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Some practical values of argumentation

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I identify two sets of practical values of argumentation from a standpoint that places a premium on maximal participatory democracy. The first set includes pedagogical values for both teachers and learners. The second set of values are transformative and include: facilitating openness as both tolerance and opportunity; facilitating understanding of one's own positions, other's positions, and the conceptual frameworks underlying them; and, finally, fostering motivation by encouraging action.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, audience, bias, conceptual framework, democracy, dialogism, pedagogy

1. INTRODUCTION

Like any other theoretical or practical view, argumentation theory is preconditioned by various structural assumptions, commitments, and values, whether these are made explicit or even recognized by the theorist herself (Warren, 1988; Haraway, 2004; Nagel, 1986; Gadamer, 1989; Hamblin, 1970, pp. 242-244). Although, of course, when they are not, it can be tricky to identify what exactly those assumptions are. In this paper, I work from a standpoint valuing maximal participatory democracy to argue for two sets of practical values of argumentation theory and practice; namely, pedagogical and transformative values. I shall begin by situating my approach within a maximally democratic framework and identifying an obligation to try to reason and/or argue better that might help us appreciate argumentation that engenders values important for maximal participatory democracy.

2. SITUATING MY APPROACH

I begin the task of identifying some practical values of argumentation from a standpoint valuing maximal participatory democracy. This means I share in common with Paul J. Weithman (2000) the assumption that "'democratic' is a degree concept and that political processes can be more or less democratic" (p. 67). The extent of a democracy's "democracy" depends on the manner by which it demonstrates and combines "democracy-conducting features" (ibid.). Whatever this set of features might be, I believe that it would, at the very least, include some minimal degree of collective decision-making under what Trudy Govier (1999) calls

conditions of uncertainty. The viewpoints stemming from this uncertainty should be viewed in contradistinction to abstract independent standards of political judgment. In most cases, the genealogy of a given political viewpoint is, at its core, a collaborative effort. And attempts to bracket out the contingencies therein by ontologizing one's beliefs (and values) as indefeasible cannot operate and have no home within a democratic framework valuing maximum participation. In short, we can say that claims or projects that offer "value-neutral, ahistorical, or noncontextual objectivity" (Warren, 1988, p. 39) would be incompatible with a maximally democratic framework.

For her part, however, Govier simply takes democracy to mean a society filled with disagreements that affect all citizens and must be explored and resolved reasonably without appeals to deductive certainty. Of course, I agree with Govier on this point. But I further believe that a *maximally* democratic society could be described in Van Parijs' terms as a "society that subjects everything to collective decision-making and gives each of its members an equal power in the decision it takes" (as cited in Howard, 2002, p. 28). Thus "maximally democratic" also means "maximally participatory." This view assumes that maximum participation is a good thing. A maximal participatory democracy is, however, presented here as an ideal. Although I am not suggesting any concrete ways to move society closer to it, I will identify a variety of practical values of argumentation that can be supplemented for varying degrees of participatory democracies. If I am right, this undertaking carries with it potential to direct us toward and make explicit the more transformative powers of argumentation theory.

With these preliminary insights in mind, I now turn to the task of identifying the practical values of argumentation. My point of departure for doing this entails a reinterpretation of J. Anthony Blair's (1981) thesis that we have a moral obligation to try to reason well. This will help clarify later on what exactly I take to be the practical values of argumentation, and why we ought to engage in and appreciate argumentation that facilitates these values.

3. THE OBLIGATION TO TRY TO REASON AND/OR ARGUE BETTER (AND MORE OFTEN)

Blair (2012a) claims that for moral reasons we all ought to, *pro tanto*, try to conduct ourselves reasonably, and as often as possible.¹ Stated more formally, his argument runs as follows:

P1: If in general we have a moral obligation to [try to] do something, then we have a moral obligation to [try to] do whatever else is necessary in order to do the first thing. If we have moral reasons to realize the end, then we have moral reasons to realize the necessary means to that end.

P2: We have a moral obligation to [try to] avoid false beliefs and to pursue true beliefs.

¹ Blair (2012c) says in a postscript that he should "more consistently have written of the obligation to *try to* reason well," because "it is too morally demanding" otherwise (p. 33). I have thus added "try to" to the phrasing of the obligation.

