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Commentary on Michael H.G. Hoffmann: “Searching for Common Ground on Hamas through Logical Argument Mapping”

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1. INTRODUCTION

Prof. Hoffmann has given us a very clear paper that includes both a presentation of important principles behind argumentative interchange as well as a concrete model and application of how so-called "deep disagreements" can be approached. The concept of "deep disagreement" as it has been recently formulated stems from a paper of R. Fogelin in 1985. Its importance can be seen in the fact that twenty years later, the journal which originally published the paper, *Informal Logic*, reprinted the paper along with articles reacting to, and commenting on, the piece in a single commemorative issue. Consequently, although there are many aspects of the debate arising from that piece which could be discussed, the focus here is its potential impact on an important current debate.

In his work Prof. Hoffmann has presented us with a concrete case that would show what the limits of Fogelin's claim might be. Nothing is more effective in philosophical debate than to have a particular instance against which a generalized claim can be measured. Hoffmann's detailed examination of the argumentative standoff between the Israelis and the Palestinians is a fine example of confronting any student of informal logic with a complex and protracted debate about a question that is of huge importance, whether that question is considered from a political, moral, or spiritual point of view. More importantly for our purposes today, however, this debate also can provide the backdrop for examining both general questions pertaining to the nature of argumentation as well as the specific queries pertaining to the diagramming method proposed here. In the short time allotted for criticism, a number of intriguing insights raised by Prof. Hoffmann will have to be left out of consideration. One can only recommend that his paper be read in all its detail and studied for the many inviting pathways it opens up in argumentation theory.

2. THE LIMITS OF L.A.M.

There are four items, however, that appear to me to be worthy of more intense scrutiny here. The first three are of a more generic nature while the last focuses on the particular example that occupies much of the diagramming section of the paper.

First, the question arises whether the diagramming method, LAM (Logical Argument Mapping) is the most perspicuous way of presenting the presuppositions at work in the argumentation. In another presentation "Logical Argument Mapping (LAM): A tool for problem solving, argumentation, deliberation, and conflict management," Hoffmann lays out the schemata for representing an argument. Some of the schemata are more formal, e.g., truth tables, *modus ponens*, various types of syllogisms (disjunctive, conditional, etc.), while others are more concerned with the "informal" side of the propositional relationships in the argument, e.g., claim to warrant or reason. When viewing the diagramming structure itself, however, one wonders what advance the procedure has over some earlier forms of diagramming. Now, admittedly, Prof. Hoffmann is making use of the work of thinkers such as Toulmin (as is clear from the "informal" side just mentioned). The innovation provided by Toulmin has to be counterbalanced by the distinctions that continue to influence the analysis of argument, as pointed out by Prof. Johnson who writes, "...we have seen that terms such as 'logical type,' not to mention 'argument' and 'premise' and 'modal term' all continue to do heavy duty in Toulmin's theory (Johnson, 2000, pp. 355-8)...The lesson here seems to be that we cannot just wipe the slate clean."¹ Now, Prof. Hoffmann is surely sensitive to the history of philosophy in general and to the history of the discipline of argumentation in particular. Indeed, his broader allusions to Kant and Pierce and others make this unquestioned.

Still, when one considers the diagrammatic connective links between propositions in the argument, it appears that some refinements proposed by earlier theorists are overlooked. For instance, just to cite one example, Douglas Walton in his work "Argument Structure: A Pragmatic Theory" describes the various types of relationships between premises and conclusions and presents schematically the differences between them. Thus, for instance, the distinctions of linked and convergent arguments, serial and divergent arguments, among others, provide for what seems to be a more accurate and revealing portrayal of the propositions constitutive of an argument.² Other textbooks have tried to use as links lines that, by either being wavy or broken, would show propositions that were conflicting with or irrelevant to the claim being made. There have been other examinations of expansions to diagramming arguments. One thinks of attempts to show how rebuttal or rebuttal of rebuttal can be represented in an argument³ as well as of attempts to show how the argument schemes can be related to the Toulmin schemes.⁴

