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Emotional Arguments: What Would Neuroscientists and Psychologists Say?

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Abstract: Why is there resistance in acknowledging emotional arguments? I explore the ambiguity entrenched in the emotional mode of argument, which may contribute to the lack of widespread agreement about its existence. In particular, belief systems and personality styles are addressed, as they are integral to the emotional mode of argumentation. This multidisciplinary approach neither advocates nor dismisses the emotional mode; it adds another layer of understanding to the literature that is important to consider.

Keywords: arguers, audience, bias, cognition, dialogue, emotional argument, implicit bias, interaction, neuroscience

1. Introduction

As a Critical Thinking instructor, I teach students to de- and re- construct arguments—a process that largely distills emotion from an argument’s core structure. This method is in line with many Critical Thinking texts that outline methods for diagramming arguments [e.g., Groarke & Tindale, (2013), Govier, (2010), and Vaughn & MacDonald, (2016) to name a few]. Informal Logicians largely abstain from incorporating emotion into the structure of arguments; presumably, this is partly because it causes subsequent havoc with respect to a normative evaluation of arguments. More importantly, we may not even be able to agree descriptively on what the emotional argument is. As a community mediator, I facilitate communication between parties that acknowledges and addresses emotion. Realistically, in a conflict resolution context where practitioners are aiming to guide disputants to come to mutually agreed upon and feasible resolution(s), we cannot ignore emotions that are present. They are part of the disputants’ arguments. They drive them sometimes; they are entangled in claims and reasons other times; and both of these circumstances are quite different from the emotional expression of arguments. While it would be admittedly easier to separate emotion from reasoned arguments, it simply will not work for long-term, sustainable resolutions, especially between parties who have to continue to engage with each other post-mediation (i.e., co-workers, neighbours, family members, etc.). In fact, separating emotion from the dialogue may impede agreement on a settlement at all in this context. These two examples are important to consider. In higher education, some goals include preparing post-secondary students for employment (Klassen & Dwyer, 2015), or at least guiding students to be competent lay people (Battersby, 2005). And yet what I practice in a real-world context is not adequately addressed by a field that deals with the *real* practice of argumentation. It is this inconsistency that motivates more work on the emotional mode of argumentation.

That emotion is present in dialogic arguments is not a contentious claim to make for argumentation theorists; however, whether those emotional aspects of arguments are strong, or worthy, attributes of making arguments is debatable. This paper does not take on the task of

justifying the emotional mode of argument; rather, it takes a deeper look into the nature of emotion in the context of an Argument (O’Keefe, 1982). Given the resistance for a more “universal,” or widely agreed upon, approach to recognizing emotional arguments—even on a descriptive level, let alone a normative one, I turn to exploring the cognitive structures that tether emotional arguments and the psychological attributes that function as emotional outputs in *real* argumentative scenarios. This is done in an effort to showcase primarily emotional arguments, instead of categorizing emotion as peripheral to an argument’s core logical structure.

An emotional argument occurs when the dissent between arguers is of an emotional nature; in other words, the persuasive strength in an interactive argument comes from emotion. The descriptive approach to emotional arguments in *Dissent in the Midst of Emotional Territory* (Carozza, 2007), with an additional criterion, offers a delineation of emotional arguments that holds for this essay:

- i. Emotions can be used to express arguments (Gilbert, 1997).
- ii. Emotions can be used as grounds for a claim (Ben-Ze’ev, 1995; Gilbert, 1997).
- iii. Emotions can make up a claim (Plantin, 1999).
- iv. Empathic emotions of the audience can be appealed to (Walton, 1992).
- v. Emotions of fear in an audience can be evoked (Walton, 1992).
- vi. Emotions of joy in an audience can be evoked (Borchers, 2012).

2. Neuroscience: An explanation for entrenched biases

Bobula, a Child Development Specialist and Early Childhood Educator, studies “self-regulation” in children. Self-regulation is the ability to act in a deliberate, planned manner in governing one’s own behaviour (Bodrovat & Leong, 2007, p. 127). Self-regulation is thus commonly referred to as impulse control, or self-control - physically, socially, and emotionally. Early Childhood Educators are continually teaching self-regulation to young children. Through her research on self-regulation in Early Childhood Education, Bobula (2011) found that “implicit bias” (or, unconscious bias) is a necessary consideration for teachers. Implicit bias, as she describes it, necessarily includes emotional standpoints. An example of implicit bias that she shares reads: “an employer who, having several equally qualified job applicants, chooses the one who is a member of his/her in-group citing that the applicant would ‘fit in’ better with co-workers” (Bobula, 2011, p. 8). This functions as a subtle, implicit, mechanism of category association, where categories span multiple identity politics: race, sex, gender, age, etc. Typically, implicit biases are developed in early childhood, and their enactment—at any stage—is not backed by *conscious* consideration. What follows from this, given the example above, is that a hiring committee may *consciously* profess to practice inclusivity or diversity, but there can be implicit biases at play that make their choices of exclusion unbeknownst to them. Implicit biases are different from explicit ones, which are conscious forms of bias. Actually excluding a group, or individual, from a meeting, or verbal harassment are examples of explicit forms of bias.

