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Commentary on Tone Kvernbekk: “Argumentation Practice: The Very Idea”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In her paper, Kvernbekk raises the question whether MacIntyre’s conception of practices really suits the needs of my theory of argumentation. Specifically she argues his conception of practice does not accommodate the three features that I laid out, but that the problem lies as much with MacIntyre’s conception than anything else.

The main problem, in Kvernbekk’s view, lies with the stipulation that the practice of argumentation is teleological because, she holds, MacIntyre’s view cannot accommodate that feature. She writes: “The question for our investigation will be whether argumentation is more like painting or more like teaching (4) because MacIntyre holds that painting is a practice in his sense but that teaching is not.” Kvernbekk believes that if the answer is that it is more like teaching, then it will not fit MacIntyre’s conception. Let me read again her statement:

And here we have the main reason why I do not think that argumentation is a practice in MacIntyre’s sense. While the notion of internal goods may capture a number of important things about an activity, the same notion makes practice close in on itself and become inward looking. As Wain and Higgins point out, internal goods are for one’s own sake. And this is precisely why MacIntyre insists that teaching is not a practice—teaching is for the sake of something else (rather than for its own sake). If argumentation is a practice (in the MacIntyre sense), then arguers argue for the sake of arguing, for the sake of perfecting an argument, for sake of satisfying the standards of excellence. But this is not what Johnson envisions for argumentation. For Johnson explicitly states that, “The practice does not exist for itself but rather because it yields a product of value to human society” (2000, p. 209). This is part of Johnson’s idea of the *telos* of argumentation. I conclude that the concept of practice as elaborated by MacIntyre does not accommodate his teleology desideratum.

The problem, then, is the compatibility/suitability of MacIntyre’s conception of practice with my claim about teleological nature of the practice of argumentation. Kvernbekk’s paper raises serious doubts about my adoption of MacIntyre’s concept of practice. As I see it, there are three issues. First, about the very nature of practice: what are practices, and why do they exist; and does this term apply to argumentation? Second, the issue of the teleology of argumentation: can argumentation be said to have a purpose? Here we will, both of us, have to deal with The Goodwin Objection—which is that it is a mistake to assign argumentation a function or a purpose (Goodwin, 2007). Third, why does any of this matter: why does it matter whether argumentation is or is not a practice?

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2. WHY PRACTICE IS IMPORTANT FOR MY THEORY

It might help a bit if I explained why I chose to adopt MacIntyre's conception, but to do that I need to back up a few steps.

Two central feeders to the idea that argumentation is a practice were my 1984 paper for ISSA (published in 1987) and our (Blair & Johnson) 1987 paper, *Argumentation as Dialectical*. In (1984), I argued that the traditional conception of argument¹ was much too limited and called for a fortified conception. And it was clear to me (already from 1987) that handling objections was a crucial feature of argument that did not turn up in theorizing about argument.

My interest in informal logic as providing a theory of argument which would breach these gaps was stimulated not only by our research and work in informal logic throughout the 70s but as well by Govier's 1983 paper calling for a theory of argument, (published in Govier (1987). And Finocchiaro's attempt to construe informal logic as theory of reasoning (1984). I began serious work on my theory of argument in the early 90s. In my 1990 paper for the Logic and Politics conference, the idea of the dialectical tier is already signalled, and in a 1993 paper delivered at Sonoma (published in (1994)), I have defined what I can pragmatic approach which situates argument within *the practice of argumentation*.

Much of what I had to say there about practice stems from (1987) where Blair and I discussed the *process* of argumentation. It must have occurred to me later that both the process or arguing and the product we call argument need to be seen in larger context—which I thought of as the practice of argumentation. It also was clear to me that traditional theory did not reflect the way in which arguments turned up in that practice. From this sketch, you can see that a *crucial theme* in my theory would be that then-current theories of argument were not in line with *argumentative practice*, principally in the way in which they conceived of argument.

Here I believe I was influenced as well by the idea of *praxis*—a term with both Aristotelian and Marxist resonance, though I am most familiar with it from Richard Bernstein's fine study of the pragmatists: *Praxis and Action*, where I came upon statements like this one: "Unlike Marx, Dewey does not think it was necessary to abandon philosophy or go beyond philosophy but rather to reconstruct philosophy so that it would become a guide to enlightened practice" (1971: 228). Which it was easy for me to transform into a proposition of the following sort: "I did not think it was necessary to abandon logic but rather to reconstruct it so that it would become a guide to enlightened practice."

I really had not given much thought to how to unpack this idea of argumentation as a practice but I knew that for my purposes the referent of the term had to include *the process* of arguing which I thought of as typically a verbal exchange—a dialogue—between two people; the *product* which I thought of as typically a text (e.g., Wittgenstein's argument against a private language) and the agents that engage in the

¹ I mean here the idea associated with Copi *Introduction to Logic*, the oldest logic textbook in North America, where you will find the following definition: "An argument, in the logician's sense, is any group of propositions of which one is claimed to follow from the others which are regarded as providing evidence for the truth of that one. (7, 2e, 1961)

production of these two. But I felt I needed a more robust account of practice, and was aware of MacIntyre's introduction of the term in *After Virtue* which I reviewed and, without much reflection, adopted. That being the case, it does not surprise me to learn that the fit between MacIntyre's account of practice and the needs of my theory is not good.

