Commentary on McKeon on argument, inference, and persuasion

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Commentary on McKeon's "On Argument, Inference, and Persuasion"

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Arguments inhabit many spaces – logical, epistemological, rhetorical, dialectical, social, and ethical among others – and there are just as many ways to evaluate them. Even if we take a more pluralistic perspective on what arguments are and what they can do, there is a valuable insight to be had from Bob Pinto's proposal to see arguments as "invitations to inference," and Professor McKeon has put his finger on an especially important point. The question that rhetoric asks – *Was the audience rationally persuaded*? – needs more than a simple Yes/No answer. It is a gourmet question; it deserves better than a fast food answer. Argumentation theorists would do well, then to follow McKeon's lead and address the more analytic question: *Was the audience rationally persuaded in the right way – taking the premises, making the inferences, and following the line of reasoning offered by the proponent arguer?*

At the risk of muddying the waters and possibly slightly changing the subject a little bit, please indulge me as I offer two classes of examples of arguments and their histories. In each case a proponent engages in argumentation at the end of which her targeted audience accepts the conclusion. By some measure, they are all examples of successful argumentation, but they are not all of a piece. I ask for a little further indulgence as I refrain from labelling the proponent "*the* arguer" because insofar as proponents, audiences, opponents, judges, juries, and even kibitzers are all engaged in the argumentation, they are *all* arguers. I do this not to be pedantic or to press my own agenda on this – well, not *merely* to be pedantic and not *entirely* to press my own agenda – but because it implicates important aspects of argumentation that are relevant to the question at hand. I will, instead, refer to the "proponent" and her "target", as I did in the opening sentences, labelling them P and T.

(I) P argues for a conclusion C, offering as reasons R_1 and R_2, reaching C by way of inferences I_1 and I_2. T hears and accepts her reasons R_1 and R_2 but reaches C by way of I_3 and I_4. Suppose, for a stick-figure, schematic, and trivial example, P offered A, A$\rightarrow$B, and B$\rightarrow$C as premises, then used *modus ponens* twice to infer B and then C, while T employed hypothetical syllogism to infer the intermediary step A$\rightarrow$C followed by *modus ponens* to get C. Does that not count as being "directly persuaded" by the argument? I am tempted to say it should count because P would certainly accept T's line of reasoning. However, it was not explicitly "*in the way intended by the arguer*", which was an explicit part of the characterization of direct persuasion (p. 10). T might find a very clever short cut to the conclusion. How far can T's line of reasoning depart from P's intended line before the persuasion becomes "indirect"?

Ironically, less can be more here: had P not supplied the intermediary steps, and had no intentions regarding the specific details of the inferential chain to the conclusion, it would seem open and unproblematic to us to say that it should indeed qualify as a case of direct persuasion if T made *either* the MP-MP or the HS-MP inferences to C from the provided premises. As appealing as that response may be, however, it raises an additional problem or two. First, any proponent who simply lays out premises and a conclusion without any line of reasoning could then be said to have

directly persuaded any target who accepts those reasons and comes to accept the conclusion based on them regardless of the actual line of reasoning used – which undermines much of the point of distinguishing direct from indirect persuasion in order to pinpoint the specific and characteristic success of rhetorically successful argumentation. The actual line of reasoning would be irrelevant. Further, it apparently would also condone *invalid* inferences and inferences that would not be acceptable to the proponent. Suppose, for another stick-figure, schematic, and trivial example, P argued C↔A and A, thus A→C, therefore C but T reasoned C↔A and A, thus C→A, therefore C, i.e., mistakenly taking the converse of the conditional needed from the biconditional premise and then *affirming the consequent* rather than using *modus ponens*. I offer this particular example because it will no doubt be familiar to logic teachers everywhere. It is an easy mistake for students to make under the time pressure of an exam, so it is fairly common. Admittedly, it is a very minor problem and one that is quite easily fixed – but it is a problem. Besides being something that logic instructors should not overlook, it is representative of structurally similar but more serious examples that no argumentation theorist can ignore.[1]

The main points remain: there is a characteristically rhetorical kind of success that involves direct persuasion; in direct persuasion the target has to accept and use the reasons provided by the proponent to infer the conclusion; and, in addition to the agreement on the reasons and conclusion, there has to be some correlation between the proponent's and the target's lines of reasoning that take them from the reasons to the conclusion. The waters are already quite muddy.

