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Mark Twain, Argumentation Theorist

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Abstract: Commentators have read Twain's *Is Shakespeare Dead?* as the strained work of a man worried about his own literary legacy. But it is actually an essay about argumentation. Twain writes about the burden of argument, premise relevance, understanding and inference, and norms and practices of argumentation. I will argue that what is taken to be a thoroughgoing cynicism on Twain's part is best understood as a thoughtful scepticism about the scope of reasoning.

Keywords: argumentation, IBE, inference, Shakespeare, Twain

1. Introduction

Why may not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? *Hamlet* 5:1

If you want to catch up on the debate about who wrote the works attributed to William Shakespeare, you should start soon, because it has been going on for hundreds of years. It's a rich debate, brimming with wit and theory and anxiety and indignation, and I recommend it as a hobby. If you talk about it with other people, though, they will come to regard you as a crackpot. That's what happened to Mark Twain when he published *Is Shakespeare Dead*, one of his last books, in 1909. It's a shame, because no one seems to have noticed that Twain was actually using the debate as an opportunity to make some important points about the structure and practice of argumentation. In this paper I'm going to try to recover some of those points, without spending too much time on the debate itself. Like much of Twain's work, the book is laced with irony, sarcasm, and self-deprecating jokes. But on my reading, there is nothing puzzling about two features of the book which have caused confusion. First, the subtitle, *From My Autobiography*, is entirely appropriate, quite apart from Twain's famously failed attempts at writing a standard autobiography (Bristol, 1998). I'll try to explain why. Second, though the book is dripping with the scorn Twain often ladles onto his assessments of the human intellect, he is being neither ironic nor satirical when he asks: "Am I trying to convince anybody that Shakespeare did not write Shakespeare's Works? Ah, now, what do you take me for?" He means that he is *not* trying to convince us. And I will try to explain what he was doing instead (Lystra, 2006).

As we'll see, Twain was extremely ambivalent about "reasoning." Yet it is not paradoxical for him to offer lessons on argumentative practice. The lessons are deflationary, it's true, but they also paint a wholesomely realistic picture of the relationship between doing, knowing, and reasoning. They also endorse, though with questionable grace, a kind of moral maturity-in-argument. For a man who made a career out of being outrageous, he offers us, in the year before he dies, an insightful account of the moral and epistemological differences (and very unfortunate *similarities*) between arguing well and poorly.

2. The debate

To get at these things, I do need to briefly outline the Shakespeare debate. I will try to be neutral. Long ago, as a result of a host of cultural, political, philosophical, and commercial trends, there arose a nagging question. How could the William Shakespeare who grew up in Stratford possibly have lived the sort of life required to write the plays and poems attributed to him? The idea is that the author of the works seems to be exceptionally well-rounded, and it is not easy to see how that could be true of the man who began and ended his life in Stratford. I'll give just one example, oversimplified. Some of the plays depict the inner workings of a royal court with great accuracy and fluency. But Shakespeare was evidently not a courtier. So how could he have written so well and familiarly about such things? We could make a long list of examples like that. It came to be felt as a problem, something that needed an explanation.

The main battle lines look just as you'd expect. The anti-Stratfordians simply insist that someone else wrote the works attributed to Shakespeare—Twain is in that camp. The Stratfordians, on the other side, typically take one of three tacks. Some deny that any special knowledge or experience is required to account for what actually shows up in the works. Some admit the need for special knowledge, then try to explain how Shakespeare could have gained it. And some say that Shakespeare was a genius, able to transcend normal human limits. (The first tack seems to underestimate the works too much, and the third seems to overestimate the man too much. If the works attribute to Shakespeare are special, in form and content, and if the writer was a human, instead of a god, then the task is to show how the supposed author can have come by the required knowledge.) It's against those who take the second of these tacks that Twain fights most energetically.