The development of biases, generally speaking, can be explained with neuroscience, the study of the brain and nervous system. Consider that to have memory of something, or to learn something, the following occur: 1) when we have experiences, at a cellular level, our neurons communicate with each other; 2) the more experiences we have strengthens the connections between our neurons; 3) the more experiences we have of some X contributes to “long-term”

memory, or knowledge, of X (e.g., knowing how to make a bowtie or do long division). It is important to note here that when we do learn something (that we do not forget), our neurons physiologically change in an effort to make even more connections, which amount to expanded knowledge. We can learn how to mentally multiply a single-digit by another single-digit without any aids, and when we grasp this well, we can learn to mentally multiply a double-digit by a single-digit, or at least the cognitive framework has been exercised for learning this mechanism. This lays the foundation for multiplying a double-digit by another double-digit mentally, and so on. The more that we learn, the stronger the connections between neurons that allows for long-term memory (e.g., factual information, knowledge) and working memory (e.g., tasks related to school or work). Analogously, these experiences can also be emotional (developing emotional responses), or they can be evaluative in nature (learning to make judgments). These types of experiences that involve emotion are housed under long-term memory, and the same pattern needs to occur: the more emotional experiences we have, the deeper or stronger the emotional memory (Bobula, 2011, p. 6). What happens is the experiences we have—actions, emotional responses, or evaluative judgments—get “wired” into our brains. With this explanation, then, learning how to tie a shoelace, learning that young males are fast, irresponsible drivers (stereotype!), and feelings of joy when you see a nuclear family that has a (male) father, (female) mother, and two children, cognitively speaking, occur in a similar fashion.

Now, what does this neuroscientific discussion have to do with emotional arguments? Emotional arguments have deep connections with arguers’ biases. Bias is a prejudice in support of or against some thing, person, or group. That we do not always understand each other’s ideas, wants, needs, or desires—in part—is because we have different biases that prompt our actions and beliefs. This is also what makes the development of a “universal” standard for diagramming or evaluating emotional arguments tricky business. These are not neutral stances—we cannot grasp them through objective standards, like we can in formal logic or arithmetic.

Walton (1992) writes that bias in an argument is characterized as an arguer having i) a lack of balance or neutrality, and/or ii) a lack of critical doubt (p. 266). These can impede good argumentation depending on the context and dialogue (i.e., a pragmatic and dialectical concept). Walton connects bias specifically to emotional appeals. Emotional appeals become fallacious when they target an audience’s bias such that the audience is impeded from practicing balance or critical doubt. The audience thus reacts in accordance with his/her vested interests (Walton, 1992, p. 264). These are instances of explicit bias though, as an arguer in these types of appeals employs “targeting” behaviour. While a specific audience may have trouble noticing this given their vested interests, most of us who are detached from the argumentative context can recognize such manipulative ploys. This is not the type of bias that I address in this paper, and so in the ensuing discussion only three of the six types of emotional arguments are important to consider.

When emotion is used in the following manners, implicit—or unconscious—bias may be present in arguments: emotion used to express an argument (Gilbert, 1997), emotions used as grounds for a claim (Ben-Ze’ev, 1995; Gilbert, 1997), and emotion used as a claim (Plantin, 1999). These are situations where the arguer, not the audience, employs emotion. In these contexts we cannot easily charge an arguer with manipulative tactics, as we can in some appeals to emotions. Using emotion in the construction of your argument likely indicates that there is an important belief, tethered by a bias underlying the emotion infused in the argument. What follows is an extended example that I subsequently refer to in the discussion of emotions, beliefs, and biases in an argumentative context.

