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Commentary on Blair

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Commentary on: J.A. Blair's "Towards a Philosophy of Argument"

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I find this paper useful in many ways and agree with much of it, especially with Blair's application of his concepts and distinctions to current disputes in the theory of argument. Since Blair warned me that he would be unable to read his complete paper and would be presenting it with likely variations from the wording in his text, I will for the most part avoid comments discussing wording of various points. Just in case I don't have an opportunity to present my comments in full, I have also adopted the policy here of moving from broader concerns to narrower ones.

First I would like to comment on the expression "philosophy of argument." I used this expression as the title of a recent book (Govier 1999) and Blair liked it and has taken it up here. To my knowledge, this phrase was not current before I used it. Here, Blair tells us that it is appropriate to use the term "philosophy of argument" to describe his account because the account involves a sorting out, classifying, defining, and framing of central terms of issues, and that classificatory work is then offered as a basis for understanding and action. This explanation is sensible enough as far as it goes; such conceptual work is indeed characteristic of philosophy. It can be argued that such conceptual work is necessary for doing philosophy, necessary in the sense that any philosophical work that does not explicitly incorporate it can be said to presuppose it. However, this conceptual organizing is also characteristic of theory construction in subjects other than philosophy. Thus the fact that an account incorporates such work is not a sufficient reason to call it "philosophy." In constructing the title for my book, I considered 'philosophy of argument' to be a proper way of describing what has also been called 'informal logic,' 'argumentation theory,' and 'theory of argument' because of some further features of these areas of study. One such feature, and the main one in my view, is the articulation and reflective exploration of *relevant norms* and in particular, *norms of justification, evidence, reasoning, and truth*, which have traditionally been central topics in philosophy. Another is the many links between the investigations in informal logic and the theory of argument of classic philosophical themes such as induction and deduction, the clarification of meaning, the nature of assumptions, and topics in formal logic and the philosophy of language.

Secondly, I would like to discuss a segment of Blair's discussion that strikes me as somewhat unclear, but apparently plausible and interesting. Blair says that atomic arguments in his sense (or lines of argument or argumentation) can be put to any number of uses. He cites as uses conveying knowledge, altering opinions, showing one's knowledge, persuading another to adopt a policy or action, exploring for oneself the pros and cons of a given position, and resolving a conflict. These objectives, Blair says, would not have to be achieved by offering and considering argument. They could be achieved in other ways. He offers no examples at this point, so I shall take the liberty of inventing some myself. Altering someone's opinion by hypnosis would be an instance of altering it by some means other than offering him an argument. Appealing to a third party to make and enforce her decision as to the correct resolution of a conflict would count as resolving it by some means other than argument. In such cases, we might have used argument for the practical purpose, but we did not. We did something else. I accept

both Blair's point that arguments can have these various uses and his further point that argument is not strictly needed for these purposes. But here is what is confusing. Blair says that the uses he has listed may be called *intrinsic*. In seeking to explain what he means by this, he says that *what is usually wanted is that these ends be achieved by means of argument.* But who usually wants this? Why do they usually want it? Why do they want it usually, and not all the time? And if it's not a *desideratum* all the time, why is this *intrinsic*? These are the sorts of things I want to ask. Nevertheless, I think that I have some idea what Blair means here. If I am right, the theme he is alluding to is important. I think what he means is that for conveying knowledge, altering opinion, demonstrating knowledge, persuading another to act, exploring pros and cons, or resolving a conflict, argument is a *preferred mode*. But if so, we need to ask why it is preferred, and why it should it be preferred.

My answer would be that if one adopts an attitude on an argument, the proposition or action in question is supported by reasons; thus rationality is involved in the adoption of attitudes and the making of choices. One might even say that this reasoning is manifest (Johnson 2000). There is a difference between gaining a belief through hypnosis and gaining it by considering arguments for and against it and appraising the reasons and evidence for oneself (Adler 2002). There is also a difference between resolving a conflict by submitting it to a third party who can impose a solution and working out that conflict by a argumentative negotiation with the other parties involved in it. I think Blair presumes that a rationally reflective result is preferable to a result gained in some other way. If that's so, I agree, but I urge that it would be useful and interesting to clarify the account on this point.

