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# An Alternate Use of the *Uses of Argument*: A Feminist/Perceptive Adaptation of the Toulmin Model

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**ABSTRACT:** Though a segment of feminists have questioned the combative, logical, objective nature of academic writing and presentation, their critique has seldom extended to the most widely used model in composition and communication, Stephen Toulmin's Informal Model of argument (1958), which terminologically relates to combative, logical and legal terminologies (staking or possessing legal and 'warranted' 'claims' on 'data'). Toulmin's model, however, adapted to a visual rather than legal metaphor, fits well with the less confrontational, more personal and contextual approach espoused by some feminists and many argument theorists. This essay offers an adaptation of Toulmin's six-part model based in a visual metaphor, adding three more parts: 'Interrelated Perceptions' (to partially account for argument complexities; 'Field Specific Horizons' (similar to Toulmin's 'fields,' context of evaluation); and 'Historical/Cultural Horizon,' (using Gadamer's, 1989, hermeneutical historical concept to further contextualize arguments. The model then responds to two key feminist and argumentation theorist concerns, replacing the argument-as-war metaphorical mapping of argument relations, and personalizing and contextualizing arguments as to historical, social, and cultural situation.

**KEY WORDS:** argumentation, feminism, Stephen Toulmin, informal argument, agonism, perception

A significant segment of feminists of various disciplines, from the late 1980s into the 1990s, began to question the common agonistic (from the Greek, *agon*, 'struggle') concept of academic writing due to its 'objective' and 'combative' nature (cf. Annas, 1995, Tompkins, 1987; Frey, 1990; Flynn, 1988; Gearhart, 1979; Foss and Griffin, 1995; Lamb, 1991; Spender 1985). For instance, Pamela Annas writes that the academy values writing that is 'abstract, logical and impersonal,' rather than 'sensual, a particular problem for female writers, many of whom tend toward the latter type of writing' (1995, p. 362). Olivia Frey (1990) questioned academic argument as the 'preferred mode of discussion' (509) because it 'may not fit the values, the perceptual frameworks, and the ways of writing of many women across the country' (1990, pp. 507-508). Jane Tompkins applied the problem to her writing as a scholar:

The political problem posed by my need to reply to the essay is this: to adhere to the conventions is to uphold a male standard of rationality that militates against women being recognized as culturally legitimate sources of knowledge. To break with the conventions is to risk not being heard at all' (1987, pp. 170-71).

Sally Miller Gearhart (1979) goes so far as to conclude: 'any intent to persuade is an act of violence' (p. 195).

Individual critiques found some verification in field research in gender. The research of Deborah Tannen (1993) confirmed that male students are more likely to be

comfortable attacking readings and might find the inclusion of personal anecdotes irrelevant and 'soft.' Women were more likely to resist discussions they perceived as hostile, and women in her classes were most likely to offer personal anecdotes (125). Elizabeth Flynn (1988) concluded, drawing upon the work of researchers who found similar patterns in male and female psychology, (i.e. Choderow; Gilligan; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule), as well as her own studies, that due to an 'imbalance in the social order' women may differ in their 'developmental processes' and in their 'interactions with others' in ways that affect their writing processes (p. 425).

Such critiques, as might be expected, enabled connections with feminists and others concerned with revising academic argumentation and writing (cf. Bridwell-Bowles, 1992; Brody, 1993; Chase, 1990; Emmel, 1996; Resch, and Tenny; Friend, 2002; Kraemer, 1991; Lamb, 1991; Tedesco 1991), but also (ironically) met with significant opposition because of their seemingly 'essentialist' dichotomization of masculine and feminine 'styles' or approaches (Bruner, 1996; Easley, 1997), their assumptions about the relation of women to combative language (Jarrett, 1991), and/or their logical inconsistency—i.e. *arguing* for a non-combative model (Fulkerson, 1996). Cohen (1995), in particular, objects to Gearhart's equating persuasion with violence as 'an attitude that,' he insists, 'effectively puts an end to all rational discourse and any possible exchange of ideas' (p. 179).

In light of these criticisms, calls for a 'feminist' argumentation have been re-interpreted as part of a general trend in argumentation away from agonistic models of argument (Gilbert, 1994; Cohen, 1995; Fulkerson, 1996; see also Farrar, Musgrove, Stewart, and Cosby, 1995), as one option among other options (Lynch, 1997; George and Cooper; Sefcovic and Bifano, 2004), and/or as a needed perspective with qualifications (Fulkerson, 1996; Bruner, 1996; Easley, 1997).