3. Marriage Mediation

My co-mediator and I knew we were in for a challenge as we waited for a couple to attend their first mediation session. The goal of the mediation was to help the pair develop strategies for living and speaking with each other, or a separation was likely imminent. In case development, this is done separately with each party, the husband—a recently retired, energetic, extraverted, love-life type, explained that he was relying on mediation to save his relationship. His wife won't see a marriage counselor (he's tried this in the past). He needs to find a way to make her understand that their marriage is in big trouble. According to him, she doesn't quite understand the gravity of their situation. He wants her to come home from work happier, engage with him, talk to him, maybe even go out on a date with him. He doesn't understand how it's happened, but they are simply roommates now, living in the same home but with different bedrooms, eating schedules, etc. He won't sleep in the same room as her because he's so upset. He doesn't think she even cares. The husband was friendly, exuberant at times, a charming man who self-identified as being very social, and it was obvious from being around him too. Bottom line: he wants to remain married. He's attracted to his wife and cannot imagine being with anyone else. He just needs to get through to her.

When we met with his wife, a few years younger and still employed full-time, she took a more detached, calmer approach to her marital situation. She was not happy with the way the household was being run. She is at work all the time, and when she comes home she wants to relax. She wants to have a quiet dinner and watch TV. She can't do this when her husband has random people popping in—the neighbours, family (this includes their adult children), friends, and so on. She complained that her home had a revolving door, and she was angry. Her husband is too “social” to even understand that she has a legitimate concern. Bottom line: she doesn't think there's anything to do—she and her husband are different people; they are not compatible anymore. When asked if she would consider a divorce, financial security (for both of them) was given as a sole reason for remaining in the marriage. Maybe one day they'd be a couple again, maybe not.

From a surface analysis, the pair exemplify different modes of discussion and argumentation. The husband is more emotional, in terms of his expression, and even the reasons for his claims. He was obviously invested in the relationship. The wife had a more logical approach—little emotion was obvious. This, however, does not imply that she wasn't acting on her emotions. In mediation, each party has the opportunity to explain the situation from his/her perspective without interruption from anyone. The husband kept interrupting his wife when she spoke. Everything that she said was questioned, or counter-examples were put forward to show the flaws in her thoughts (which happen to both be logical strategies), or sheer emotion was expressed in response. The wife said that her main concern was the amount of socializing her husband does at home, and she needs that to change. If friends didn't have the keys to her front door, and if she could have quiet weeknights, she would be happier and less angry. Her husband did not seem to understand this though. When we asked him to paraphrase (i.e., technique of “reframing”) what his wife needs from him, he had no clue. He just defended their family and friends. He urged her to be more open and friendly.

When the husband demonstrated high emotion (e.g., emotive language, facial expressions, voice tone and level, flush) he wasn't just showing how committed he was to the dialogue, he was showing beliefs and biases too. These are not always easy to detect, and in the section below I argue that it is *through* dialogic argumentation that we can come to learn about

these. An explicit belief that he shared was that family and friends were the most important aspect of life. A bias underpinning this belief he articulated is a joy that is connected to having people (e.g., adult children, their friends, extended family members) present, continuously. This was obvious enough to the mediators. Even further, he could have a fear associated with worthiness (wanting to be needed) and loneliness that are cropping up at this time in the marriage because the husband is newly retired.

Though the wife in this case presented as a reasonable, listening, non-interruptive party, it does not mean that there was no emotion present to guide her arguments and responses. There were. In this case, a belief system of the wife's was financial freedom is important at this stage of life—this was an explicit statement. A bias that underlies this belief is class-related. Separating from her husband would necessitate selling the family home, and neither would be able to afford such a large home with a pool individually. Neither would be able to continue their collection of motorcycles, a passion they share. They would have mortgages again, etc. This implicit bias made it difficult for the wife to take a threatened separation seriously. Perhaps it even explains her *laissez-faire* attitude. She was not worked up about the relationship being on the rocks.

Someone might charge this case as one that belongs to therapists or counselors to take care of, not argumentation theorists. This is dismissive in nature. There are individuals in different levels of government, in legal practice, mediation, service work such as hospitality, and even in social work settings that deal with these types of communication practices that are blatant “interruptions” of logic, and that (I may argue at a future time) are pseudo-logical arguments; that is, arguments where emotion guides the reason, and there is little in the way of understanding and addressing them from Argumentation Theory. Lawyers don't turn cases away because a client needs counseling; front lines complaint workers cannot tell a complainant to seek therapy and then come back to lodge a “coherent” complaint, or at least they shouldn't. When you deal with arguments in such concentration, you need more tools.