(II) The second class of examples involves a target audience who already accept the conclusion. *Prima facie,* they would be immune to any rhetorically successful argumentation on the subject. No argument could possibly be "belief-inducing" with respect to that conclusion because it is already present among the targets' beliefs so it cannot be "induced" by the argument. The belief might be clarified or refined; it can be strengthened or reinforced; it could be recalled or made more prominent; but it cannot be introduced, caused, or induced. And yet, Robert Pinto's insight that arguments are "invitations to inferences" should apply in cases like this because we know that accepting the conclusion of an argument is not the same thing as accepting an argument.

Let me divide this into three subcases: (a) the target already believes the conclusion and does so for the given reasons; (b) the target already believes the conclusion and continues to do so but for other reasons; and (c) the target already believes the conclusion, for other reasons, but is convinced by the argument that the new reasons are better. Our concern here is with rhetorical success so we can safely ignore the fourth case, in which the target believes the conclusion but *discontinues* that belief on the basis of the argument. That would be a truly epic case of rhetorical failure, a "backfiring argument" of the highest order.[2]

The first of the three subcases is the most straightforward and it lends credence to the *prima facie* exclusion of the possibility of successfully arguing with already persuaded targets. If T already believes the conclusion and does so for precisely the reasons offered in the argument, then from the perspective of rhetorical persuasion it really would be Beating a Dead Horse. The argumentation would be redundant and not one to chalk up as a case of rhetorical success. Of course, instead of Beating a Dead Horse, the context might mean the argument is better described as a case of "Preaching to the Converted" with the goals of reinforcing, refining, repositioning, or recalling beliefs rather than persuasion simpliciter. In that case, the rhetorical and argumentative significance is not measured by its persuasive effects. There are, as we know, many reasons to

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[1] The charge of pedantry admittedly might have some traction here.
[2] See Cohen 2005, "Arguments that backfire" (Count this footnote as a follow-up on the earlier threat regarding my own personal agenda.)

argue. Rational persuasion may be the most important one, and even if not, it is the one that is on the table here. That does not prevent acknowledging other reasons to argue, of course, and I think we do need to consider some other reasons for arguing to make sense of the other two subcases.

For these two subcases, suppose, as before, that P offers reasons R_1 and R_2, makes the inferences I_1 and I_2, and reaches the conclusion C. The target, T, hears and accepts P's reasons R_1 and R_2 and follows the same inferential path through, I_1 and I_2 arriving at the already accepted conclusion C. Suppose further, that while T accepts the reasons and reasoning offered by P, they were <u>not</u> the same as the reasons she had and the line of reasoning she had followed to get to C originally. T's belief set may be enlarged by the new premises and enriched by the new inferences, but the belief in C remains. The two subcases diverge here: in one, while T acknowledges the cogency of P's argument, she prefers the supporting argumentation she already had; in the other, T thinks P's new argument is actually an improvement on the reasons and reasoning she had used, so T adopts P's argument for future use. This last case strikes me as a case of successful argumentation in the rhetorically relevant way even though it neither is belief-inducing nor rationally persuasive with respect to the argument's conclusion.

To be sure, P's argument did rationally persuade T of something, namely that R_1 and R_2, provide good reasons for accepting C. Moreover, as Maurice Finocchiaro, among others, has argued, an argument from R_1 and R_2 to C operates as *both* an argument for the claim that C and an argument for the claim that R_1 and R_2, are good reasons for C,[3] so perhaps there is way to recognize the rhetorical success of P's argumentation in the third subcase. While this response gets something right, it still is not completely satisfying. Besides moving the goalposts, it fails to distinguish the last two sub-cases, the one where T accepts the new argument, but as redundant, and the one where T adopts the argument as a superseding improvement.

The argumentative success that is peculiar to the last subcase does strike me as rhetorical in all the right ways: it is a case of rational persuasion. The target accepts the premises as well as the expressed line of reasoning leading to the conclusion. Moreover, she does so "non-redundantly", i.e., in a way that makes a positive change in her cognitive field. We may have to rely on more epistemological considerations to recognize what happens in this kind of example and how it relates to more straightforward cases of rhetorical success. In the end, I do think Professor McKeon is on the right track here, so I hope this does not muddy the waters nor change the subject too much.

References

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[3] This is one of the important themes running through Finocchiaro (2013).