I now shift to consider several more technical issues.

(a)   In my written version of this presentation, Blair says on page 2 that "the smallest unit of argument consists of a reason to take (that is, maintain, adopt or change) an attitude towards a proposition or towards an event or state of affairs or property, or an action of policy." This, he says, is an atomic argument. From this way of stating the matter, I gain the distinct impression that the *argument* is what in standard parlance would be called the *premise¸* though Blair does not want to say this, because he thinks a reason can be several linked premises. But perhaps "a reason to take an attitude" is a premise plus some sort of inference or mental inclination to move from the premise to something else. In any event, *a reason for X would not include X itself*. Thus it would appear that the smallest unit of argument does not include what would one would traditionally refer to as the conclusion. If R is a reason for X, then, on the usage Blair proposes, R is the argument. The argument is NOT 'R, so X.'

I find this usage confusing, the more so because Blair later seems to relate his notion of atomic argument to what others (Johnson 2000) have called the illative core of an argument, and the illative core does include premises and conclusion. My unease is only increased when Blair later states that by "atomic argument" he does not mean a premise, and reminds us that he is not presupposing that only propositions can serve as reasons. I think Blair needs to do further work here. My own preference would be for a more traditional model in which atomic arguments have one or more premises and have a conclusion, and all these are expressed in the form of propositions. I do not think that Blair's important broader position about logical, dialectical, and rhetorical aspects of argument and perspectives from which arguments can be evaluated would have to change if one were to amend his account in this way. For example, one could allow for *emotions* providing *reasons* for attitudes by recasting the content of those emotions and attitudes in the form of propositions. I suspect that Blair will not want to go this route. But he needs a more precise account of the atomic argument, the role

of propositional premises and conclusions within it, and the relationship between his account and more orthodox accounts of the illative core.

   (b) There seems to be inconsistency on another key question, which is whether the term "argument" is being used as a success term. In my version, on page 2 Blair speaks of an atomic argument as one that by itself will have made an action or attitude *more reasonable* than it otherwise would be. This way of talking requires that 'argument' be a success term. Later on the same page Blair says that considerations put forward *may be taken to be reasons or presented as reasons*, even though they do not in fact constitute reasons. When that happens, are there *arguments*? It would seem that there are not, if we follow up on the idea that the atomic argument will make an action or attitude *more reasonable*. And yet Blair soon shifts to allow that "we also identify as arguments things that are taken to make an attitude or action more reasonable *even though they do not*, and things that are offered as making an attitude or action more reasonable, although they do not." He notes with apparent approval that people speak of there being logically bad arguments, saying that the appraisal of arguments can place them on a spectrum of weak to strong. Thus his account is contradictory, on the issue of whether "argument" is a success term. I would propose that Blair stick with his second point here, allowing that when R is presented as a reason for X, an argument is offered, whether or not R really constitutes a reason for X.

   (c) Blair's account strikes me as especially fruitful and helpful in its distinction of the logic, the dialectical, and the rhetorical as three different perspectives on argument and argumentation, rather than as three distinct modes of argument. The wording of his account strikes me as painfully awkward, however, insofar as he speaks of reasons as *entailing or making plausible or probable attitudes*. I would prefer a somewhat tighter and more classic usage. If R is a reason for X and a reason that actually entails X, then R and X had better be propositions, so that we can understand and articulate what entailment amounts to in this context. Now suppose that a person P accepts R as a reason for X in the sense that he believe R to be true and understands that R entails X. Suppose that on that basis he is rationally persuaded that X is true. If one wishes to describe this shift in terms of attitudes (I myself would prefer to speak of beliefs or opinions), we can say that P has been given reason to adopt a particular attitude towards X, namely the attitude of accepting X as true. Again, I don't know whether Blair will regard this sort of re-conceptualization as a friendly amendment, but I think it could be understood as such.

   (d) For anyone who should happen to be interested, I would like to note that my own perspective on arguments and argumentation is predominantly logical with only occasional shifts into the dialectical and rhetorical.

References

Adler, Jonathan E. 2002. *Belief's Own Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

Govier, Trudy 1999. *The Philosophy of Argument* (Newport News, NJ: Vale Press).

Johnson, Ralph H. 2000. *Manifest Rationality* (Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum).