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Commentary on: Henrique Jales Ribeiro’s “What argumentation (theory) can do for philosophy in the 21st century”

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the remarkable features of the Toulmin and Perelman projects is the coincidence involved: that two philosophically-trained scholars, without any awareness of the other’s existence, should make similar observations of the inability of traditional philosophical logic to provide an adequate conception of argument and reclaim a tradition of argumentation with roots back in Aristotle. Professor Ribeiro’s insightful paper takes us back to that “fateful” moment, to that crossroads in the development of reasoning studies, and lays stress on the revolutionary nature of what occurred there.

As an audience for this discussion, we are sympathetic, even receptive. But this itself is a sign of how much has changed. Neither Toulmin nor Perelman were rhetorically successful, if we are to measure such success in terms of how their intended audiences responded to their argumentation. One was met by claims of betrayal (Toulmin, 2003, p. viii); the other by confusion at best and silence at worst (See Tindale, 2010). It is the newly, and loosely, formed cohort of argumentation theorists who welcome this historical turn. The response of philosophers is still less clear. And that, of course, is what interests Professor Ribeiro. In particular, he raises at least one key observation and two related questions. The observation is that the field has developed from one of multidisciplinarity to one of interdisciplinarity. The questions, then, are (1) what is the interdisciplinary nature of argumentation theory? And, (2) where does philosophy fit? Let me address these questions in reverse order.

2. THE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY IN ARGUMENTATION STUDIES

Certainly there has been a ‘dethroning’ of sorts. The targets at which Perelman and Toulmin set their lances were no windmills, they were actual giants, closer to immoveable objects. Toulmin challenged his colleagues’ firm belief that formal validity was the criterion for assessing arguments, and he did this from within the community that he was challenging. “It is one thing,” he wrote, “to choose as one’s first object of theoretical study the type of argument open to analysis in the simplest
terms. It would be quite another to treat this type of argument as a paradigm and to demand that arguments in other fields should conform to its standards regardless" (2003, p. 133). Perelman insists from the beginning that the domains of argumentation and demonstration are separate, with separate concerns and tools. The traditional tools of the philosopher are honed for the domain of demonstration, not argumentation. In both cases, the greater philosophical target is Cartesian. Descartes displaced both dialectic and rhetoric in the process of establishing a ground of indubitable truths. Argumentation cannot function with such displacements.

More interestingly, Perelman applies one of his own theoretical tools—that of dissociation—on philosophy. In dissociation, the theorist takes a term and identifies a conflict within it, leading to the establishment of a new term. Perelman called the new term “regressive” or “open” philosophy, as opposed to “first philosophy” out of which it is drawn and against which it is set (1949/2003, p. 191). It also studies the fundamental propositions concerning being, knowledge and action, but it differs in the weight given to the starting points: “Regressive philosophy considers its axioms, its criteria, and its rules as resulting from a factual situation, and it gives them a validity measured by verifiable facts” (p. 191). But unlike first philosophy that may see itself aimed uniquely at knowing the real, regressive philosophy aspires to an ontology that is able to guide action (Perelman, 1979, p. 103). Once first philosophy established a system of absolute truths, its proponent must then explain how disagreement emerges in the domain of knowledge or action. It is the character of disagreement that encourages philosophic pluralism. Without agreement, we must accept a pluralism and different scale of values. And this, for Perelman, was always the primary claim of argumentation.

Indeed, ‘pluralism’ is a term we might prefer to relativism for describing both Perelman and Toulmin’s efforts (Bermejo-Luque, 2004) The latter trails after it connotations of an argument being good in one circumstance and not in another. Whereas pluralism identifies the different contexts of argumentation in which common criteria effect different results.

This goes someway toward suggesting how philosophy “fits” within argumentation theory. A new series of questions pushes philosophy to the margins while drawing argumentation theory to the centre. This reorganization in turn modifies the terms involved, conceiving each in terms of the other. Philosophy lends its power to argumentation theory, which in turn transforms philosophy in light of its [argumentation theory's] own needs. I will return to this.

3. WHAT IS INTERDISCIPLINARY ABOUT ARGUMENTATION STUDIES?

Toulmin (2001) reminded us of how difficult it can be to maintain the boundaries between disciplines. They stand apart in terms of interests and methodologies, but at the same time these methodologies share features and the interests and concepts from one discipline constantly intrude on another. Toulmin also did a lot to encourage the multidisciplinary nature of argumentation theory in its early decades, spurred by his observations about fields, including philosophy, with their different
data and backings. But the merging interests of those disciplines involved prompted talk of argumentation theory and questions about the commonalities involved.

Still, it’s also important to observe that we speak of argumentation theory being interdisciplinary and not a discipline in its own right. One of the arresting metaphors in Professor Ribeiro’s paper is that of the colonizer in “the discovery and colonization of the continent of argumentation” (p. 2). But who occupied that territory before the colonizers arrived, and how did they transform what they found? If anything, rather than a colonization it was a return from exile. The “continent of argumentation” flourished under Aristotle and his successors. It contained a wealth of ideas about logic, and rhetoric, and dialectic, and its practitioners honed and tested its principles to amazing effect. But somewhere along the way the continent was not so much invaded as occupied from within, with one element usurping the role of others, or denying them a role at all. Toulmin, wearing his historian’s cap, tells a very compelling narrative here. Much was lost that has now been recovered.

In fact, we might identify the emergence of an interdisciplinary field with the repopulation of Ribeiro’s continent of argumentation. Perelman’s project, for all its apparent “newness,” is by his own admission an amplification and extension of Aristotle (1982, p. 4), and Toulmin’s tracking of the return of logic from abstractness to its human roots is a return as much to rhetoric as it is to reason. Post-Fregean “analytical philosophers...extracted propositions from their original context in formal logic, and resituated them in the human situations where they are put to practical use” (2001, p. 200). We see this, for example, in the encouragement of Austin and Searle to think of speech as an act or performance, and in so doing those philosophers “called on what we might call a “rhetorical” approach to language and knowledge to balance the defects of the geometrical approach” (p. 200). The objects of interest of analytical philosophers in Britain and America “were traditionally a preoccupation of rhetoric” (Toulmin, 1990, p. 188, italics in the original).

And thus, along with the return from the text to the oral, we see a return from the universal to the particular, and from the objective to the local, and the atemporal to the timely (Toulmin, 1990; but these sentiments are shared by Perelman). Or rather, it is a return of these forgotten elements, now combined with what had survived in the continent of argumentation, and which now makes room to share its space so that, in combination, we have an indisciplinary endeavour which draws its strength from its past and its present.

Philosophy will always survive as a discipline in its own right, with its particular interests and achievements, just as it will continue to inform other disciplines in its applied aspects. But within argumentation studies it owns no supremacy. It stands, as Perelman and Toulmin have shown, as an equal among equals, transformed by the very human and rhetorical demands made of it. To that end, a definite decentering has occurred, and Professor Ribeiro does us all a service by bringing an important historical event to our attention and encouraging us to dwell on the implications involved. Important aspects of Philosophy now receive their power in terms of how they supply the needs of argumentation theory as it establishes and develops its “human” mission. The full nature of this relationship is a story that is still unfolding.
REFERENCES