Implicit biases that prompt emotional arguments can be problematic, not because they are *emotional arguments* but because they can stem from biases that are *unknown* to the arguer, his/her audience, and third party observers, since they are unconscious to us. Bobula (2011) claims that under pressure we tend to revert to our implicit biases (p. 23). The same can be said when an argument context is really important to us. We hang tight to our learned biases. Our biases prompt our arguments and these affective processes aren't all easily addressed with reason.

4. Neuroscience: Methodology for emotional arguments

For Bobula (2011), unlearning biases is a process of self-regulation, and she refers to psychologists and neuroscientists who have offered mechanisms for doing so. Given research and methodologies from neuroscience, arguments that are emotional in nature could learn from this field. Rather than using the normative parameters in informal logic to address the emotional mode, practices analogous to cognitive ones could be used instead. One of the mechanisms that Bobula summarizes, that could work in arguments that use emotion, follows.

Interpersonal experiences that present challenges, or counterpositions to one's implicit bias, can aid in lessening the grip of a given bias (Livingston & Drwecki, 2007, p. 822). Several examples are glossed over by Bobula (2011)—contexts related to race, age, gender, and other stigmatized groups. For instance, if you assume that a disabled person is not smart, befriending disabled people, or immersing yourself in an environment where there are more disabled people,

should change this implicit bias. Why couldn't we apply an analogous method in argumentation? Dialogic arguments practiced sincerely and with an open-mind (i.e., principle of charity, truth-seeking, burden of proof) can help arguers become aware of biases, (a step towards unlearning implicit ones?).

Bobula (2011) writes, "Repetition strengthens connections and lack of use weakens connections in the brain. For people who are highly motivated to reduce their implicit biases and who adopt one or more of the strategies described, repetition of the strategy will strengthen those neural networks and, in turn, may weaken the stereotypical one. Every time we employ one of these strategies, we make an investment for an unbiased future" (p. 30). Awareness of implicit biases can have a ripple effect in dialogic argument settings. It can prompt a discussion about the bias, and how it is impinging on the argument, and maybe it can help with the "unlearning" of implicit biases—though this is likely not possible unless there are multiple arguments that an arguer engages in where the bias is discussed. I argue that unlearning a bias, while a good thing and indicative of the success of emotional argumentation, is not necessary for the argument to take place productively.

5. Conflict resolution mechanisms

This section, which concentrates on personality conflict styles, is much shorter than the emphasis placed on neuroscience and cognition in this paper. It's incorporated to compound the claim that we are not doing enough to understand the nature of emotional arguments and how they are communicated.

Oudeh and Oudeh (2006) delineate five distinct conflict management styles. When in an argumentative dialogue, any type of dialogue, arguers employ one or more conflict styles. The authors frame these conflict styles as each having unique strengths and challenges. Summarized, succinctly, no style is bad. Successful conversants have an awareness of their style(s), an understanding of how others' are conversing in an argumentative situation, and how these manners can be navigated to reach mutual resolutions.

Brief descriptions of the five conflict styles follow. A woodpecker is interested in resolving conflict in a way that satisfies the woodpecker's wants and needs. Like real woodpeckers, they can be *noisy*—they will repeat their stance repeatedly until it is accepted. They are single-minded in this endeavour (Oudeh & Oudeh, 2006, p. 44). An owl is calmer than a woodpecker. They are conscious of being fair and just to everyone involved in the conflict setting. They tend to be observant (i.e., will search for data, etc.), and slow to make a final decision. This is because they want it to be the correct decision. They are truth-seekers (Oudeh & Oudeh, 2006, p. 84). A parakeet is friendly, talkative. Parakeets lighten the mood in a conflict setting. They tend to agree with what others say, as their goal is to make sure everyone is happy. To do this, they usually abstain from any topics that are contentious. Preserving the relationships involved is of utmost importance to a parakeet (Oudeh & Oudeh, 2006, p. 63). A hummingbird has a typical negotiation style. They quickly brainstorm different options and latch onto the first one that everyone can agree on. Efficiency in mutual-decision making is key for a hummingbird (Oudeh & Oudeh, 2006, p. 123). And, finally, an ostrich is uncomfortable in situations of conflict, so they avoid it all costs. Sometimes this translates into not responding to phone calls or emails, or just fleeing the scene. They prefer to just "agree to disagree" (Oudeh & Oudeh, 2006, p. 104).

