May 15th, 9:00 AM - May 17th, 5:00 PM

Commentary on Gilbert

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In Response To: Michael A. Gilbert's *Agreement*

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Professor Gilbert argues that the traditional account of agreement as the normal goal of argument, or at least of interpersonal argument, is flawed since it presents "agreement" as a unitary concept. In reality, Gilbert says, "agreement" has, what I will call, both degrees and dimensions. His present paper thus expands upon remarks he made in Coalescent Argumentation, and the paper needs to be read in the context of the book, where he says,

> In order for someone to be persuaded of a proposition P, that person must change not only his/her belief states but the corresponding attitudes as well. Someone whose mind has been convinced, but does not fully believe, is liable to say something like, "I guess you're right, but I'm still having trouble with it." One can begin with either the mind or the body, but persuasion does not occur until both are synchronized.
>
> It is simply wrong for philosophers to ignore the emotional, physical, and intuitional aspects of belief, persuasion, and argumentation. (1997, 40-41)

That agreement can exist in various degrees Gilbert illustrates easily with his hierarchy running from "grudging compliance" to "consensus." Then we move beyond propositional agreement (a cognitive outcome) to what Gilbert calls "face goals" or "relational goals," such as attitudinal agreement, respect, admiration (i.e., affective outcomes). We can reasonably postulate that for any affective dimension of agreement, one could construct a similar hierarchy of degrees—such as one running from "bored willingness" to "pleasure in cooperation" to "delight." Here I suggest that we can talk of "agreement dimensions." As Gilbert puts it, "when we argue there is always a great deal more at stake than can be identified by a proposition" (2). To borrow a trope from the General Semantics movement, Gilbert is pointing out that agreement$_1$ is not agreement$_2$ is not agreement$_3$.

I agree with Gilbert that the current concept of agreement, as he outlines it, is significantly oversimplified; however, I am not familiar enough with the informal logic literature to know whether Gilbert may be disputing a straw man. Still, I want to question some of the views Gilbert asserts about how the concept should be expanded.

One of my problems with Gilbert's analysis concerns the extension of the term "interpersonal argument." Although Gilbert initially asserts that the "accepted, . . .implicit, model of agreement is far too narrow to [apply] . . . when we are studying marketplace argumentation" (1, emphasis supplied), in the remainder of the paper he seems to restrict "marketplace argumentation" to "interpersonal argument." And the more I ponder the latter term, the more I

realize that I don't comprehend its appropriate boundaries. Even consulting my favorite books on argument theory didn't help: neither Williams and Hazen (1990), nor Emmel, Resch, and Tenney (1996), nor van Eemeren, Grootendorst, and Henkemans (1996) include "interpersonal argument" in their indexes. Neither does Gilbert, although he does use the term in <u>Coalescent Argumentation</u> (139). The term troubles me because I suspect that what one can correctly assert about interpersonal agreement may not hold true for the broader set of "marketplace arguments."

A paradigm instance of "interpersonal argument" is easily found. If my wife and I argue over where to go for dinner, that would be interpersonal without question. What features are salient? It is (1) an argument between <u>two</u> individuals, (2) about a decision that affects both but has little significance outside the pair, (3) it is oral and thus synchronic, and spatially bound, (4) those involved know each other, (5) it is characterized by reciprocity of participation, and (6) the distribution of power is at least approximately equal.

Gilbert's three examples seem to match those features: two roommates disagreeing over an appointment date, two conference-goers disputing about fallacy theory over drinks, and Elaine complaining about Greg's having mocked her in public.

But surely that paradigm case represents only a portion of "interpersonal" argument. Is it necessary that "interpersonal" argument be restricted to two people? I see no reason to think that adding a third party would necessarily change the status of the argument, and in <u>Coalescent Argumentation</u>, Gilbert includes an example in which a third party resolves a disagreement by offering a ride. Must interpersonal argument be oral? In an age of e-mail, faxes, even overnight mail, one could probably carry on an interpersonal argument in writing. Thus the spatial containment isn't essential, orality isn't essential, and simultaneity isn't essential. Must the power-relations between the parties involve some sort of balance? Apparently not, since "interpersonal" arguments may occur between parent and child, between boss and employee, or between student and professor, as Gilbert illustrates with the argument between his research assistant and himself. Is the argument subject matter then crucial? That is, must an interpersonal argument involve personal content? In my paradigm case, my wife and I were arguing about which restaurant to go to. If we had been arguing about whether the U.S. should be bombing Yugoslavia, would that no longer be interpersonal?

The one feature that seems critical is reciprocal participation, playing the roles of mutual interlocutors.<u>1</u>

Having just acknowledged that I, literally, don't know what I'm talking about, let me go ahead to suggest two interpersonal argument situations that might pose difficulties for Gilbert's analysis. One may even call into question Gilbert's comment that "agreement is the ideal goal of every argumentation" (Gilbert 14), a position he deals with at some length in <u>Coalescent Argumentation</u> (chap. 10).

(1) Consider the case of playing the Devil's Advocate. In the paradigm instance, one argues against a position with which he/she agrees in order to test its strength. This I do in committee meetings in order to make sure we haven't ignored some crucial dimension of the case at hand. In Coalescent Argumentation, Gilbert points out that the ultimate goal in such a case is still to secure or perhaps strengthen agreement. But I often play a similar role in class. And there the situation is different. I may or may not be arguing a position I agree with, but the goal is to get students to become better critical thinkers, and ultimately better arguers by offering counter positions to their views. It isn't to get their agreement. In fact, I expect continued disagreement over complex moral and policy issues, but as a friend of mine puts it, though we fail to reach agreement, we may learn to fail at a higher level.