3. Enter Twain

Here's an interesting preliminary question: Why did Twain care so much—or at all—about any of it? I won't canvas all the theories that have been offered. But it's worth pointing out that Twain was in *general* fascinated by mistaken, swapped, assumed, and stolen identities.¹ And he was fascinated by the processes—legal, forensic, spiritual, political, and narrative, by which those identities become rightly known (Ashton, 1996). Also, he was deeply familiar with, and deeply admired, the works attributed to Shakespeare (Hirsh, 1992). Finally, he had a personal stake in the idea that someone of humble beginnings could become a justifiably renowned writer. With all of this in mind, how could Twain *not* have been captivated by the controversy? Yet in his own account of how he first got interested in the problem, Twain mentions none of these things. Instead, he describes how his supervising steamboat pilot, George Ealer, barraged him, aggressively, and out of the blue, with Stratfordian arguments. In an attempt to please Ealer, Twain got into the habit of taking the other side, “for the sake of the argument,” as we might say. And then:

Study, practice, experience in handling my end of the matter presently enabled me to take my new position almost seriously; a little bit later, utterly seriously; a little later still, lovingly, gratefully, devotedly; finally: fiercely, rabidly,

¹ Examples of these show up in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Puddinhead Wilson*, *The Prince and the Pauper*, *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*, *The Mysterious Stranger*, *The American Claimant*, *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*, and many others of Twain's works.

uncompromisingly. After that, I was welded to my faith, I was theoretically ready to die for it... That faith, imposed upon me by self-interest in that ancient day, remains my faith to-day, and in it I find comfort, solace, peace, and never-failing joy. (Twain, 1909, p. 11)

Twain's engagement with the problem, then, along with his faith in the notion that Shakespeare did not write the works, was "imposed" on him, "welded" to him, through repeated rehearsal in his own self-interest. Reasoning, according to Twain, had nothing to do with it.

Ealer did a lot of our "reasoning"—not to say substantially all of it. The slaves of his cult have a passion for calling it by that large name. We others do not call our inductions and deductions and reductions by any name at all. (Twain, 1909, p. 12)

But if Twain refuses to call any of these exchanges "reasoning," then what was it? And what does Twain think that reasoning really is? Those questions bring us to the details of Twain's path through the debate. According to him, the main sin of the Stratfordians lies in the way they offer groundless conjectures and speculations to fill in the large gaps left between the few things that are positively known about Shakespeare. It reminds him, he tells us, of his childhood attempt to write a biography of Satan. When he expressed dismay about how little was positively known about Satan, his Sunday School teacher was happy to help:

We set down the five known facts by themselves, on a piece of paper, and numbered it "page 1"; then on fifteen hundred other pieces of paper we set down the "conjectures," and "suppositions," and "maybes," and "perhapses," and "doubtlesses," and "rumors," and "guesses," and "probabilities," and "likelihoods," and "we are permitted to thinks," and "we are warranted in believings," and "might have beens," and "could have beens," and "must have beens," and "unquestionablys," and "without a shadow of doubts"—and behold! (Twain, 1909, p. 23)

Likewise, the Stratfordians offer conjectures, then treat them as facts. In Twain's day, as in ours, very little was actually known about Shakespeare's life. Stratfordians met the many questions aimed at them by supplying lots of "maybes." *Maybe* Shakespeare went to school, learned Greek and Latin and ancient history and literature, served in the army (and the navy), held a diplomatic position, read up on law, studied science (and the occult), traveled extensively, and so on. With these suppositions the Stratfordians purport to show how it is that Shakespeare became able to write the plays and poems that reveal such wide-reaching accomplishments.

But for Twain, it's not just that conjectures like these are completely ungrounded. What exercises him is the way in which these conjectures are offered as inferences to the best explanation. If we *knew* that Shakespeare had written the works, then it might well make sense to infer, for example, even without any other evidence, that he had at some point studied ancient history. That would *explain* how he was able to write about such things. But of course, that IBE scenario makes no sense as an approach to showing that Shakespeare *did write the works attributed to him*. That's the very question at issue. The mere possibility that Shakespeare could have studied ancient history (if he could have) adds none but the flimsiest support to the

propositions that Shakespeare was the author. He'd have had the *possibility* of having gained *one of the many* kinds of knowledge that the author would have needed.