P3: Being able to reason well is necessary as a means of ascertaining true and false beliefs.

C: We have a moral obligation to [try to] reason well. (p. 7)

At the time this article was written, Blair took “argumentation skills as more or less identical to skills in critical thinking” (2012c, p. 2). However, Blair has since argued that informal logic—which focuses on “teaching the analysis and critique of arguments” by teaching “methods of argument analysis and evaluation other than formal logic”—cannot be taken as equivalent with critical thinking, because it is “one aspect of the theory and practice of argument management; and argument management is one element of critical thinking” (2012b, p. 50). Consequently, some of the skills involved in reasoning well seem to, at least in part, be involved in and can possibly be developed through argumentation.

Now, Blair’s (2012a) second premise expresses the basic assumption that beliefs can be true or false. On this view, reasoning poorly might mean attaining false beliefs (and potentially risking harm to others) while reasoning well means attaining true ones (and *benefiting* ourselves and others) (p. 8). If, however, we view the matter from a standpoint that appreciates maximal participatory democracy as described above, then our treatment of truth with respect to political life (and the uncertainties therein) might be different too. We may place a premium on the movement to better beliefs from worse ones, rather than in the dichotomous lens of either true or false. I prefer this for practical reasons: maximal participation is more effective if we can appeal to what we find best to believe in given particular circumstances rather than appealing to the truth and shutting down the communicative process. From this basis, I contend that we can understand the obligation differently; namely, as a moral obligation to try to reason and/or argue better (and to do so more often).

There are other reasons for why we have an obligation to try to reason and/or argue better. The first is socio-political. Our lives, for the most part, are media saturated and occur within inescapably social contexts at the ontological level. At our core, we are what Johnson and Blair (2006) call “consumers of beliefs of values” who are always encountering new information and the beliefs of others, and many of these are different from or conflict with our own (pp. 1; xi).

Moreover, our lives occur *as* fundamentally social. For this reason, our consumption of beliefs and values through the statements and arguments of others should be viewed as an active process, which, based on Tindale’s (2004; 2009) view, we can potentially engage in to varying degrees. To this end, Tindale posits that “[i]t seems a fundamental feature of our social beings that we are ‘in audience’” (2009). “We always have the standpoint of an audience,” he continues,

of what the experience of an audience feels like; this is our primary relationship to argumentation, our entry into it. Individually, and in the groups to which we belong or to which speakers assume we belong, we have this potential. We are constantly open to being addressed. We are able to learn to be arguers, to engage in argumentation from this perspective, because we have first been audiences, and engaged from that perspective. Thus, audience as a way of being is fundamental to argumentation as a social phenomenon. (p. 47)

‘Being in audience,’ then, is an essential aspect of our being in the world, and we can always “have the perspective of an audience and hence understand what it can mean to be addressed by any particular discourse,” even if we are not part of an arguer’s intended audience (2004, p. 152). A simple example should suffice to make this point clear: today we have access to historical texts of authors who wrote so long ago that they could not have anticipated (to any meaningful extent) the sort of horizons of meaning that various twenty-first century readers would have upon encountering their texts, but—and this important—we can nonetheless appreciate those texts from an audience’s perspective.

This experience of being in audience, says Tindale (2009), is in part captured by Bakhtin’s notion of ‘addressivity,’ which

refers to the ways in which words used in utterances, in their very structure, both address and anticipate a response. Utterances are not isolated components of discourse, woven together to form a coherent whole; they are essentially dialogical in nature, the utterance captures both the utterer and the audience insofar as the audience’s expectations, interpretation and response condition the development of the utterance and ensuing speech. Transferring this understanding of utterance to the genre of argumentation, we must see this dialogical character fixing the audience as a primary contributory source of the argumentation... Understanding any argumentation, including the intentions involved, must begin as much with the audience as the arguer. (pp. 47-48)

For Bakhtin and Tindale, then, context is necessarily central to argumentation (in terms of both its construction and evaluation), so are the arguer and her arguments, as well as the audience and its responses.