Second, the role of relativism in the resolution of conflicts is one that needs to be addressed. One can readily admit that most arguments can never be all comprehensive in their structural formulation so that all aspects are presented in such a way that assent to objective truth is compelled on the part of any rational participant. Of course, there may be some mathematical arguments of this sort. The clear exposition Hoffmann gives of the Euclidean proposition that the sum of the interior angles of a triangle are equal to 180 degrees may be one of that sort.⁵ However, as the author notes, even in such a case, one

¹Johnson 2005, pp. 223-224:

²Walton 1996, ch. 3.

³Slob 2005, p. 431.

⁴Reed and Rowe 2005, p. 379.

⁵Hoffmann 2004, pp. 299-301.

has to consider the representational system in which the proof is delivered – e.g., the proposition regarding 180 degrees for the interior angles simply will not hold in the case of Riemannian geometry. Now one might want to say that mathematical truths might be so relativized, but does one want to say the same about physical truths? One might adopt a radical position here that fits in with what Hanson or Feyerabend might say, but do most really want to accept such a position? More generally, someone like Putnam wants to argue against the relativism that so easily can beset us.⁶ In the case of the moral issues presented by the Palestinian-Israeli case so deftly sketched in Prof. Hoffmann's paper, can we be content either with the relativity of the representational system for a given type of geometry or with the – at best – futuristic, Peircean-type, promissory note of the agreement of those engaged in the scientific enterprise? Prof. Hoffmann writes, "we should not worry too much about the 'truth' of what we presuppose as real for a certain time."⁷ Is it possible to resolve debates that touch on profound human issues without resorting to universal principles that transcend the moral relativism which the paper seems to tolerate, even such relativism is not espoused therein outright? Prof. Hoffmann clearly is sensitive to this issue. He has written a paper recently in which the issue of relativism plays an important role.⁸

Third, if in the 'final analysis' of an argumentation certain differing a priori propositions are reached, i.e., conflicting propositions resting on beliefs that neither party is willing to abandon (e.g., the Koran commands Jews be exterminated vs. every Jew is entitled to live), does the diagramming process have anything to offer? Now, one might claim, in a Peircean spirit, that there never really is a "final" analysis of an argument – argumentation is an ongoing process without termination. In such a case, does LAM effectively become just a technique offering false hope for a future resolution of a debate, a resolution that will never really be forthcoming?

Fourth, there are some particularities of the individual argument used here that might throw light on the power of the technique employed. Consider, for instance, on page 22, the shared features in the argument: there are five "shared" premises. Three of these seem to be factual, i.e., " Hamas is an Islamic movement," " Hamas propagates violence," " Hamas' 1988 charter {maintains...?}"; the other two seem to be, for lack of a better word, *interpretive*. [Perhaps, it would be better to speak of these having an intentional embedding.] Now, one might ask: A). Is there a way of determining which premises in an argument are factual and which are interpretive? B). If the factual ones are non-disputed, what weight do they exercise in the argument vis-à-vis the interpretive ones? Can they be considered as foundational in way that the others are not? Do the factual ones have a "truth" that the others do not? C). If they are foundational, how does this bear on a fact/value distinction and the overall grounding of moral imperatives (whether they be general or more specific, e.g., "one ought not to trust those with a commitment to violence"; "one ought not to trust the Hamas")? Does one not need, in the end, to make an appeal in ethical disputes to some non-relativistic grounding for ethical imperatives? Finally, D). Do not the two factually shared premises in this example simply seem to be so trivially true to the divergence of positions, that their endorsement by both parties hardly furthers the dialogue leading to a resolution of the conflict?

⁶ Putnam 1983.

⁷ Hoffmann 2004, p. 297.

⁸ Hoffmann 2005.

[link to paper](#)

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