Inferring explanations that are then relied upon to support the claim that they're meant to explain could be the work of charlatans, or incompetents. Or it may just be the work of people who refuse to take the challenge seriously. It's as if their faith in Shakespeare's authorship is never really in question: "Well of course he *must have* gone to school—look at all the learning contained in the plays." In any case, the Stratfordians are, in Twain's eyes, *not reasoning*. But they are *pretending* to reason, and that, to Twain, is despicable. Twain calls the Stratfordians, without much of a wink, "thugs." And he has their number. Repetition of spurious conjectures spun into self-referring explanations are instruments not of intellectual exchange, but of psychological force:

The thug is aware that loudness convinces sixty persons where reasoning convinces but one. (Twain, 1909, p. 110)

3. Shakespeare and the author

Of course, the "thugs" are not just surmising and conjecturing their way from explanations into evidence; they are also trying hard to evade two other prominent features of the problem. First, there's what we *do* know about whoever it was that wrote the works. The second feature of the problem, at least for Twain, is *the fact that we know so little* about Shakespeare.

Much of the attack he makes on the Stratfordians rests in the first of these features. But I want to focus on the second feature first. Twain writes about it with real energy, and he returns to it several times, including at the very end of the book. How is it that someone of such stature, someone whose works we take to be almost sacred, left behind so little record of himself?

Isn't it odd, when you think of it: that you may list all the celebrated Englishmen, Irishmen, and Scotchmen of modern times, clear back to the first Tudors—a list containing five hundred names, shall we say?—and you can go to the histories, biographies and cyclopedias and learn the particulars of the lives of every one of them. ... You may add to the list the thousand celebrated persons furnished by the rest of Christendom in the past four centuries, and you can find out the life-histories of all those people, too. ...and you can trace the authentic life-histories of the whole of them. Save one—far and away the most colossal prodigy of the entire accumulation—Shakespeare! About him you can find out *nothing*. (Twain, 1909, p. 140)

Why isn't there more?

There are many reasons why [not], and they have been furnished in cartloads (of guess and conjecture) by those troglodytes; but there is one that is worth all the rest of the reasons put together, and is abundantly sufficient all by itself—*he hadn't any history to record*. ...Its quite plain significance—to any but those thugs (I do not use the term unkindly) is, that Shakespeare had no prominence while he lived, and none until he had been dead two or three generations. (Twain, 1909, p. 142)

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The public at large, evidently, made no connection between the plays they celebrated and the man who now gets all the credit for them. This is obviously headed toward a kind of argument from ignorance, and so we argumentation theorists can weigh in on whether or not it is the good kind. But before we do that, let's make sure we have the whole thing before us. H. L. Mencken (1909) wrote a brief and scornful review of Twain's book. Here's the gist:

All that he proves, indeed, is that the majority of Shakespeare's contemporaries were densely blind to his enormous genius. ...In a word, the absence of contemporary news of Shakespeare proves only the absence of contemporary appreciation. (Mencken, 1909, p. 155)

But that's not an entirely fair treatment. For Twain, the significance of the lack of information we have about Shakespeare heads in two directions. First of all, according to Twain, when someone becomes famous, people who knew them before they were famous, later tell all sorts of stories about them. The stories may be wildly inaccurate, and they may get distorted as they are transmitted through the ages, but the point is that personal reminiscences accumulate around well known people. Perhaps we could call it the Gossip Principle. Twain cites his own case as an example.

...I am away along in life...yet *sixteen* of my Hannibal schoolmates are still alive to-day, and can tell—and do tell—inquirers dozens and dozens of incidents of their young lives and mine together; things that happened to us in the morning of life...
...And on the few surviving steamboats...there are still findable two or three river-pilots who saw me do creditable things... They know about me, and can tell. And so do printers, from St. Louis to New York; and so do newspaper reporters, from Nevada to San Francisco. And so do the police. If Shakespeare had really been celebrated, like me, Stratford could have told things about him; and if my experience goes for anything, they'd have done it. (Twain, 1909, p. 65)

It's clearly not a scientific point, the Gossip Principle. But Twain takes it to be a realistic generalization about the effects of celebrity. People like to tell stories that associate them with famous people. An absence of such stories suggests an absence of fame. And if Shakespeare was not a celebrity, even while the plays were wildly popular, then his claim to their authorship is weakened. But the Gossip Principle is not the only locus of the significance of our lack of information about Shakespeare.