As a result, dialogism emerges as a central feature of this conception of argumentation with respect to argument, evaluation and acceptance. Since arguments are co-developed as arguers compensate for the “expectations, interpretation, and responses” of audiences, the sorts of objections considered and the requisite responses offered by arguers are determined by the ever present demands of context, which, above all, fundamentally includes the audience and its perspective (and the horizon of meaning underlying that perspective) on the matter at hand.² Thus, with Tindale, we see that our fundamental way of being is such that

² Govier’s (1999) so-called “Noninteractive Audience” is incompatible with the idea of an active audience as part of the context of argumentation. She conceptualizes the noninteractive audience as “the [massive] audience that can’t interact with the arguer, and whose [most likely heterogeneous] views are not known to him or her” (p. 183), for example, “the audience for many arguments presented in the mass media” (p. 189). When dealing with the view that there are cases where mass audiences can “talk back,” Govier firmly holds that the audience “cannot respond while the argument is being developed, so their challenges and questions of meaning do not affect the final product” (p. 200n13).

While I might be accused of taking Govier too literally here, her description of an argument as a static “product”—with emphasis on the finality of its completion—reveals and effectively captures the difference between her and Tindale’s (2004) understanding of the active audience located in a rhetorical approach to argumentation, which, for his part, treats argument as a *process*. So to use Govier’s Noninteractive Audience to undercut the notion of addressivity would be rather dubious because, quite frankly, Govier and Tindale are talking about argument in two completely different ways. When treated as a process, arguments can evolve and adapt to changing information about the

we always already have the potential to engage in reasoning and argumentation. And I add that if we are to continue living with each other, we then need to reason and argue better.

Moreover, when it comes to judging someone as reasoning well/badly, the way of reasoning is not *inherently* erroneous. According to Douglas Walton (1995), a particular sort of reasoning might be okay given certain contexts (pp. 14-18). Reasoning is contextual and judgments of an argument's goodness are dependent on (relevant) context. Let us consider this observation in conjunction with another: Even when we brush aside beliefs or views we encounter but do not care enough to think about at all, we tacitly endorse them. This seemingly passive acceptance is actually a bare minimum of actively reasoning: we can't help but reason to some extent. Given this, and since the quality of arguments are context dependent, we can reason differently than we have before, or how we are inclined to do so. We can, then, understand reasoning in terms of better or worse (on a scale of varying degrees of better and worse). And insofar as arguing is an activity we can understand them in terms of better or worse as well.

What this amounts to, at the very least, is that we're responsible for how well we reason and we're accountable to others who can challenge us when we express our beliefs. Whether we like it or not, we are confronted with information that needs to be adequately dealt with, and in light of rejecting the essentialist qualities of arguments (i.e., their inherent goodness or badness), we can say that we are responsible for trying to reason and/or argue well (understood as better); as such, we ought to try to do this.

I will now turn to the task of identifying possible pedagogical and transformative values of argumentation that might help us with trying to reason and/or argue better.

4. PRACTICAL VALUES OF ARGUMENTATION

4.1 Pedagogical values

Argumentation can be practically valuable for the teaching and learning of argumentation evaluation and construction, as well as cultivating the various critical thinking skills and dispositions associated with these. And, based on what was established in the previous section, I submit that learning is especially valuable when these skills and dispositions are taught in a dialogical manner.

To this end, let us return to Blair (2012) and unpack what he identifies as an obligation for teachers of reasoning and argumentation to acquire, which includes "as sound an understanding of reasoning and argument as possible" (p. 2) as it follows from the foregoing obligation to try to reason well. In doing so, we can

views and values (or *cognitive environment*) of the audience, as well as the surrounding details of why the audience does or does not accept the argument regardless of whether overt engagement in dialogue (in the colloquial sense of the term) has occurred. The scope of a "process argument" is not as narrowly circumscribed as the scope of a "product argument," which would seem on Govier's view to be complete once it has left the hands of the arguer and is taken up by the mass audience.

bracket his uncontroversial claim that teachers of reasoning and argument ought to be knowledgeable. My concern, however, is that in striving to acquire “as sound an understanding as possible” teachers run the risk of attaining too narrow a view of reasoning and argument. By this I mean that mining information for the sole purpose of building a grand view about reasoning and argument could put one at risk for developing a monological lens and a correspondingly myopic approach to the topics at issue.

