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Argument Has No Function

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ABSTRACT: Argumentation studies in the last decade have taken a pragmatic turn, from examining units (or ‘products’) of argument to examining the speech activities within which those units are deployed. Within this new perspective, we’re able to take Toulmin, among others, seriously at last. In this paper, however, I want to argue that we have turned askew. Toulmin, it should be recalled, developed an idea about the uses of argument. Contemporary argumentation theorists, by contrast, have talked about argument’s function. To this I reply: No!

I will begin by reviewing the function claims made within recent argumentation theory. At this point, I take a ‘function claim’ to involve twin assertions:

1. That the interaction (dialogue, conversation) within which arguments are deployed has a function (purpose, [common] goal).
2. That individual arguers are obliged to so act as to achieve that function.

An unsystematic survey of the literature reveals such claims in the pragma-dialecticians, Douglas Walton and Ralph Johnson. Michael Gilbert, who otherwise trenchantly insists on recognizing the purposes of individual arguers, still wants to squeeze normative force out of a conception of the joint purpose of the activity. Alas, even our conference organizers shift quickly from inviting work on the uses of argument, to talk with apparent approval of ‘scholars [who] have begun to create taxonomies of the uses or functions of argument and to develop theories of evaluation with criteria varying according to function’.

Against such function claims, I expect to raise two lines of objection. First, I will draw from the critique of functionalism as it arose in the early social sciences, to point out the significant methodological problems function claims encounter. It turns out that for any one detail of social life, many functions (=many ‘dialogue types,’ for argumentation theorists) can be postulated. How can we tell which is really present? Equally, though oppositely, in a functionalist perspective all the details of social interaction tend to get ‘dissolved’, as they all are seen as serving the One Big Function of social cohesion (=‘resolution of disagreement,’ for argumentation theorists), a proceeding that is as dull as it is conservative.

Second, I will examine the problems that arise when trying to derive norms from functions—something most early social scientists managed to avoid. Although there may in some cases be a weak obligation to contribute to a social function, functionalism itself has

trouble explaining exactly why the benefits and burdens of the activity have to be distributed just so.

I will close by considering alternatives to functionalism. Does the distinction between 'functions' and 'uses' make a difference? Yes. While it is mysterious to ascribe purposes to social forms, it is easy to ascribe them to individual actors, since in communicating those actors are themselves openly engaged in expressing and interpreting such purposes. If we throw out 'functions,' are we left without norms? No. Arguers can generate the norms governing their transaction in the same way that they generate their arguments: by design. To achieve their individual purposes, they will want to undertake and impose obligations to argue in certain ways.

In short, I propose to bring the study of the pragmatics of arguing up from the early twentieth century (e.g., Durkheim), to at least the 1970s (emulating Harvey Sacks, Emmanuel Schegloff, Dell Hymes, Irving Goffman).