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Commentary on Goodwin

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In Response to: Jean Goodwin's *One Question, Two Answers*

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Ever since the Pythons worried about which was the right room for an argument, we've been waiting for someone to come along and design that room. This, the design theorists propose to do. Specifically, "...design theories contend that the argumentative transaction is internally self-regulating. Each arguer, to achieve her goals, tries to establish for herself and the other participants a normative environment within which their arguing can proceed." And in many respects this seems right and welcome. Argumentation theorists have grappled with the task of developing top-down theories that direct and inform good argumentation while still trying to be true to the everyday activities of arguing itself. Design theorists propose to develop theory from practice, at least in its initial stages (beyond this, once "central," "basic," or "paradigmatic" cases have been "defined," remaining cases would be accommodated).

Dialogue theories have met with mixed success, as Jean Goodwin indicates. There is a problem that many of the examples used to illustrate such theories do not involve two (or multiple-) party dialogues with any expectation of cooperation. There are also concerns that the schema derived from proposed sets of questions and responses are then applied to actual discourse with problematic results (Levi: 2000, 26). And Goodwin points to the further question of the source of the rules for the proper ways of conducting such dialogues; it is never clear in dialectical or pragma-dialectical accounts, whether those rules come from the internal agreements of participants, or some external source like a model of reasonableness. Some of these problems may yet be worked out, but the development of an alternative like that described here is important, and for more than just the reason of drawing our attention to the work of Jacobs, Kauffeld and Goodwin.

In a spirit of general support, then, I will address two features of the account. One, which concerns me, involves the nature of transaction and the remarks on cooperation. The other, which confuses me, concerns the fit between design theories and informal logic.

The merits of using "transaction" as the paradigm for the activity of arguing is that it furthers the spirit of the rhetorical tradition to study argument in the multiple contexts in which they arise. Specifically, "transaction" covers all the contexts in which a person carries out their projects: "...in a transaction a person is doing business, carrying out her projects. In specific, she is carrying out her projects within an environment whose most important features are other people." We might expect cooperation to be a feature of such an account, but Goodwin suggests otherwise: design theorists are suspicious of the claim that arguing is ideally a cooperative activity. Instead, arguers impose obligations on each other. Drawing from the work of Ehninger, Goodwin speaks of how an arguer obligates another to engage back, and in turn imposes on herself or himself obligations to argue soundly. These are internal, self-regulating, norms; not external norms like that of Grice's cooperative principle.

But one thing to wonder about here is whether the goal of argumentation should affect how we think about such norms? The pragma-dialecticians, for example, see argumentation as the resolution of disputes. In situations where both parties to the dispute recognize the goal of resolving it, cooperation seems important and rational and far from counter-intuitive. I suspect that the design theorist's response to this would be to argue that *on such occasions* the

argumentation would certainly be self-regulated in this way. What would perhaps need to be resolved is whether such occasions constitute “central” cases (and who “defines” what is “central”).

Still, there seems a deeper question of how arguers think about other people: whether they are obstacles to be negotiated around (the walking metaphor is striking here, and worrisome), or fellow agents whose views matter and whose well-being we care about. Associated with this are contrasting views of argumentation: in the one case as a tool for personal advancement, and in the other as an extension of our character and our way of being with others (hence, the concern of critical thinking theorists to foster the development of character traits).

Let us return to the definition of “transaction” given from *Webster’s*: “a communicative action or activity involving two parties or two things reciprocally affecting or influencing each other.” It strikes me that there is nothing in this definition *per se* to preclude a cooperative model. But the economic interpretation that is preferred here “requires the participant to employ strategic rationality in planning her engagement.” Thus, argumentation seems to become a tool for rational self-interest. This is, I think, the clearest difference between the two models, dialogue and design. To have two parties reciprocally affecting each other means only that they stand in relation to each other with respect to some end. This would be the context that the design theorists would have be self-regulating. But it seems that the narrower interpretation of “transaction” given here anticipates how that regulation will develop (along the lines of the economic model) and assumes that cooperation will not be central.

Much depends on how we understand “cooperation,” of course, and this is not something to be pursued at length here. It is the case that not all argumentation has participants who share a common external goal and therefore feel moved to cooperate towards that goal. On the other hand, all argumentation does involve utterances (the basic interest of the pragmatic accounts) that derive their meaning from the context, and as the participants make contributions so their utterances are constructed in light of those previous meanings. That is, the utterances of an argumentative exchange are co-constructed by the participants, not just in the obvious sense that the different parties contribute them, but in the deeper sense that each utterance contains something of the previous utterances (or is at least determined by them) and something new.

This is a deep sense of cooperation that characterizes discourse generally and argumentation specifically.

In this respect, I do think that argumentation is far more like waltzing than like walking. It is the case, as Jean Goodwin offers, that to say arguing is a dialogue is to make a strong claim, one she is not prepared to make. But the minimal cooperation of the walker as she negotiates her way through the crowd, seeking the most efficient path to her end, seems too bleak a picture to prefer and is also, I think, counter-intuitive to how arguing actually takes place. It also, as I said before, has an implication for the social value of arguing that I find problematic.

My second point concerns the fit with informal logic, and here I am more in quest of clarification than anything else. We learn at the start and close of the paper that the design theory depends on Informal Logic for procedures to assess arguments. Insofar as an obligation requires an arguer to give good reasons for a claim, IL is in the wings to provide an account of good reasons. What this means, initially, is that the argumentative situation is not entirely regulated from within. It is not just a matter of how an arguer and her other participants establish

for themselves a normative environment. At least, the norms agreed to by the participants are not sufficient to allow us to judge that the argument is “good,” or “strong,” or “cogent.” There is also the external constraint of the principles of good reason. This guards against subjectivity and assures some objective standards. But, then, the design theory will be as hard-pressed as others to show how these two aspects fit together in the assessment of an argument. And it is, after all, a theory that should “serve goals like argument assessment, not just descriptive accuracy.” An example would help, and perhaps this is provided elsewhere.

One way in which the informal logician would appear to be useful is in relation to “strategies” that the participant in an argumentative exchange uses to regulate the transaction. A design theory, we learn, should provide analyses of strategies, specifying how they should be employed. This sounds like the kinds of argument forms or schema that interest the informal logician, like appealing to authorities or arguing from analogies. But then the examples given of elucidated strategies are those of proposing and accusing, not traditionally the informal logician’s domain. So I would ask, by way of clarification, just how, specifically, the interests and procedures of the informal logician serve the project of the design theorist.

In conclusion, while I have obvious reservations about how “transaction” is being interpreted and employed in the model, I don’t see that the concept precludes a more “positive” reading. And given the current shortcomings of dialogue theories, adequately catalogued in Goodwin’s paper, the design theorists’ project is only to be welcomed and encouraged.

Reference:

Levi, Don S. 2000. *In Defense of Informal Logic*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.