

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

Commentary on Reygadas & Haidar

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Gilbert, Michael, "Commentary on Reygadas & Haidar" (1999). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 105.
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In Response To: Julieta/Pedro Haidar/Reygadas's [Towards an integrated theory of argumentation](#)

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This is a very difficult paper for me to comment on for two reasons. The first reason is that Haidar and Reygadas have a monumental grasp of the vast range of literature that has come to be known as Argumentation Theory. I do not mean that they are somewhat familiar with the core material as published in the last thirty years in such places as JAJA, Informal Logic, and Philosophy and Rhetoric. No, their expertise goes well beyond that into all aspects of Linguistics, Communication Theory, Discourse Analysis, and all aspects of philosophy that impinge upon the considerations we have been undertaking. Commenting on their assessment of the details and relevant aspects of these diverse undertakings is well beyond my meagre scholarly resources. Given the choice of spending several years catching up in order to check on their statements and verify their citations or taking their word for it, I choose trust.

The second difficulty, surely a happier one, is the extent to which I agree with their conclusions. Since they come to Argumentation Theory from linguistics they are particularly sensitized to the differences occurring in diverse communications and have a deep awareness of how criteria of argument evaluation can be applied differently in various circumstances. In addition, their quite proper insistence that social status and power play a significant role in communications may well be do to their own cultural diversity. That is, in living in and coping with a culture where power positions, social status and social practice are of the utmost importance, it is not surprising that one can look at other cultures and more easily see the same process.

I want to address two main points, the first at length, the second in one paragraph. The first is their discussion throughout their paper of the integration of the dialectical and the rhetorical, the ideal and the real, the abstract and the concrete within the practice of Argumentation Theory. The second is the possibility of working out their programme given the range of diverse approaches that need to be included.

Haidar and Reygadas point out early in their paper that no matter how much we separate the dialectical and rhetorical approaches in theory, actual situations "almost never exclude the rhetoric[al] components of emotion and ethos, the persuasive strategies" (ms. p.6). They remind us (ms. p 9) that even though we focus on one aspect or use one analytical tool, that argumentation is "a real total and continuous process," which we arbitrarily slice and dice for scholarly purposes. The social psychologist focuses, because of her interest and training on, perhaps, the social dynamics of goal establishment, while the informal logician takes that same interaction, ignores the social setting and instead maps out the relationship between premisses and conclusions. Each of them models something of significance to the complete package, but each

of them must hold in their minds that it is one of a multitude of aspects that are going on simultaneously.

In reviewing the various fields and sub fields which all examine the human process called 'argumentation,' we get a sense of just how diverse they are and of how many distinct approaches exist. Of course, the almost universal drive that lies behind all this research is the fundamental belief that argumentation is a better way of maintaining civilized relations between people than any other. But argumentation, in and of itself, does not necessarily avoid strife – rather it is good argumentation that does that. Consequently, there is frequently a strong normative component in various approaches, and sometimes the normative is confused or conflated with the descriptive. Virtually every contributing field has a descriptive aspect. This is true even of what is perhaps the most normative, Critical Thinking, because the identification and layout of premisses and conclusions is, arguably, descriptive.

The problem, however, goes back to the first issue, viz., actual situations differ from theoretical ones. In fact, real argument situations are extremely idiosyncratic, as is localized language usage, which creates difficulties for both the descriptive and normative programmes. The descriptive programmes are hampered because they require some degree of uniformity in order to draw out generalities. If there is no uniformity, then what is being described that is applicable across contexts? The normative has difficulties because rules of procedure need to be consistent across different situations. This flies in the face of the simple fact that social and cultural customs differ from language group to language group. Moreover, depending on how such groups are delimited, the result can end with very small user groups and very fine distinctions. That is, the shared communication tools used by a group of language users might be uniquely instantiated by any number of sub-groups. A small group of friends or a spousal pair might use the larger group's language in such a way as to make it impossible to interpret the communication, let alone determine if it is following normative rules. (*vide*, Willard, 1976, 1989.)