We should recognize that attaining “as sound an understanding as possible” admits of many different pedagogical approaches and should include learning from the students that one teaches. Teaching good argumentation and reasoning skills should not amount to Freire’s (1970) oft-cited “banking concept of education,” which consists of “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” (p. 72). Naturally this pedagogical approach would be far too monological for our liking. I do not mean to suggest that this is what Blair implies with his claim. I am simply offering a word of caution and want to emphasize that there is a certain quality of argumentation that is most valuable with respect to engaging students in the evaluation and construction of argumentation.

A dialogical style of teaching and learning can go a long way toward facilitating an understanding of oneself, others, better ways of being sensitive to the context of argumentation, and, as a result, the evaluation and construction of argumentation, and point to how these aspects are best learned and taught. Indeed, through a dialogical and cooperative teaching style teachers and learners can better develop what Warren (1988) identifies as important outcomes of teaching and learning, namely that “teacher’s/learner’s...eventually come to recognize their own conceptual frameworks, see alternative conceptual frameworks, and where possible, conduct discussions across conceptual frameworks” (p. 40). These are helpful character-building practices that educators should try to engage in better and naturally find a home in dialogical argumentation theory.

The pedagogical values examined so far may seem like nothing more than values of argumentation *practice*. But the practices developed and promoted through theory are not isolated from that theory in a way that make it any less valuable than the practices themselves. More specifically, there is, for example, great value to taking a meta-view toward the practice of argumentation by understanding the theory supporting the practice. A teacher’s understanding of the constitutive components of a dialogical argumentation theory, or simply the rationale underpinning dialogism, could no doubt contribute to her understanding and appreciation of the practice in a way that enhances the quality of her teaching and the skills involved, all the while fostering an appreciation for these practices in her students. Furthermore, dialogical teaching styles can aid teachers and learners alike in developing the dispositions involved in reasoning and arguing better. In short, argumentation theory is most valuable when it is involved in the process of promoting dialogism inside and outside of the classroom.

4.2. *Transformative values*

The next set of practical values to explore is the “transformative,” which include (1)

openness (understood in terms of both tolerance and opportunity), (2) understanding, and (3) motivation. Values (2) and (3) presuppose openness. Taken together, these values are understood as transformative in the sense that they serve as a precondition for social change.

I understand *openness* in two senses. In the first sense, openness is tolerance of other views and differently minded people from the perspective of oneself and likeminded individuals. In the second sense, the experience of openness is opportunity for engagement in discourse from the perspective of the Other. These two senses are not so clearly demarcated so as to exclude the possibility that at one and the same time I can be open in the sense of tolerating other viewpoints while also experiencing the opportunity to engage in dialogical argumentation.

My understanding of tolerance follows Warren's (1988) definition: "being receptive ('open') to points of view different than one's own on a given topic or issue" (p. 37). "It is difficult," she says, "if not impossible to consider seriously other points of view than one's own if one is not aware that there *are* other points of views" (ibid.). In other words, ignorance begets ignorance. I take this claim to be relatively uncontroversial but useful for illustrating the benefits of tolerance.

Now, tolerance of viewpoints that conflict with one's own, or those of one's society, plant the seeds for social transformation. No doubt there is always resistance and conflict to different viewpoints, and this is not to say that status quo views necessarily require change. Rather, an attitude of tolerance for other voices (and otherwise muted voices) provides us with valuable content to learn and even deliberate about. If, however, we believe that society should value uniformity and so close our collective mind off from different and even subversive voices, we risk forcing others to, for example, remain quiet about their suffering if they are suffering—and even whether or not we would come to find their claims for attention, understanding and/or action legitimate. A few choice words by Richard Rorty (1991) help describe the more salient aspects of this phenomenon. We are contingent on our acculturation, which

is what makes certain options *live*, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional. We can only hope to transcend our acculturation if our culture contains (or thanks to disruptions from outside or internal revolt, comes to contain) splits which supply footholds for new initiatives. Without such splits—without tensions which make people listen to unfamiliar ideas in the hope of finding means of overcoming those tensions—there is no such hope...So our best chance for transcending our acculturation is to be brought up in a culture which prides itself on *not* being monolithic—on its tolerance for a plurality of subcultures and its willingness to listen to neighbouring cultures. (pp. 13-14)

To put the matter in Kantian parlance: tolerance preconditions the possibility for meaningful and maximally democratic change.