This essay begins there, positing not only that feminist perspectives express a trend in argumentation itself, but also provide, with qualifications, an opportunity to reconceptualize argument. An adaptation of Toulmin's model to a visual metaphor provides an alternative for those who question current metaphors of argument. It also provides a more connective basis for thinking through arguments of all types, and may be used as a corollary or counter example to Toulmin's original. I do not offer it as THE feminist alternative, just one suggested by the particular strains of feminism outlined here.

The feminist critique focuses on two key problems—antagonistic relations and impersonal objectivity—both related to what Fulkerson (1996) calls the 'argument-as-war' 'conceptual metaphor.' Fundamental to our common understanding of argument--'arguments are conceived as having an essentially adversarial structure' (Cohen, 1995, p. 179, cf. Fulkerson, 1996; and Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, 'Conceptual'), it is not just an isolated image. It 'manages to permeate to all corners of discourse about argument and our argument practices' (Cohen, 1995, p.178).

The war metaphor casts the recipient of the argument as Other, as the 'opposition,' an enemy, someone to be convinced or defeated. The language of Toulmin's model (1958) comfortably aligns with such a stance, implying that audiences function as positions to be rebutted or diverted (qualification), and the arguer as someone who legally (with the help of a 'warrant') stakes a 'claim' or takes possession of the objective subject ('data'). A feminist alternative sensitive to the concerns raised here should be based in a

more *connective and personal metaphorical matrix* (using the feminine origins of the term intentionally) of associations, such as the one available in a visual metaphor:

### **Toulmin's Terms**

Claims  
Warrants  
Data  
Qualifier  
Rebuttal  
Backing

### **Feminist/Connective Terms**

Perception  
Chosen Lens  
Situated Observation  
Given this lens  
Outside the lens  
Frame of the Lens

The vision metaphor returns argument from its practical equivalence to *agon* to its original Greek meaning, to 'make clear.' The vision analogy maps the 'claims' complex within a perspectival matrix; 'perceptions' of 'situated observations' (temporal, changing, subject to experience) occur through 'chosen' lenses (though they may *seem* natural or commonly understood), and *given that lens*, certain things are revealed ('Given this lens') and/or hidden ('Outside the lens'). The model also illustrates that the lenses themselves are 'framed' by certain belief systems or fields of vision.

The model as a whole implies that *persons* create and maintain perspectives, and that those perspectives are always *mediated* (drawing from some implications of Toulmin's 'warrant') by the assumptive lenses of particular fields and cultures. *Seeing*, then, is a cultural, as well as individual act, and different (cultural) lenses create different perspectives. 'Perception' implies flexibility and changeability, since perceptions change with time and circumstance. The superordinate image of the law court and its agonistic associations is replaced by 'field of vision' associations that emphasize the personal/cultural positions and situations that enable us to see what we see. Toulmin himself stresses the importance of the situatedness of argument: 'for me all questions about knowledge have to be situated' (Olsen, 1993, p. 296).

This model, then, doesn't change the basic *structure* of how we argue, but it does modify the *metaphor* and *context* we use to think it through. Framing arguments in a visual metaphor may not eliminate agonistic tendencies; at least it does not inherently promote them, and it potentially personalizes and contextualizes argument as something we see or offer or share ('Look at this... Do you see what I see?'), rather than something we defend, justify, or present for analysis ('This is reasonable and logical; you should believe it').

A switch to a visual metaphor reflects one concern shared by some feminists and argument theorists, changing the argument-as-war approach. This concern is relevant, not just because women or others may be enculturated in certain less agonistic ways, but because agonism may not be the best model of human relations. Even if we, as Jarrett (1991) suggests, do not want to eliminate conflict from argument, posing argument as sharing situated perspectives rather than as abstract case presentation could in any case promote more effective conflict interactions.

The feminists mentioned here seek to include the personal, the invitational, not just to 'feminize' argument, but also to highlight the interconnected, situational, historical, cultural context from which we make our arguments. Argument as *agon* sets an often abstract relation between arguer and audience, as well as arguer and subject

matter. In the following sections I offer some parameters for understanding the visual model—the importance of metaphors, parallel arguments in argumentation theory. Based on this research, I suggest a fuller model that maps argument perceptions as occurring in specific historical, social, cultural and political ‘horizons.’ The concept of horizons encourages us to consider how we understand arguments, as not only logical, but hermeneutical endeavors (Ehrenhaus, 1988).