Twain also considers what we might call the Paper Trail Principle. His view is that a way of life, a pattern of activity, an engagement in the world, inevitably leaves traces. Shakespeare's record as a husband and father, a philanderer, an actor, a theater manager, a merchant, a land speculator, etc., did leave traces, documents. But none of the traces we have of him connect at all to any literary work or accomplishments—or to *any* work or accomplishments of the sort that would be required to write the works, informed as they evidently are by thorough expertise in a number of complex fields. Shakespeare wasn't a famous author in his time. Nor did he leave any traces of having been a diplomat, a soldier, a sailor, a lawyer, a world traveler, a courtier, a serious student of languages and literatures and history, and so on.² There were people who were

² Twain makes much of the fact that Shakespeare's will makes no mention of any manuscripts or books, even though he accounts for all of his furniture.

accomplished in these fields, and we have all sorts of characteristic traces about them. It's not just that, *pace* Mencken (1909), Shakespeare wasn't appreciated—it's that no *relevant* traces of him exist at all.

It would of course be fair to interrogate both of these principles. Does celebrity in Twain's time work the same way as it does in Shakespeare's? Are we so sure that paper trails unfailingly followed people of certain accomplishments in Shakespeare's time? It seems to me that we could be doubtful on both counts, at least without some serious historical research. We can't do that research here, obviously, but I don't think that that stops us from gaining some appreciation of their combined weight from Twain's point of view: What if one of the most accomplished, learned, versatile, prolific, sophisticated, and influential writers in the English language was utterly unrecognized (even while his work was celebrated), and left no sign *at all* that he ever learned *any* of the things he wrote about, or that *he even wrote at all*? Would that be surprising? He illustrates his point with a catchy analogy:

We will suppose a case: take a lap-bred, house-fed, uneducated, inexperienced kitten; take a rugged old Tom that's scarred from stem to rudder-post with the memorials of strenuous experience, and is so cultured, so educated, so limitlessly erudite that one may say of him "all cat-knowledge is his province"; also, take a mouse. Lock the three up in a holeless, crackless, exitless prison-cell. Wait half an hour, then open the cell... The mouse is missing: the question to be decided is, where is it? (Twain, 1909, p. 52)

What could be sensible, rational, mature, about insisting that the the mouse is in the kitten? But that is exactly what, to Twain's mind, the Stratfordians do insist upon.

He will say the kitten *may have been* attending school when nobody was noticing; therefore *we are warranted in assuming* that it did so; also, it *could have been* training in a court-clerk's office when no one was noticing; since that could have happened, *we are justified in assuming* that it did happen; it *could have studied catology in a garret* when no one was noticing—therefore it *did*; it *could have* attended cat-assizes on the shed-roof nights, for recreation, when no one was noticing, and harvested a knowledge of cat court-forms and cat lawyer-talk in that way: it *could* have done it, therefore without a doubt it did; it could have gone soldiering with a war-tribe when no one was noticing, and learned soldier-wiles and soldier-ways, and what to do with a mouse when opportunity offers; the plain inference, therefore is, that that is what it *did*. Since all these manifold things *could* have occurred, we have *every right to believe* they did occur. (Twain, 1909, p. 53)

At moments, Twain shows what is either uncharacteristic candor or a (more characteristic) laziness in his analysis. He knows that his cat and mouse scenario is also a species of inference to the best explanation. He takes it to be the right kind. But he knows that the Stratfordians (and Baconites, who insist that Francis Bacon wrote the works) view his arguments with equal disdain. He wryly concedes:

It is proper to remark that when we of the three cults plant a “*We think we may assume,*” we expect it, under careful watering and fertilizing and tending, to grow up into a strong and hardy and weather-defying “*there isn’t a shadow of a doubt*” at last—and it usually happens. (Twain, 1909, p. 54)

He thus seems to admit that everyone’s inferences flourish under the same kind of cultivation, take root and grow in the same way. And he steadfastly refuses to refer to what *he* is doing as “reasoning.” Still, not all inference patterns are equal. What we’d like to have is Twain’s account of what makes his arguments and plausibility judgments better. Instead, we get stories from his own life, and catchy analogies that depend on widely understood truths about the way of things: almost certainly, the tomcat contains the mouse. But I’d like to suggest that this is part of what counts as Twain’s argumentative realism and moral maturity.

