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Charlotte Jørgensen

University of Copenhagen, Department of Media, Cognition, and Communication, Rhetoric Section

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Commentary on: Moira Kloster's "The virtue of restraint – rebalancing power in arguments"

CHARLOTTE JØRGENSEN

*Department of Media, Cognition, and Communication, Rhetoric Section
University of Copenhagen
Njalsgade 80, DK-2300 Copenhagen S
Denmark
chl@hum.ku.dk*

In her paper about power relations between participants in argumentative interactions, Professor Kloster addresses an issue that is immensely important and relevant to the study and practice of argumentation. Imbalances of power between arguers often explain why argumentative exchanges go wrong and create conditions that are counterproductive to good argumentation. I also appreciate the normative approach evidenced in the aim: "to remedy improper uses of power" (p. 9). At the same time, Kloster's way of approaching power from her logical view of argumentation is somewhat alien to my rhetorical way of thinking. As commentator, let me at once add that I am not acquainted with the fields of inquiry and the literature that the paper refers to and proceeds from. Being in a position where I – to use the terminology of the paper – need to be 'leveled up', the comments have the character of questions rather than expert comments on the paper's own terms.

In the first sections of her paper, Kloster suggests that argumentation theory may reach valuable insights by turning to negotiation theory, which is described as "years ahead" of argumentation when it comes to investigating power relations between parties involved in the interaction (p. 2). The introduction to this line of inquiry on the following pages is informative and illuminative, and Kloster convincingly gets the message across that looking at negotiations may yield fruitful insights about argumentation in general. However, in the comparison between negotiation and argumentation I encounter a need for clarification. It strikes me the two terms in the comparison are not on par. Negotiation is defined as a practice or kind of discourse "which may include argumentation and may rely on reason". The word 'argumentation' here must be understood as referring to a broad notion on a higher level of abstraction than 'negotiation'. But if negotiation is a practice subsumed under argumentation, how can they at the same time be compared as two parallel kinds of practice? Is Kloster saying that negotiation and argumentation overlap? Or does she, in using the comparison, imply a certain type of argumentative practice? (Cf. Walton, 1992, p. 95) It seems to me that the latter is the case and that the specific kind of argumentation in the comparison is indicated by the term "rational persuasion". What in turn this expression refers to is indicated by the description of argumentation as "the practice of presenting, evaluating, and revising arguments with the aim of assenting only to conclusions which have been adequately supported" (p. 2).

My own paper for this conference concerns the relations and interplay between rhetoric, dialectic, and logic. Having this in the back of my mind while preparing the commentary, I was inclined to consider the paper in this perspective. In this connection, Kloster's paper exemplifies the fact that investigations within these fields of course do not exclude integration of other research traditions, in this case negotiation theory and feminist studies. Apart from this, how does her paper fit in within the three traditional fields of argumentation? Firstly, Kloster repeatedly identifies herself as a logician, underscoring for instance that her purpose is not a question of "abandoning the standards of logical reasoning" (p. 9), referring to *informal logic*, I assume. Secondly, her paper incorporates approaches associated with the *dialectical* tradition by focusing on turn-taking communicative situations. Thirdly, the paper includes some elements that point in the direction of *rhetoric*, for instance the term 'persuasion' to identify the aim of arguing. When it comes to the legitimacy of persuasive appeals, the picture becomes blurred: On the one hand, Kloster seemingly maintains a traditional logical view that privileges rational appeals and reject emotional appeals; on the other hand, her proposal to make room for narratives in argumentative settings may be seen as an opening towards the acceptability of *ethos* and *pathos*.

In this connection, I have some reservations concerning the concept of *rational* argumentation. 'Rational persuasion' may sound like a *contradiction in terms*, and it seems unclear whether Kloster uses the notion of *rationality* in a narrow or broad sense? At the outset of the paper, she distances herself from "rational argument" – or worse, "the rationalist model of [...] logical reasoning" – identifying it with "a masculine, westernized ideal of objective reasoning" and norms and privileges enjoyed by especially well-educated and well-off white males (p.1). However, the paper on the whole leaves the reader with the impression that she carries this rather restricted rational norm with her in the baggage. If we understand rationality in the broader sense of *reasonableness* and rephrase the ideal of argumentation as 'reasonable persuasion', this would be a significant improvement from my point of view (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969; Toulmin, 2001).

Another question relates to theories of *consensus* vs. *dissensus*. That Kloster identifies with the consensus view is evidenced several times in the paper; for instance, she describes the goal of argumentation as "the successful resolution of a disagreement" (p. 6). On the other hand, the inclusion of negotiation theory presents a move towards the acceptability of reasonable disagreement, a move that I welcome.

The final comments concern the issue of the so-called *status quo fallacy*. It is described as "power-blindness" consisting in a "comfortable ignorance, on the part of those who fit the current norms, of the difficulties faced by those who are disadvantaged." The fallacy is committed, explains Kloster, when privileged communicators "assume that everyone can read, [...] get a job", etc. This reminded me of the anecdote about the judge who reproached the poor, starving thief, saying: When I go home from work, I am hungry too, but I don't steal! Now, is this really a fallacy? I agree that such examples reveal lacking social and communicative skills as well as empathy in general, but find that categorizing them as a fallacy is stretching the notion of fallacy too far.

I fail to see the *status quo* power-blindness as a fallacy because, to my way of thinking, this term is closely related to *how* one argues and should not be extended to one's conceptions of *who* one argues with, or to other factors that surround the argumentative interaction. Thus, I cannot follow Kloster when she insists that they should be treated as "a problem in the argument itself: the use of premises which are either not acceptable or not sufficient to establish the conclusion." (p. 8) Moreover, I cannot see how this is demonstrated in the paper. Most of the examples concern discourse that seeks to prepare participants to enter argumentation by equalizing them. Nowhere in the paper does Kloster provide examples that show how ignorance of power-imbalances between the parties appears in the arguments themselves, or that such ignorance can be used abusively in premises, which are unacceptable or insufficient to establish the conclusion.

However, this objection does not mean that I am blind to the problem of power-blindness. Kloster is right in drawing attention to it. As I read the paper, the kind of discursive practice that she is concerned with is argumentation in *educational* contexts, typically problems that arise in classroom settings. In turn, the main point, as I understand it, is that in various situations of this educational kind one must face the problem that the differences in powers may be too many and too big for argument even to get started. In such cases one must of course do something to equalize power. To ignore imbalances, projecting one's own competences and norms onto those who do not share them, is indeed counterproductive.

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