## PERCEPTIONS AND METAPHORS

According to Lakoff and Johnson, ‘many, if not all, of our abstract concepts are defined in significant part by conceptual metaphor’ (1980, ‘Metaphors,’ p. 128), which are not just ‘tropes’ or rhetorical devices; they *generate* (perhaps *Gender-ate*) *perspectives*. The ‘argument is war’ metaphor is ‘reflected in our language in a variety of expressions,’ such as ‘Your claims are indefensible;’ ‘He attacked every weak point in my argument.’ ‘His criticisms were right on target;’ ‘I demolished his argument;’ ‘He shot down all my arguments’ (‘Conceptual,’ p. 454). We do not just talk argument is war, ‘Many of the things we *do* in argument are partially structured by the concept of war’ (p. 455). Interestingly, gender seems to map their examples, lending off-hand credence to the feminist critique. They offer that, in an imagined culture where argument is ‘viewed as a dance,’ ... ‘the goal being to perform in a balanced and aesthetic way,’ ... ‘people would view arguments differently, experience them differently, carry them out differently, and talk about them differently’ (p. 455). The visual metaphor already used in understanding (‘I see what you mean...’), could help us escape for a while argument as *agon*. Even Toulmin, in *Uses of Argument* mixes relational and legal metaphors, noting that warrants ‘act as bridges and authorize the sort of step to which our particular argument commits us’ (1958, p. 98).

Similarly, models, a type of extended metaphor, provide some structure for generating or interpreting arguments. According to Michael Pemberton, models provide ‘conceptual frameworks’ (p. 42) through which we understand certain subjects, functioning as what Kuhn refers to as ‘preferred analogies’ (p. 45). He distinguishes, following Rom Harre, the *subject* of a model, that which the model is supposed to represent, and the *source* of a model, basically ‘the medium or analogous system on which the model is based’ (p. 45). In the present controversy, the problem is with the source of the analogy and its relation to the subject, the matrix of war analogies used to map argumentation.

Pemberton notes that ‘models will always be partial isomorphs of their subjects’ (p. 45); this explains two aspects of the problem. Although the argument-as-war model (cf. Palczewski, 1996, for an excellent overview of this analogy) adequately explains many aspects of argument as is, it does not explain others, especially non-aggressive motives for arguing or non-agonistic arguments (cf. Fulkerson, 1996, p.6); it also reflects some of the more negative aspects of human relations--the desire to dominate and control. For this reason, Easley (1997), before teaching a course on argumentative writing, ‘couldn’t help feeling that the teaching of argumentative writing was basically an anti-feminist activity’ (p.1). Re-mapping argument with a different metaphor similarly might miss some aspects of argumentation, but will bring other elements that highlight how perspective and situation interact.

So far, feminists have not offered a *model* of less agonistic argument that clearly identifies an alternate argument structure. A feminist ‘model’ might seem an oxymoron, given the feminist critique of the impersonal and objective nature of academic writing. But models based in relational analogies may function inter-relationally, such as Foss and Griffin’s (1995) ‘invitational’ rhetoric or Rogerian argument. In any case, as Palczewski writes, ‘we need to open up studies of argumentation so that they address not only adversarial processes (which, in some instances, are indispensable) but also consensual processes (which, in other instances, are indispensable)’ (p. 5-6).

## PERSPECTIVES ON ALTERNATE METAPHORS

The key question is whether a less combative model of argumentation would offer greater possibilities for women in general and/or argumentation as a whole?

As argumentation theorist Michael Gilbert (1994) notes, many feminist authors

make a reasonable case for supposing that the style of argument fostered by the C-L [critical logical] tradition is preponderantly male, and that this disparity places an unfair obstacle in the path of those women who feel themselves excluded from the official arenas where one is required to argue ‘reasonably’(p. 110-111).

Composition scholar Richard Fulkerson (1996), though he questions what he perceives as the ‘exaggerated’ and ‘self-contradictory’ claims of many feminist critiques, agrees that

If it is true that women are socialized to be less aggressive, less competitive, less blunt than men (of even if there is something more basic such as an evolved tendency toward nurturance), then conceptualizing argument as a battle in pursuit of victory and dominance over the other side indeed makes argument a male’s game (p. 9).

