finish of an argument. From an alternate dispute resolution perspective, this is an encouraging trend towards remaining more open to ways in which the parties to a dispute can design their argument processes for better results.

Instead of defining rationality in terms of an individual’s assent to certain statements, or adherence to specific rules of logic, the authors define rationality as a characteristic of the argumentation practice itself. A process will be rational if it properly employs second-order consensus about procedural questions to negotiate successfully the shifts between consensus and dissensus within the first-order argument. Again, from an alternative dispute resolution perspective, what seems valuable about this definition is the way it permits us to sidestep even the need to agree on a “unique and absolute concept of rationality” in advance of working on disagreements. This permits us not to worry about individual competence or individual psychology when entering into a dispute or being asked to consider mediating a dispute. Instead, we are free to “consider conflict and difference of opinion as essential and fruitful elements of every argumentation practice”. This permits arguments to be much more than an unfortunate detour on the way to consensus or a regrettable departure from consensus. We are free to see the many negotiations within or between arguments as a valuable way of working out what rationality is, not just as a way of finding where rationality must lead us.

Another valuable component of this shift in perspective is that we can see consensus as something that coexists fruitfully with dissent. Encouraging a second-order consideration of what is happening in the argument practice will, in the authors’ estimation, allow arguers to express radical dissent without having their communication break down. This means the arguers can recognize the goal of the argument as something quite distinct from just the outcome produced by following a single set of rules from beginning to end. This seems to be a very helpful way to shift argumentation away from game-playing, both in spirit and in practice. Moving away from the notion of inviolable rules or specified games permits ongoing innovation in argument practices. This may be very helpful as we argue within increasingly diverse communities of belief and expectation.

What remains open is whether this new analysis can still do the job we expected of common ground, or whether it is better seen as a new concept – “dynamic consensus”, say – which would be a worthy addition to argumentation theory in its own right. While there could be static forms of consensus, in which an agreement, once reached, is honoured indefinitely, there could also be forms of consensus which are highly mobile. We are generally unwise to picture disagreements as something to be settled once and for all. (Few models of dispute resolution are based on a requirement of consensus, because consensus can be so fragile.)

## COMMENTARY ON PAOLA CANTÙ AND ITALO TESTA

Here I find the authors short on examples to illustrate how their model illuminates or improves real argument practice. The authors stay entirely within a theoretical framework, ending their paper with an application of their concept to meta-theoretical analysis. They demonstrate how their second-order principle shows that Pragma-Dialectics and Walton's New Dialectics differ in their concept of rationality. It seems entirely appropriate that a rethinking of "common ground" should cause us to rethink related concepts such as rationality. However, if this new interpretation is also to be of value within argumentation practice, we will need to see how it applies directly to first-order arguments. It is not evident how argument practices actually incorporate any second-order discussion that will help them build and rebuild common ground to keep them moving towards the desired goal.

For effective application of a new idea within dispute resolution, there needs to be a way to translate the theoretical underpinning of an argument practice into specific advice on which practice to choose in which contexts, or on how to modify existing practices for better results. As a theorist of dispute resolution practices, I want the promise of a new vision developed into options for application. What would it look like in practice to apply a "second order" concept of common ground?

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