Here I would like to make just one slight correction of Kvernbekk's otherwise lucid presentation of my theory: On the status of the three features I ascribe to the practice of argumentation: that it is teleological, dialectical and characterised by manifest rationality, Kvernbekk is somewhat loose in her characterization of these, sometimes calling them desiderata (1), features (1) the features as individually necessary and jointly sufficient desiderata (3). My view is that these are properties, as it were, of the practice; and in the case of manifest rationality, I hold that this feature is particularly important; other practices display the feature of being teleological (e.g., explanation, scientific theory) and dialectical (discussions, interviews) but not manifest rationality. Kvernbekk says that manifest rationality may apply to scientific research. She says that those engaged in science argue, which is not denied, but that is not sufficient. The chief business of science is theory construction. The criteria to which theories are accountable are it seems to me quite different than those for argument (simplicity, coherence e.g.), and there is nothing like the requirement for a dialectical tier. So I am suspicious of the attempt to extend the property of manifest rationality to over scientific theory.

3. THE ISSUES

A. Practices. What are practices? As Kvernbekk notes, MacIntyre's idea of practice diverges somewhat from the ordinary conception which itself is quite complex. I would call MacIntyre's definition a theoretical one.² Kvernbekk states that the conception is "difficult to define" (1) though this has not prevented many from both offering a definition and/or making use of the conception. Obviously the sense of this term that is important for us is related to others like "tradition," "custom." A practice is something like a tradition—a way of doing things. It is also important to note that there is a sense of practice which is co-dependent on theory—that is, one is putting into practice a theory—putting into practice the Meyer Briggs understanding of personality in ones teaching. But that is not always the case, and if there is a practice of argumentation, it will show the influence of many theories not just one—a point that Kvernbekk made in her ISSA paper last year (2006).

Later in the paper Kvernbekk returns to this matter when she discusses Miller's conception of practice as purposive, in which respect it differs from MacIntyre's (self-contained) and which she claims is more in line the needs of my theory—and I agree with this. But now we fly straight into the arms of the question: but who is right here, Miller or MacIntyre? if there is any right here: and how can this be settled? This question has implications as well for how we regard Goodwin's intervention which only becomes an objection to the conceptions that ascribe purpose (function) to the practice (like mine and Miller's).

² This is how Hansen categorizes my attempt to define "argument" (2002: 272-273).

B: The teleology of argumentation: Can argumentation be said to have a purpose? All the writers mentioned in Kvernbekk's commentary seem to think so. But then all have to deal with The Goodwin Objection. In her paper "Argument has No Function," delivered at *The Uses of Argument* conference in 2005 and published in *Informal Logic* (2007), Goodwin argues that it is a mistake to ascribe a function/purpose to argument. What basis does she provide for this claim? In the first place, she transposes the critique of functionalism from sociology into this domain. It turns out, she claims, that for any one detail of social life, many functions (= many dialogue types, for argumentation theorists) can be postulated. How can we tell which one is really present? Second: "Equally, though oppositely, in a functionalist perspective all the details of social interaction tend to get "dissolved" as they are all seen as serving the One Big Function of social cohesion (a resolution of disagreement, for argumentation theorists)—a proceeding that is as dull as it is conservative" 2005:165). A final line of objection emerges in her attempt to work out an alternative according to which "while it is mysterious to ascribe purpose to forms, it is easy to ascribe them to individual actors, since in communicating those actors are themselves are openly engaged in expressing and interpreting such purposes." I do not find mysterious to ascribe purpose to practices, to say that people bring practices into being to serve some purpose or purposes. In our area for example when someone finds a hubcap that has fallen off a passing car, there is the practice of placing that hubcap up against a tree close to where it was found. Quite ingenious, it seems to me. People quickly see the point.

4. CONCLUSION

Why does any of this matter? Why does it matter whether argumentation is or is not a practice? Here is Kvernbekk's view:

Does anything hang on argumentation being a 'practice' or a 'purposive practice'? It has mattered much to some educationalists to classify teaching as a MacIntyrean practice. And what the concept may give, I suggest, when stripped of its tendency to self-indulgence, is a complex notion that can do two related things for us. It can serve as a reminder of the complexity and plurality of the activity; and it can serve as a vaccination against narrow focuses on parts of the activity which may easily be taken for the whole enterprise.

These important reminders apply no less to argumentation than teaching.

Still: What is the point of worrying about something like painting or teaching or argumentation is a practice? After all these activities have other assignments: painting is a craft, or an art form; teaching is an activity, and a profession (or occupation); argumentation is a form of communication. What, then, does it matter whether argumentation is also construed as a practice?

For me the answer is that the failure to so situate it has been partly responsible for the fact that important aspects of that practice to remain in the background, unappreciated and unacknowledged. Toulmin made something like the same point in *The Uses of Argument*. "If all were well (and clearly well) in philosophical logic, there would be no point in embarking on these investigations: our excuse lies in the conviction that a radical re-ordering of logical theory is needed in order to bring it more nearly into line with critical practice..."(1958: 253). Where I disagree with him is how that is to be achieved: "In tackling our main problems about the assessment of arguments, it will be worthwhile

COMMENTARY ON TONE KVERNBEKK

clearing our minds of ideas derived from existing logical theory and seeing by direct inspection what are the categories in terms of which we actually express our assessment, and what precisely they mean to us" (1958: 6-7). But the lesson here seems to be that we cannot just wipe the slate clean. At least Toulmin does not appear to have been able to do so, even if we take it that his project was not necessarily to banish such terms altogether but rather to remove them from a substantive role in his theory. Indeed the lesson from modern philosophy, played out all over again here, is that we will have to retain something of the practice/tradition we wish to leave behind.

I don't think I have yet quite found a way to articulate what I am driving at here, but I think I am much closer to it now having had the benefits of reading Kvernbekk's paper.

[link to paper](#)

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