However, tolerance is not without its limits. As Carl Sagan (1996) memorably put it, "[k]eeping an open mind is a virtue—but...not so open that your brains spill out" (p. 187).³ To this end, Warren (1988) has some worthwhile advice to offer us:

³ Sagan (1996) credits this quip to space engineer James Oberg (p. 187).

“[T]he extent of one’s willingness and ability to be openminded about issues is,” she says, “significantly affected by the conceptual framework out of which it operates. *Openmindedness is a disposition that persons do or do not exercise within a given conceptual framework.* This is the *essentially contextual* nature of openmindedness: it is always exercised from within a (some) conceptual framework” wherein “certain positions, claims or points of view may be viewed as *undeserving* of serious and equal consideration” [author’s emphasis, *et passim*] (pp. 37-38). Warren’s justification for these claims will become clearer once we investigate her distinction between two types of bias.

Warren distinguishes between bias that generally manifests within a particular conceptual framework through false claims or “conceptually flawed distinctions,” and bias in the sense of inescapable partiality, a feature of any putative conceptual framework (p. 39). As a result of bias in the latter sense, “claims *from within* a given conceptual framework [are] resistant to certain new evidence (especially logically incompatible evidence)” (ibid.). This is not, however, indicative of closed-mindedness *per se*. A conceptual framework with the latter sense of bias will find certain claims to be “*logically incompatible* with the basic and defining assumptions of the...conceptual framework, and so cannot consistently be added to it” (p. 38). For instance, any claim to the innate inferiority of women to men—a claim that “makes sense” within a patriarchal framework—is logically inconsistent with the most basic assumptions of a feminist conceptual framework, which cannot tolerate the claim at all.⁴

Not all biases are bad nor are they created equal. For example, the “facts” of a patriarchal conceptual framework are established on the basis of not taking into account what the feminist one does. More clearly, certain underlying beliefs and assumptions on the patriarchal framework are not shared by the feminist framework, because the latter has a meta-position whereby it can evaluate and challenge the assumptions and beliefs of the patriarchal framework instead of just assuming them. Such a framework precludes uncritically accepted assumptions of the patriarchal framework from becoming structural features of it. And, consequently, at work in the feminist framework is “a better bias...because it is *more inclusive* [that is, tolerant of other’s realities] *and less partial*” than the patriarchal framework, which “is *more partial because less inclusive*” (pp. 38-39).

In addition to tolerance, I understand “openness” in terms of opportunity. Opportunity constitutes the experience of the tolerated individual(s) entering into dialogue with those tolerating her/them. But with respect to argumentation, the tolerated individual(s) may enter as either the arguer or the audience. Someone whose otherwise muted voice was tolerated by others, for example, can then

⁴ The discussion of tolerance suggests that we can (and it is important to) escape the influence of our basic assumptions. Of course, this may seem strange since these assumptions have been described earlier as the lenses through which information and our experiences make sense. Toleration of other points of view may be precluded by certain conceptual frameworks, but this does not necessarily mean that the subjects of those frameworks cannot develop different, better frameworks. Some avenues to explore for how this might be accomplished include Warren’s suggestion of “revolution” over “reform” (1988, p. 36), and Gadamer’s (1989) idea of the “fusion of horizons” of meaning.

become visible as an arguer. So an argumentation theory that can facilitate tolerance as understood above is practically valuable for helping to make it possible for individuals who would otherwise be closed off from dialogue to have an opportunity to enter into it.

While tolerance can help individuals achieve participatory status as arguers, it can also help them achieve the status of active audience members. But this claim needs to be qualified further, for as we saw above, a fundamental feature of our existence is that we can *always already* take the perspective of audience. For this reason, what amounts to “achieving the status of active audience members” is that the role of those individuals as an active audience *matters* and is, in turn, broadened in scope. In other words, they can have greater *opportunity* to engage in the dialogic process of argumentation. Thus engaging in argumentation requires us to broaden the scope of our discussions by acknowledging that suppressed viewpoints should be heard and could be catalysts for transformative and substantive change (socio-politically speaking).

The next transformative value I will discuss is encouraging *understanding*, which I take to be a practical transformative value of argumentation because understanding, generally speaking, is often required for individuals to work together toward common ends, strengthen their own positions, evaluate other’s arguments better, and construct one’s own arguments better. That said, understanding itself is a textured concept, and we need to approach it needs to be approached at a deeper level.