As an example of how conflict styles relate to an argumentative dialogue. Consider the mediation described above. In that setting there were several styles present. The husband functioned primarily as a woodpecker, or turned into a parakeet. He was expressive, emotional, social, talkative, and he kept driving the same point home: his wife needs to change, immediately. This makes him primarily a woodpecker. He left the first session with little to no acknowledgment of his wife's needs. Periodically, he would be friendly and acquiesce to a mediator's direction. The husband is likely a stronger parakeet than woodpecker, but he was distressed. The wife was primarily an ostrich, but sometimes she showed elements of an owl. She wouldn't be affected to engage in the anecdotes and examples that her husband kept introducing (e.g. *remember that time when . . .*). When prompted by a mediator though she would answer a question directly, clearly, with reasons, and most of all with awareness of how her answers would upset her partner (this is when her partner hadn't already interrupted). One of the mediators presented as a parakeet—acknowledging, understanding, smiling. The other mediator functioned as an owl—asking prompting questions, explaining that the couple may be at a roadblock because their respective introverted and extraverted dispositions aren't being recognized and managed, etc.

In connection with emotional arguments, it may seem like the woodpecker style is the least productive when a mutual decision needs to be made, and furthermore that the single-mindedness of a woodpecker is indicative of high emotion and thus impedes resolutions. And maybe this is accurate. What's less prominent are the other emotions that are guiding the dialogue. By definition, an ostrich won't demonstrate his/her emotions. That doesn't mean there aren't any present that are integrally affecting the discourse. The wife in this situation was angry. She expressed this in case development with the co-mediators, and (less so) in front of her husband in the mediation session. Her anger was translated with a detachedness, which had an effect of instigating her husband's frustration, which translated into persistent, repetitive claims and reasons.

G. Oudeh and N. Oudeh (2006) theorize that the intersection of our conflict styles take on a particular pattern. In this case it is certain that the communication the couple had at home, building over time, was made up of different intersecting styles. The husband likely used a parakeet style for a long time in the marriage, and for a while when their current problems began to surface. The wife primarily used an owl conflict style (this was described to irritate the husband throughout their married years), but at some point reverted to an ostrich where her husband and any of their conversations and interactions were concerned. How does this look when they have an argument that needs solving? Verbatim, here is what G. Oudeh and N. Oudeh (2001) write of the interaction between these two conflict styles used in a dialogue: "When a Woodpecker and an Ostrich have differences, there is usually a delay in the actual conflict" (p. 150), and, "The more a Woodpecker insists on a specific outcome, the more reticent the Ostrich will become" (p. 151), and finally, "With this combination, there will be no resolution until one or both parties move to another conflict management style" (p. 151). All of these ring true for the couple in mediation. These conflict styles are encased in emotion. While the ones highlighted are negative in this example, there can be positive emotions that drive arguments.

In the same way that G. Oudeh and N. Oudeh (2006) describe and prescribe remedies for conflict styles, argumentation theorists could benefit from analogous tools. For example, the silence of an ostrich could be construed, given the dialogue, as a mechanism for (not) expressing anger. Ostriches are making arguments implicitly. By not showing up to a mediation session (which occurred at the second meeting) the argument continues, and it is primarily emotional. If

it were logical, there would be a verbal reason and claim—there were none. And while I acknowledge that this is a physical gesture, in the larger context it's an output of a highly emotional dialogue. I argue that we should be able to figure this out with deep analysis and there could be mechanisms that help analyze the effectiveness of such a tactic.

6. Conclusion

Looking at the emotion in argumentative discourse is simply put a more holistic approach to arguments. And, if we want to understand arguments, analyze them, respond to them, more sincerely and accurately, then we need to widen the lens with which we do so. We need to teach Critical Thinking students, for example, that Venn diagrams work in some situations, knowledge of fallacy schemes work in some contexts, some level of emotional intelligence is necessary in various argumentative circumstances too. And, these are not exhaustive, if we are going to use the “toolbox” analogy for Critical Thinking, then let's really do it, and acknowledge these aspects of arguments that have been less popular in Argumentation Theory. Gilbert (1997) distinguishes the “logical” skeleton of an argument from the whole context of argument. It's the latter which is more holistic and calls for a wider, more inclusive, collaboration of tools for competent lay people.

Considering neuroscientific mechanisms and personality constructs changes nothing about emotional arguments and maybe everything for argumentation analysis. That is, there could be other ways to approach the emotion in arguments, how we should be engaging in and analyzing these arguments. We can shift away from a normative framework that has logic rooted, ironically it's our field's bias, and include or adapt to a more consequentialist analysis of arguments. This means that in the mediation between husband and wife, the outcome (mutual resolution), could help us analysts determine whether the emotional arguments were effective.

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