He offers the alternate metaphor ‘partnership’ (p. 11) to emphasize that we can argue together from our common need to understand each other.

Feminists offer other approaches, notably Foss and Griffin’s (1995) ‘invitational rhetoric,’ mentioned before, where conclusions are ‘offerings’ and the rhetor/audience relation is defined by ‘safety, value and freedom’ (p. 10) rather than distrust, attack, and coercion. Maryann Ayim (1991) recommends a similar ‘affiliative nurturant style,’ as opposed to the ‘dominant confrontational style’ (p. 79). However, these approaches lack specific argument structure.

In the field of argumentation, other writers offer similar criticisms. Cohen (1995), writing from philosophical/educational perspective, cites feminist critiques as just one among many reasons to challenge the argument-as-war metaphor, suggesting that the war approach creates ‘casualties’ out of those who lose and ‘argumentative arguers: proficient, pedantic, and petty’ out of those who win. He laments, ‘Good trial lawyers should not be the only recognized legitimate end product of an educational system’ (p. 181), which Toulmin’s legal metaphor seems to imply is the goal of argumentation.

Wayne Brockriede (1972) characterizes argument as involving three kinds of relationships: ‘rape,’ ‘seduction,’ and ‘love’ (p. 3-5). He observes, ‘...the adversary system in all of its glory manifests rape when one adversary sees another as an object or an inferior being and when he intends to destroy his opponent’ (p. 3-4). Seduction,

according to Brockriede, occurs when ‘the arguer ‘sees the relationship as unilateral and does not look at the coarguer except from his own point of view’ (p. 4). Love occurs when arguers promote ‘a bilateral relationship,’ see ‘a person as a person,’ and desire ‘power parity’ (p. 5).

Gilbert (1994) finds feminist critiques compatible with his view of ‘coalescent communication,’ ‘critical reasoning that embraces inclusion, agreement, and connectedness’ (p. 96). Arguers should seek to ‘identify not what is wrong with an argument, but what are the points of agreement and disagreement’ minimizing disagreement by finding what ‘crucially requires disagreement as opposed to what is merely an inessential accompaniment of the opposed position’ (p. 96).

His metaphor, ‘coalescence,’ ‘means combining two things into one whole or bringing separate things together’ (p. 96). Arguers do not have to agree, but ‘find the aspects with which we can agree, sympathize, or, at the very least, understand’ (p. 96).

Clearly, agonism creates antagonism. These writers call for a more egalitarian and thoughtful relation of arguer, audience and subject matter. We need to ask how our models of argument relate to this change. Significantly, Gilbert (1994) uses a visual metaphor to set parameters for alternate arguments, relating his ideas to feminist views such as Carol Gilligan’s:

What is even more important than style is *focus*... . Who a partner in a dispute is, what connections and concerns she has, and why the issues are important to her are every bit as vital, if not more so, than the precise representation of the premises and conclusions (p. 101-102).

## THE FEMINIST/PERCEPTIVE MODEL

Though Charles Willard (1976) and others have questioned the value of Toulmin’s model for describing real life arguments (as opposed to isolated samples) the reception of Toulmin’s model has been widespread, especially in the teaching of written argument, mostly because, as Charles Kneupper (1978) once pointed out:

- Valid syllogistic arguments are rarely found in rhetorical discourse (p. 239)
- A coherent essay could result from the development of each functional element of the Toulmin model in the kernel argument and from tying the interrelated claims together in a conclusion (p. 240)
- The Toulmin model treats the overall functional relations of the claim and provides insight into the structure of argument (p. 240).

For Kneupper then, and for many who use it, Toulmin’s model works because it can be rhetorical, generative, and structural, as many argument texts using the model attest. Kneupper also believes, as does Fulkerson (1996) (though Fulkerson does not believe we need to ‘teach’ the model as such) that the model provides a way for the teacher to ‘criticize the argument more specifically’ (p. 241).