(2) Or suppose Pro and Con amicably agree to differ. Here, I'll offer a messy but real example. About a year ago, late one night at a party of English faculty and graduate students, I got into an argument with Professor Lil Brannon, a nationally prominent composition theorist, as well as a former student, and an old friend. I include this background, since it may be relevant to the "face" dimensions of the argument. Our disagreement concerned the value and importance of a famous book in composition, Lives on the Boundaries by Mike Rose. The discussion started when I remarked that I thought the book was actually a good one to teach in a first-year writing course, both because it tells the story of a famous English professor who had had to struggle in college, and because it gives moving portraits of the many non-mainstream students he has tried to teach.

Lil, however, said that the book doesn't deserve the high praise and awards it has received. When I asked why, she pointed out that although the book has been lauded as a portrait of what it means to teach "basic writers," Rose essentially ignores the role of women. Since the teaching of basic writing is actually dominated by female teachers with low pay and little support, Rose gives a seriously misleading portrait. Finally, she noted, Rose had turned the book into what nearly all male teachers create when they tell their stories: he had made it into a heroic victory narrative in which the embattled protagonist overcomes great obstacles and succeeds in his quest to save the students from the dragons of illiteracy.

That made me stop and think. I had to agree that it was a hero narrative, but I don't regard that as in itself a bad thing, even though Lil pointed out to me how traditional that stereotype is, even in the movies. I had to acknowledge that there weren't many women of significance in the book, and I found it odd now that she had pointed it out, although a number of Rose's students were females. As far as being a portrait of basic writing in the U.S., I agreed that certainly that wasn't the case, but then I had never taken the book to be such a portrait.

We went back and forth for perhaps a half hour, clarifying our positions, and questioning each other. As far as I'm concerned, this represented an excellent

argument. We operated dialectically as equals, both of us clarified and supported our points, and we made what I call mutual, which is not to say that our views coalesced.

On Gilbert's affective or "face" scale, such an exchange ranks near the top. "Both parties feel that the other party has understood and agreed with their concerns" (Gilbert 12). Yet neither of us ended up persuaded by the other, so in terms of Gilbert's hierarchy of agreement, this exchange would not even make it onto the chart. Lil and I continue to disagree over the book, but we do so at a higher level. And the next time I read it, I will do so differently.

Now perhaps Gilbert would not even consider that to be interpersonal argument. Nearly all of his examples—two in the paper and a series in his book—involve two people who are intimately connected and deliberating about a joint decision, about who shall take the car, or where to go on vacation. But Brannon and I needed to reach no decision. Our exchange resembled the interaction Gilbert describes between two argument scholars discussing fallacy theory. There Carole secures David's agreement that "every traditional informal fallacy has an instance where it is acceptable argumentation" (9). Yet she is taken aback when David continues to believe fallacy theory basically makes sense and should be used in teaching critical thinking (9). As Gilbert notes, they will probably need to continue their argument. If they do, both stand a good chance of learning something, although I doubt they will agree about the value of teaching fallacies.

That said about interpersonal argument, I am much more interested in what "agreement" means and the role it plays in other sorts of real-world or marketplace argument. In Coalescent Argumentation, Gilbert remarks in passing that "in most contexts, one is arguing with an ongoing partner" (144). My field is written argument, and that usually implies not interlocutors, but a group audience, a group whose members have diverse values, background knowledge, and epistemological presumptions. Composition teachers still tell students that the goal is to persuade the audience, not necessarily to change their minds, but at least to take the writer's position seriously. Even for auditors who already agree, we would like to strengthen their degree of adherence. Here, I concur with Blair, who noted at this conference two years ago that while all argument is "dialectic," not all argument is "dialogue," and the rules change when we have a solo arguer and a distant and unpredictable audience (1997).

So in classes on writing arguments, we spend a lot of time discussing alternate theories of audience and of how a writer might attempt to predict audience response to a text. We talk about local audiences, national audiences, specialized audiences, student audiences, teen audiences, audiences invoked, audiences addressed, and fictionalized audiences "within the text." (See Ede and Lunsford; and Porter.)

In any such case of a disparate group of auditors, what "agreement" means becomes exponentially complex, since what the arguer does to convince some auditors may fail with others, succeed partially with still others, and please

some emotionally who may not agree cognitively, while perhaps offending others.

This perhaps explains why the text I currently use with first-year students, <u>Writing Arguments</u> by Ramage and Bean, devotes two chapters (over 40 pages) to "moving your audience" (chap. 7) and "accomodating your audience" (chap 8). In such marketplace argumentation, Gilbert's analysis of degrees and dimensions of agreement seems not to fit.

Let me illustrate: two weeks ago I made an oral presentation to an audience of perhaps thirty graduate students and English professors on a neighboring campus. I criticized certain feminist metaphors for argument, metaphors seeking to conceive argument in more cooperative, less combative terms. There was significant opportunity for audience response, and I received some challenging questions about concerns left out of my analysis. Did I achieve any of Gilbert's levels of agreement, either propositional or face? I really don't know. I suspect I educated some audience members who had probably not heard of Sally Gearhart or Sonya Foss and Cindy Griffin before. And I may have provoked a few others to further thought. In my world, finally, that's what argument is mainly about—provoking dialectical thinking in groups of auditors.

As I see it most marketplace argumentation involves an audience of multiple auditors, often at some distance in space and time from the arguer, auditors who may not realistically be able to respond. Gilbert's model is both too complex and too simple for such situations.

Endnote

[1]I contacted Gilbert by e-mail about this issue, and without committing himself to any strict definition, he noted that he tended to distinguish interpersonal argument on the basis of whether a reply (an interaction) was likely. Editorials are not, in general, interpersonal for him. And he and I agreed that a triadic situation in which spokespersons for opposing views address a non-participating audience would not be interpersonal argument.

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