Haidar and Reygadas say that we must abandon universality and recognize that "there is a big gap between ideal critical contexts and the real life contexts affected by subject's emotion, power, culture and ideology" (ms. p. 11). If we are going to apply standards of rationality, then we need to know what they mean. "In everyday life discussion what is valid somewhere is not always valid everywhere" (ms. p. 14). This means that we need to examine the actual situation much more closely by understanding not only the linguistic conventions currently in play, but also the logical and social as well. Universalizing from the familiar or the local does not always result in legitimate normative ideals. Grice (1975), for example, has as one of his rules of conversation that one ought not provide more information than is needed to answer a question or make a response. Yet there are cultures in which saying the minimum is considered curt, and conversational contributions trimmed to contain only what is necessary to answer the question would be misunderstood as well as being thought rude.

Yet the question must be asked, Can we usefully work in a field where we have come to believe that universalizing will not work, and that every situation we want to study might have characteristics that make it unique? I believe the answer is, yes, but it will not be easy. The undertaking requires the humanizing of Argumentation Theory so that it inevitably includes the uniqueness inherent in human activity. So, whatever criteria we develop must be seen as flexible and variable depending on the context: Rationality is not universal, it is situational. It is situational rationality that we use when we make decisions, even if lurking somewhere behind there is a generalized sense of criteria we could agree to share. Thus, as Haidar & Reygadas and Gilbert (1997) allow, the R-S-A, relevance-sufficiency-acceptability criteria may well serve useful ends, but it cannot be applied without paying attention to the details of the situation. In *Coalescent Argumentation*, I provide an example (p. 97) which illustrates that several people can use totally different levels of evidence to accept or reject the injunction to avoid the sun depending on who they are, and what are their goals, needs, desire and motives.

Somewhere Willard writes about the everyday rationality that gets us up, out of the house, and to the colloquium on time. We make constant decisions, resolve hundreds of issues, and cleverly choose the best alternative. When we argue a lot of this becomes public, and when there is disagreement there are challenges and defenses. It is then that we require situational rationality to be studied. There is nothing wrong with saying that a response must be relevant, just in how that relevance manifests itself. Eavesdropping on a culture that relies, say, heavily on story-telling, that relevance might be elusive to some. That does not mean it is not there.

The second question I raised is, given the huge diversity of approaches, can we foresee a common Argumentation Theory that incorporates either bits and pieces or whole theoretical frameworks into a totality? The answer is, I do not know. I have certainly, over the twenty-odd years that I have been pondering these issues, seen a degree of integration and cross fertilization between a number of fields. The conferences we attend that are at the core of Argumentation Theory are highly inter-disciplinary, but I feel there is still a long way to go. In particular, the tension between the disciplines that want to tell us how we *ought* do something and those that tell how we *do* something is extreme. The gap between universalizing and contextualizing must somehow be bridged.

There is more. An integrated Argumentation Theory not only requires training in a diversity of disciplines, but an ability to integrate all that material into a comprehensive approach. It is actually interesting to imagine a graduate programme dedicated to Argumentation Theory and consider what resources would be included from various independent disciplines. It's not at all clear to me that one could do so without requiring all the background one now needs to do Linguistics, Communication Theory, Social Psychology, Philosophy, and what have you. Could such a programme be designed? What would be the result? Would we have experts in ADR? Researchers in Argumentation

Theory? Rivalries between quantitative and normative outlooks? Because we must, of course, remember that the mere fact that a number of approaches fall under a common rubric such as Psychology or Economics in no way means that they are not at each other's throats!

The possibilities of programme design are unlimited, but I will not pursue them now. For now it suffices to join Haidar and Reygadas in urging researchers to look further than the limits of their specialties and to aim at an inclusion and integration that may move the field forward in creative ways.

References

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