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Commentary on Bailin

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In Response To: Sharon Bailin's [Truth and reconciliation: comments on coalescence](#)

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Prof. Sharon Bailin makes a number of very interesting and salient points in her discussion of my argumentation programme, coalescent argumentation [CA]. There is a great deal that she says that is worthy of comment and even more that beckons one into deep discussion, coalescent, critical or otherwise. Unfortunately, time constraints do not permit the full exploration her comments demand, so I will limit myself to addressing the more general points.

Bailin relies a lot on the idea of fallibilism as an epistemological foundation for inquiry, and points out that CA does not fit well with this admittedly very popular and attractive view. It is attractive, if for no other reason, than its avoidance of the deeper metaphysical pitfalls of theories of truth. That is, it is generally easier, *a la modus tollens*, to identify a falsehood than a truth. So one does not have to say, P is true, but rather, Q is false, and P is not shown to be false.

The difficulty for a CA approach, however, is that fallibilism carries with it not only the idea that one ought to reject arguments that cannot be well defended, but also the criteria for successful defense and a complete ideology of what is and is not acceptable evidence. The general principle that one ought to try to falsify what one believes is not objectionable in many circumstances, (though more often than not the falsification is directed at the other person's position and not one's own.) There is nothing to prevent astrologers from using a fallibilist framework when arguing amongst themselves, though this idea horrifies many C-L subscribers. Similarly, if every reason A has for believing in God is undermined by attacks on them, and A ultimately relies on an inner sight or vision, then, on fallibilist terms, A is wrong – unless inner vision or religious insight is permitted as an acceptable form of argumentation. On most fallibilist accounts, it is not; fallibilism is an avowedly rationalist and empiricist programme, and inner sight or hunches are only permitted when reducible to more concrete terms.

In short, there is nothing wrong with fallibilist processes so long as the framework in which they are taking place is flexible. Simply put, *modus tollens* works because it is convincing, it makes sense to us. But it works within whatever framework it occurs, whether that be two scientists or two theologians. So I agree that the fallibilist conception is a useful one, but doubt that it will serve to limit coalescence when it is not tied to a particular framework of evidence and procedure.

Another key issue is just how often pure inquiry raises or attempts to raise its head. I agree with Bailin when she allows that there are few if any pure critical inquiries, and even allow that there may be more mixed inquiry/persuasion dialogues than I sometimes seem to indicate. The difficulty is that the aspects that we acknowledge as impurities are frequently among the most crucial to

understanding the underlying dynamics of the disagreement. Moreover, very few critics rush to acknowledge that there are very many arguments where the logical plays only a minor role.

On an airplane recently I overheard the following.

Example (1)

SHE: We never seem to really talk anymore.

HE: Sure we do, we talk all the time.

SHE: But I don't feel like we really communicate.

HE: That's because you're always talking about your work.

SHE: Not all the time.

HE: Well, a lot of the time – most of it, in fact.

SHE: Oh, never mind.

HE: See, when the talk becomes real you stop it.

In this example, the logical is used to stifle and diminish the emotive content of the initial assertion. The question is moved, *a la* the C-L model, to an empirical, falsifiable issue: Do we or do we not talk much these days. As a result the point, and an opportunity for coalescence is missed.

There are certainly argument situations where the C-L model is worthwhile and inquiry does have a good grip. In a recent hiring decision in my department, discussions were open and well considered, and various people changed their minds and opinions based on contributions of others. But by the same token I was struck by how much that was said stemmed not from logical bases, but from kisceral (i.e., intuitive) sources based on a great deal of experience. In addition, while one could sense a number of agendas that were not completely on the table, by and large it was an open and careful process. Yet a great deal was not what is typically classed as "rational."

Fallibilism and the C-L models work within a framework of rules for evidence and procedure that are only rarely examined. The dyed in the wool, thoroughly socialized, highly committed and completely trained rationalist knows what is right and what is wrong, knows good evidence from bad, knows that science finds the truth and mysticism does not. These are the people who can oppose the creation of a school of chiropractic at York University while not batting an eye at the existence of the Economics Department. The discussions are heated, and personal identities and values are deeply involved. I don't want to throw out the concrete arguments, I just want to say two things. First, we have to agree on our framework, and secondly, we need to uncover everything that's going on.

As a proponent of CA and the underlying conception that the general goal of argument is agreement, I am frequently confronted with situations intended to make me balk. These sorts of cases commonly include one mentioned by Bailin. This is the notorious white supremacist convincing "an initially skeptical" someone of a worldwide Jewish conspiracy based on arguments the supremacist brings forth. The arguments, as described, include "the fact that there are many Jewish businesses and politicians and that such a conspiracy is described in a neo-nazi tract." I.e., there are two arguments, the first being an allegedly empirical fact concerning the numbers of businesses owned by Jews, and the second an appeal to the authority of a Nazi manuscript. As a result of these two arguments, the listener is convinced. Since, clearly, I am not a white supremacist but, as a matter of fact, a Jew, my theory must find a way to declare this argumentation wrong or fallacious.

How do I deal with this? How do I say they are not good arguments? The answer is that I don't. Rather, I deny the example. If the listener is actually initially skeptical (as per Bailin's hypothesis) and convinced by such weak arguments, then he is either an idiot or someone who has other goals, attitudes and emotions to which the position appeals. In other words, if those two arguments were what actually convinced the listener, then there was more going on in the interaction than meets the ear. Persuasion simply does not happen as Bailin describes it in this story. It is a much more complex, involved and time consuming human endeavour.

Most often, when we argue, we work within shared frameworks; we communicate with people we know, or, at least, with people who share a certain set of values *regarding the matter under discussion*. I may, at a baseball game get into an argument with someone sitting near me about the wisdom of the local team's pitching rotation, and that person may well be a white supremacist, and I may never know it. As long as our conversation sticks to baseball, the framework within which we are working is shared. As Brockriede pointed out, we must share sufficient beliefs and values in order to argue to any point at all. It is for that reason also that arguments about very high level principles are so frequently fruitless. There are simply insufficient subordinate shared beliefs for disputants to make any headway whatsoever. It is much better for Netanyahu and Arafat to set aside the question of who is right and who is wrong and concentrate instead on how to stop the killing and strife.

Another, related, question Bailin raises concerns argument evaluation. And again, the C-L model provides allegedly a clear method for evaluating arguments, while CA merely seeks consensus. (Actually, I do not think I much use the word 'consensus,' or if I do, then not very often, because coalescence is different from consensus.) So, people could agree to very bad arguments, and such a possibility is anathema to C-L because people must only be convinced by good arguments.

First of all, we have an enormous problem in determining what is a good

argument. Relevance, sufficiency and acceptability, the icons of the C-L methodology, are all practically relative terms dependent upon the background of the interlocutor and the importance of the issue. If the radio announces that Friendly Fish tuna is contaminated with botulism, I accept that fact and toss my two cans out. On the other hand, my grocer, who has stacks of the stuff and a multitude of customers who have carried tins away, needs to call the distributor and find out if this is true or rumour. Both of us are using good judgement in evaluating according to R-S-A criteria, but by different standards because of different goals and needs. R-S-A criteria are relative to values, goals and motives.

Secondly, a great deal of argument evaluation takes place within the process of arguing itself. Arguments are usually only evaluated when there is disagreement, and that normally involves an inherently critical attitude. If we agree, and you give me an argument that does not really impress me, I may say nothing at all. But, if we disagree, then I will have a lot to say. Again, we don't change our minds all that lightly, and our natural inertia is, perhaps, our first line of defense.

Thirdly, I agree completely there certainly is a need for a rigorous normative review of the alternative modes. I have allowed that this is the case, have begun the first steps, and invite any and all to take up a piece of the project. There is more than enough to go around, it just cannot be done in a day.

The ideal of the Critical-Logical approach is the notion of inquiry. In a pure inquiry there is no room for attachment, no concern for who is right and who is wrong, emotions are absent or, at the very least, in check and irrelevant as persuasive objects. Face goals and ego considerations are non-existent because the sole concern is what is the truth, or, less metaphysically contentious (and because I do not want to hyperbolize,) what is the best answer we can arrive at at this time. The arguments-1 put forward are viewed and analyzed in their own right and on their own merits, without regard to who put them forward, why they were put forward, or what non-logical associations they might have. In this way we can investigate the mind/body problem, come to a conclusion about capital punishment, or determine if placing an outlet of our bookstore chain across from the Brock campus would be profitable.

Of course, no one, including Bailin, believes that a totally pure ideal critical inquiry actually exists, or, if it does, it's as rare as hen's teeth. Rather, one can seek to approach the ideal with an eye to conducting the purest inquiry possible, even to the extent of having checks on each other when it seems that non-logical modes are creeping in. If we are business partners, and our only concern is for what is best for our business, then we will, indeed, do our best to try and separate our logical and non-logical considerations. But the difficulty is that purely logical inquiries are very rare, and more often than not the non-logical component is significant and, therefore, needs to be dealt with and considered in meaningful and respectful ways. This is not only because we want to understand the dynamics of an argumentation more fully, but also

because the hegemony that has ruled the court of argumentation has not really proved itself successful. If we consider that argument is the main alternative to violence, and examine how many disputes and issues are settled non-violently, then, ladies and gentlemen, we're not doing all that well.

One can answer, of course, that the reason is the lack of C-L skills, rather than the non-admissibility of non-logical argumentation modalities. But if the reality is that most times the full range of modalities enter into a dispute, then it behooves us to accept that and acknowledge it. The C-L model has long been used as much to silence people as it has to permit the careful resolution of arguments. Whether it was the voices of women when they were for so long excluded from the education required to become adept in C-L, native peoples whose methods of justice and adjudication appear non-logical, immigrants whose manner of communication relies heavily on the expression of emotion, or cultures where argumentation crucially involves story-telling and indirection, C-L centred arguments have been used to silence, not inquire.

I well know that the essential techniques of C-L can be useful and valuable, and I deeply appreciate Prof. Bailin's acknowledging that recognition. But if Argumentation Theory is to become an effective arena of study for the resolution of human conflict, then we need to hack our way into the jungle of real argumentation and examine all the species there, not just the ones we find back home.

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