The model offered here draws upon two writers in the fields of composition and communication who proposed alternate versions of Toulmin’s model useful to a less agonistic form of argument. In composition, Gail Stygall (1986) rejects ‘formal logic’ because in teaching it we imply ‘that there is one ‘right’ answer, one truth, one valid approach’ (p. 7), and because it causes us to miss the fact that ‘real world’ arguing ‘has much to do with being able to envision underlying assumptions’ (p. 7). She finds in

Toulmin’s model a way to get to these assumptions, one that is better designed ethically because instead of implying general univocal truths, it invites students ‘to come to know why and how a member of a discipline, a resident of a field, arrived where he or she did’ (p. 11). With its stress upon the field-dependent criteria for evaluation, the model reveals that ‘facts’ come after theory, or, in Toulmin’s terms, ‘the warrant becomes the *frame* through which the data is *viewed*’ (p. 8). She believes the warrant/field relations allow a clearer understanding of how truths are created, as well as the role of individuals in creating truth. Mixing visual and growth metaphors, she casts the ‘fields’ as gardens.

Robert Kendall (1978) shifts some of Toulmin’s terminology to adapt the model to interpersonal communication. First, he suggests we refer to arguments as ‘perspectives’ to avoid the confrontational connotations of the term argument (p. 3). Instead of ‘data’ or ‘facts’ he proposes the term ‘perceptions,’ to emphasize that the ‘data’ is only a person’s perceptions of the ‘facts’ (p. 5). For the ‘Qualifier’ he proposes ‘It seems to me’ to avoid the objective appeal of the more disembodied ‘presumably’ used by Toulmin, ‘as if taking for granted that everyone views data similarly and therefore has no alternative but to arrive at the same conclusion’ (p. 5). For ‘claim’ he proposes ‘assertion,’ to avoid the property associations with the term. Assertion, according to Kendall, seems more of a

simple, interpretive response to an *individual’s perceptions*... . There is no ‘staking public claim’ to a position that must be recognized and recorded as accurate by anyone else using the same data, but rather the making of a positive statement or declaration with or without support, reason, or necessary reason [emphasis mine] (pp. 5-6).

Although ‘assertion’ and other emphases may not avoid the agonistic metaphor, Kendall’s model opens up ways Toulmin might be used in a feminist context. Based in his ideas, as well as Stygal’s, I developed this visual model more sensitive to feminist ends. Each term has next to it Toulmin’s own terms:

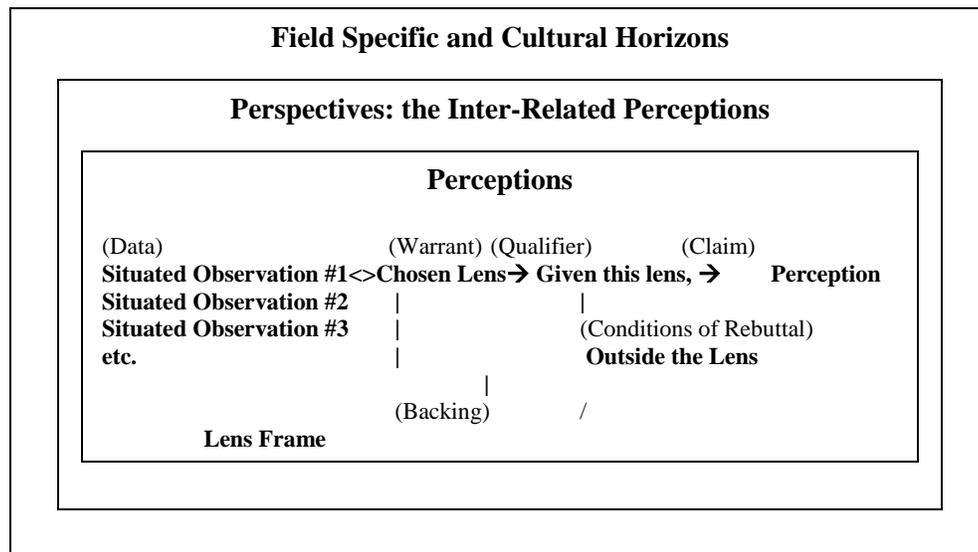


Figure 1: A Feminist/Perceptive Model of Argument

I substituted Kendall’s ‘perception’ for Toulmin’s ‘conclusion’ to remind the user of the tentative nature of our ideas and that perceptions are based on observations made

through experiential lenses. The remainder of the model follows the general visual metaphor, with the ‘backing’ referred to as the ‘frame’ for the lens.