Yes, those who are “welded” to their arguments do whatever they can to strengthen and preserve them. But the inferences that we should trust are grounded in practice, in experience, in what we understand about how things work and are done. Anyone who bet on the kitten, without some additional and compelling reason, would be doing something silly—or worse. We get our reasons from our lives. There are no guarantees, but there’s no sensible alternative ground. The opposing side may be clever enough to answer every objection. But in the end, plausibility refers back to lived experience. When Twain rejects the Stratfordians’ arguments, he is indeed articulating his autobiography.

4. The fine of his fines

There is one more important autobiographical feature of Twain’s argument, the one on which he actually spends the most time. I will spend the least time on it. It relates to what we can “definitely” say about whoever wrote the works: he was a lawyer. The Stratfordians have no trouble admitting that legal matters often show up in the plays. They also admit that it is very unlikely that Shakespeare was a lawyer—there would be many traces of that, and no such traces exist. But they “surmise” that he talked with lawyers, or performed low level tasks in a law office, or read up on law in his spare time. On their view, you can learn all about a field of activity, like law, by casual acquaintance, by reading up on it. In these ways, they say, Shakespeare could have acquired enough knowledge to write convincingly about legal matters (and nautical and diplomatic matters, and aristocratic manners and so on.). Twain, on the other hand, subscribes to what we might call the Argot Principle. The idea is that real know-how, real expertise, can be gained only by actually engaging deeply and practically in an activity. And along with real expertise comes something that cannot be faked, namely, an ability to *use* the technical vocabulary of the activity properly. Thus, real experts can spot imposters by examining how they write and talk.

I have been a quartz miner in the silver regions... I know all the palaver of that business: I know all about discovery claims and the subordinate claims; I know all about lodes, ledges, outcroppings, dips, spurs, angles, shafts, drifts, inclines, levels, tunnels, air-shafts, “horses,” clay casings, granite casings; quartz mills and their batteries; arastras, and how to charge them with quicksilver and sulphate of copper; and how to clean them up, and how to reduce the resulting amalgam in the retorts, and how to cast the bullion into pigs; and finally I know how to screen tailings, and

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also how to hunt for something less robust to do, and find it. I know the *argot* of the quartz-mining and milling industry familiarly; and so whenever Bret Harte introduces that industry into a story, the first time one of his miners opens his mouth I recognize from his phrasing that Harte got the phrasing by listening...not by experience. No one can talk the quartz dialect correctly without learning it with pick and shovel and drill and fuse.

I have been a surface-miner—gold—and I know all its mysteries, and the dialect that belongs with them; and whenever Harte introduces that industry into a story I know by the phrasing of his characters that neither he nor they have ever served that trade.

I have been a “pocket” miner... I know the language of that trade, ...and can catch any writer who tries to use it without having learned it by the sweat of his brow and the labor of his hands.

I know several other trades and the *argot* that goes with them; and whenever a person tries to talk the talk peculiar to any of them without having learned it at its source I can trap him always before he gets far on his road. (Twain, 1909, p. 73)

So what happens when the Argot Principle is applied to the plays’ many treatments of legal matter and themes? Twain was not a lawyer, so he can’t himself apply it. But he reproduces, verbatim, a very long passage from Sir Granville George Greenwood’s *The Shakespeare Problem Restated*. In the passage, a number of august legal authorities declare, of the author of the plays, that:

He had “a deep technical knowledge of the law,” and an easy familiarity with “some of the most abstruse proceedings in English jurisprudence.”