To help us do that, I turn to Catherine Hundleby (2010) who maintains that argument should “function with epistemic goals in view” (p. 303). Drawing on the work of Phyllis Rooney, she claims that argument should be more of a “joint venture of knowledge seeking” than oppositional, “reasoning with” rather than “arguing against” (p. 302). On this view, it seems that argumentation that encourages participants to cooperatively resolve differences of opinion and learn together what the best answer to a dispute may be—thereby strengthening positions on the matter—is practically valuable. Now, so far as understanding is concerned, Hundleby sees it emphasized in the work of Walton (1995) who considers “the employment of argumentative discourse to develop one’s own understanding, a purpose that he describes as *maieutic*” (p. 303). In the passage cited by Hundleby, Walton also claims that “in many cases a critical discussion can be very valuable and informative even though a definitive resolution of the conflict is not achieved...[It can have, in part,] the benefit...of increased understanding of the argumentation behind the opponent’s point of view” (Walton 1995, pp. 102-103). Even when conflicts are not cooperatively *resolved*, that is, even if there is a “loser” or no one “wins” the argument (in the traditional oppositional sense of these terms), then we might come to understand our interlocutor(s) better. An argumentation theory that fosters this sort of attitude to approaching argumentative exchange can be, no doubt, all the more practically valuable.

Hundleby (2010) further remarks that, according to Walton, the maieutic function of argumentation is, unfortunately, “secondary to the goal of persuasion” (p. 303). Moreover, Walton (1995) is uncertain about “whether this maieutic function leads to knowledge or only to a kind of insight or increased understanding

of one's own personal views and commitments" (p. 103). Interestingly, though, the latter possibility he identifies might "be a very important kind of benefit or advance that could prepare the way for knowledge. The advance here could be described as a kind of negative clearing away of prejudices, bias, dogmatic preconceptions, fallacies, and so forth that removes important impediments to the advancement of knowledge" (ibid.). Thus, not only might it be possible to understand others better through argumentative exchange, we might also come to better understand our own points of view. Whether it is a better understanding of the other's position or one's own that is gained (or even both), that understanding is made possible by a deeper understanding of the beliefs and assumptions (i.e. biases) that condition those positions. Recognizing these undergirding factors would go a long way toward developing the sort of visibility of one another's conceptual frameworks advocated by Warren that we came to appreciate above as valuable for teachers and learners above.

Furthermore, as arguers and addressees, understanding in the ways just outlined can be valuable for argument evaluation and construction. If we understand our own positions better, and in turn what underlies those positions themselves, as well as others' positions and the beliefs underlying them, then we understand more of the argumentative context in which they arise. Greater contextual understanding is something that aids our ability to more easily and better evaluate and construct arguments. In the former case, it aids our decision-making in determining whether we will accept (or reject) the argument(s) that we are engaged in. As for the latter case, it cultivates a sensitivity to the sorts of expectations, interpretations, and responses of audiences. Of course, in keeping with the views described above, I must emphasize that evaluation and construction are taken here as part and parcel of the same (dialogical) process of argumentation. Understanding, then, goes hand-in-hand with openness and one cannot be properly implemented without the other.

The final transformative value is the facilitation of *motivation*. I identify it as transformative because it may assist agents in their deliberative processes and bolster their movements to action. An argumentation theory that fosters tolerance and understanding—both practical transformative values themselves—might, for instance, be involved in affecting our attitudes toward others and move us to treat others better, or even provide us with expanded and new content to inform whatever it may be that we are deliberating about (or simply increase the scope of matters to deliberate about). These can all potentially be involved in motivating action, and better action, which we are generally obligated to try to do.

In sum, openness and understanding yield a normative thrust which can encourage motivation. One hopes that it is not too naively optimistic to think that these three ingredients, when taken together, can potentially coalesce to form a push toward positive social change.

5. CONCLUSION

After situating my approach to derive some possible practical values of argumentation theory and practice within a maximal democratic framework, I tried

to illustrate a compatible moral obligation to try to reason and/or argue better, which can help us more fully appreciate argumentation that facilitates certain practical values that flow from it. From this basis, I identified a variety of pedagogical and transformative values of argumentation theory and practice that could be useful for societies that value the maximal participation of its citizens.

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