While Toulmin’s concern in offering the model was to show how we ‘justify’ arguments, the model I offer here functions more as a hermeneutic, a way to understand how we *create* arguments. Arguments not only arise from perceptions about observed situations, they also arise within particular historical/cultural horizons.

The boundaries of the personal perceptual field that make up *full arguments* I call ‘Perspectives,’ a fuller term than perception that shows that arguments are series of related perceptions. What Toulmin terms the ‘force’ of claims would be rather their ‘perceptive fit’ to observations and relation to the changing communal visual ‘field’ of knowledge—the perceptual ‘horizon.’

Because one feminist motive for including the personal and relational is to question the false ‘objectivity’ of argument-as-is, I add three other parts. The first, ‘interrelated perceptions,’ emphasizes surrounding arguments often included within a written or oral argument. These arguments involve various texts, people, studies, anecdotes, interferences, etc., and serve as part of the general argument structure.

A second part, similar to Toulmin’s idea of the ‘field’ where arguments are evaluated, I refer to as ‘Field Specific Horizons,’ a term to emphasize how fields *interrelationally shape* the argument style and content. The model includes to encourage the user to consider how the field—conventions, terminologies, accepted topics (similar to Kuhn’s ‘normal science’)—shapes the discourse. This differs from the ‘Lens Frame’ (backing) in that it is less specific to the individual argument, but supports the argument field in general, such as when the feminists who critique argument rely on perspectives based in analogous feminist arguments (Lens Frames) that are in turn surrounded by similar arguments within the general field of feminism and/or cultural critique.

Arguments also interact with larger cultural perspectives. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s (1989) concept of the ‘horizon’ express this relation:

Just as the individual is never simply an individual, because he [sic] is always involved with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of life consists in the fact that it is never utterly bound to one standpoint, and hence can never truly have a closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us (p. 271).

Gadamer’s metaphor expresses the larger visual relations and places the argument in the broadest possible context. He notes that it is living, moving, that it often surrounds us without our awareness. Challenging the notion of ‘historical objectivism,’ which falsely posits that we can know history from outside it, he offers that understanding occurs rather when both the interpreter’s horizon and that which s/he seeks to understand are most fully known and articulated, an active interchange. He refers to this process as ‘placing ourselves:’ (271). Using the term horizon in the model serves as reminder that arguments function best in a similar context, when the individual’s interrelation with the historical/cultural situation horizon is fully recognized.

The Toulmin model originated in Toulmin’s desire to show that arguments are human interactions, not immutable truths based in immutable logic. His recent terminology in *Return to Reason* (2001)—‘reasonable doubt’ (19), ‘body and force’ (15)—shows that the agonistic court image still very much applies to his understanding of

argumentation. Yet he holds that our arguments are situational, our answers contingent, 'our best founded beliefs ... uncertain' (2001, 196). He voices the need for tolerance and 'intellectual democracy' (99). The visual adaptation encourages such perspectives.

The suggested visual model may be used to expand the Toulmin structure into a broader hermeneutical model. Following the feminist lead, as well as currents in the field of argumentation, the model may be used and taught as a way to think through arguments contextually and interpersonally, as well as to reflect upon how we create arguments. If our perspectives are to promote what Brockriede (1972) calls 'a bilateral relationship,' and help us see 'a person as a person,' and desire 'power parity' (5), some accompanying questions might move the arguer from the inner to the outer areas of the model where connection with other perspectives might begin:

- What elements of the field of vision and or cultural horizon effect my perceptions or perspectives?
- What elements of the perceptual fields or cultural horizon affect the ways other interested groups perceive the situation?
- Who stands to gain or lose given the perceptual field or horizon in question?
- What material conditions set my cultural or field horizons?
- Other arguers do not see what I see. What is different about their situation?
- What aspects of gender, class, race, ethnicity, etc., effect our perceptions?

Though not a complete solution to the argument-as-war problem, the model offers a fairly simple structure from which we might discuss and create arguments in a fuller manner, to help us *see* that we create arguments from within and reacting to very specific contexts that shape and structure what we perceive, that our fellows in disputation react to similar contexts, and that we may find meeting places within them. As John Berger notes in 'Ways of Seeing,' (1990), 'Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it fully credible that we are a part of the visible world' (p. 67). Perhaps our increasing awareness of that could create a process of more careful and personal argumentation.

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