His knowledge of legal terms is not merely such as might be acquired by the casual observation of even his all-comprehending mind; it has the appearance of technical skill.

...perfect familiarity with not only the principles, axioms, and maxims, but the technicalities of English law, a knowledge so perfect and intimate that he was never incorrect and never at fault . . . The mode in which this knowledge was pressed into service on all occasions to express his meaning and illustrate his thoughts, was quite unexampled. He seems to have had a special pleasure in his complete and ready mastership of it in all its branches.

...the marvelous intimacy which he displays with legal terms, his frequent adoption of them in illustration, and his curiously technical knowledge of their form and force.

At every turn and point at which the author required a metaphor, simile, or illustration, his mind ever turned *first* to the law. He seems almost to

have *thought* in legal phrases, the commonest of legal expressions were ever at the end of his pen in description or illustration. (Twain, 1909, p. 86)

These are just snippets, again, from a long string of such testimony. For Twain, the evidence is strong enough—the playwright was a lawyer. And since *no one* thinks that Shakespeare could have been a lawyer, it follows that the playwright was not Shakespeare. That’s the argument. I think it works pretty well—if we can trust the Argot Principle.

5. Conclusion

Can we trust it? The Argot Principle is importantly different from the Gossip Principle and the Paper Trail Principle. It is complicated and contentious and philosophical. To recap: To use a specialized vocabulary correctly requires actual expertise, and actual expertise cannot be gained by reading (alone). This suggests a distinction between a kind of knowledge that can be written down and contained in books *or arguments*, and a kind that cannot. It’s the old and controversial distinction between knowing-that and knowing-how that we find in Plato or Ryle or Dewey or Polanyi or Oakeshott or elsewhere. I won’t survey the growing literature on it here. But I will bring this paper to a close with my own autobiographical note.

In my own work on deep disagreement I relied heavily on the distinction between knowing-how and knowing that. My claim was simply that since some kinds of knowledge can’t be put into words, they can’t be offered as premises. And that means that some knowledge, real knowledge, can’t play a role in argument. And that means that it is possible for there to be disagreements that cannot be resolved by the exchange of reasons. That conclusion is impossible for some people to accept, and some of them are argumentation theorists. It has seemed to me that apart from anything else, those who reject that point have been motivated by an absolute refusal to face the possibility that reasoning has limits, that it cannot resolve every difference. So they generally end up insisting that there is no such thing as know-how, or that whatever know-how is, it can always be captured in words. That does feel like an immovable prejudice to me, and it does remind me of the way some people absolutely cannot face the possibility that Shakespeare did not write the plays. Even in philosophy, some views are too precious to abandon.

Twain tells us, again, that he is not trying to convince anyone that Shakespeare was not the author. He knows that precious beliefs are not acquired, or changed, by reasons.

We get them all at second-hand, we reason none of them out for ourselves. It is the way we are made. It is the way we are all made, and we can’t help it, we can’t change it. And whenever we have been furnished a fetish, and have been taught to believe in it, and love it and worship it, and refrain from examining it, there is no evidence, howsoever clear and strong, that can persuade us to withdraw from it our loyalty and our devotion. (Twain, 1909, p. 128)

We are The Reasoning Race, and when we find a vague file of chipmunk-tracks stringing through the dust of Stratford village, we know by our reasoning powers that Hercules has been along there. I feel that our fetish is safe for three centuries yet. (Twain, 1909, p. 131)

Above I said that it wasn't paradoxical for Twain, with his dark view of human rationality, to offer us lessons on argumentation. Maybe it is, a little. Twain could have claimed that "reasoning" is a sham, that there is nothing but force, trickery, and unreasoned persuasion. He never does make that claim, though. He is extremely pessimistic about our *responsiveness to reasons*, but he seems to believe that giving reasons is a worthy pursuit, one which deserves to be done better than the Stratfordians do it. He knows that the Stratfordians among us will not be convinced, but he nevertheless writes a whole book about the problems in their arguments. He has only a dim hope. But for my part, when I compare that dim hope to the extremely bright optimism of a young Habermasian who first came to OSSA in 1999, I find that it speaks to me more.

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