Commentary on Hegelund & Kock

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It has been a source of continuing embarrassment: the argumentation textbooks in the American debate tradition have continued to teach the Toulmin Model even in the face of substantial and unanswered objections to it leveled by Professors James Freeman (1991) and Ralph Johnson (1996), among others. I do not mean to justify this situation. Indeed, I personally think we ought to tip our hats to Toulmin for helping open the study of our actual argumentative practices; tip our hats and then pass him by. So instead of trying to justify Toulmin, I want to offer an excuse on behalf of my colleagues in the States, an excuse suggested to me by the very interesting paper of Professors Hegelund and Kock on their success in using the Model to teach students how to write an academic paper. What excuses our and their reliance on a theoretically ill-defended model of argumentation? It is this: The problems with the Toulmin Model raised by those taking what I'll call a "dialectical approach"--teachers of argumentation, perhaps mostly Canadian, coming from a background in formal logic--these flaws do not necessarily impair the usefulness of the Model for those taking what I'll call a "rhetorical approach"--teachers of argumentation, perhaps mostly American, coming from a background in communication studies.

(I invite those disgruntled by "dialectics" to read "informal logic" or other appropriate term.)

To make this excuse stick, I will define and briefly defend three differences between the dialectical and rhetorical approaches to argumentation. On each count, Hegelund & Kock's method takes a definitively rhetorical approach. And from taking such a specifically rhetorical approach, the method manages to evade the main problems of the Toulmin Model.

Turn to a first distinction between dialectical and rhetorical approaches, the one stressed by Hegelund & Kock themselves in the title of their paper: the difference in scale. Toulmin himself distinguished between "macro-arguments" on one hand--by which he appears to have meant the entire set of arguments or case laid out as a claim is put forward and repeatedly tested (Toulmin 1958: 15-22) and "micro-arguments" on the other--the individual units of premises and conclusions. "Macro-arguments," Toulmin says, take up "minutes or paragraphs, while "micro-arguments" "get down to the level of individual sentences"; the former are the organs of the overall body of argument, the latter, I suppose its cells.

This focus on the micro-level gets the Toulmin Model into trouble. For example, it turns out that Toulmin is unable to specify at the micro-level what form of sentence would fill his warrant slot. Should it be a conditional? Some
sort of rule? A generalization? (See Johnson 1996:127-34). Such imprecision where he had promised to be precise does serious damage to Toulmin's proposed Model.

But as Hegelund & Kock argue, this problem does not arise when the Toulmin Model is used at the macro-level, to model an entire presentation. At the macro-level, imprecisions in detail can be overlooked; the important thing, as they point out, is for the student to get a sense of "the overall purpose of the academic paper, its components, and how the components contribute to the overall purpose." At the macro-level, the warrant, as they explain, need not take any particular form; it merely needs to do the job of explaining the arguer's method—explaining why this sort of data can justify this sort of conclusion. So it is at the macro-level that Toulmin's functionalist approach comes into its own.

Their commitment to the macro-level places Hegelund & Kock securely within the rhetorical, as opposed to the dialectical, tradition. Dialecticians have always had a fine focus on matters such as modal qualifiers and quantification. The premise/conclusion link, or a handful of them, commonly represents the largest argumentative structures of interest. Thus when Freeman (1991) writes of the Toulmin Model, he does it in a book on the "Macrostructure of arguments." For the rhetorician, by contrast, the premise-conclusion link is the smallest argumentative structure of interest. Other tools in the rhetorical tradition attempt to model much larger features of argumentation, defining (for example) whole types of cases, helping allocate the overall burden of proof, and suggesting the typical or "stock" issues that tend to arise. So dialectic and rhetoric may be said to differ in scale, focusing on the micro- and macro-levels; and by using the Toulmin Model as a rhetorical or "macro-level" view of argument, Hegelund & Kock avoid some of its problems.

The first difference between dialectical and rhetorical approaches to Toulmin is one of scale; let us turn now to the second difference, one equally as important although not featured in the title of the paper. As Hegelund & Kock note, Toulmin intended his Model to model all micro-arguments. "Whatever field we are concerned with," Toulmin says, "we can set our arguments out in the" data/warrant/conclusion form (Toulmin 1958: 175). But this brave claim seems to get Toulmin into trouble. In particular, it seems to add to the problem of formulating warrants I noted above. Toulmin seems to believe that in well-developed "argument fields" like the sciences warrants can be identified with scientific theories "licensing inferences from observation statements to observation statements~ (Freeman 1991: 59). But what about everyday arguments? In such cases, it becomes much harder to say what warrants the move from premise to conclusion, unless we are to assume that some sort of "folk theory" lies behind every inference.

Hegelund & Kock again avoid this problem by shifting from a dialectical to a rhetorical approach. They do not attempt to model argumentative writing in general; rather, they are committed to defining the structure of a specific genre: the academic paper. Within this limited context, specific advice about the
function of each aspect of the model is both possible and justifiable.

And this is again in line with the rhetorical tradition. Rhetoricians have generally tried never to tackle argumentation whole. Rather, most rhetorical texts begin with a strategy of divide and conquer, making distinctions among major types of argument and specifying resources for each separately. (It should be noted that this strategy of "localism" is what enables attention to the "macro-level" of argumentation, since there may not be any such thing as a "good case" in general--"good case" and its constituents may always need to be defined within particular contexts. I refer the reader to Fred Kauffeld's discussion of this issue elsewhere at this Conference.) One particularly famous and long-lived example of such "localism" is Aristotle's distinction between three "types" or gene of rhetoric: deliberative, forensic and epideictic (Rhetoric 1.3). These "types" are not Toulminian fields, I suspect; they are defined, as Hegelund & Kock define the academic paper, by the speaker's intent: what she is trying to do, and how therefore she needs to go about doing it. So where dialectic tries to model argument universally, rhetoric aims only at local usefulness; and this second difference between dialectic and rhetoric also contributes to Hegelund and Kock's rescuing of the Toulmin Model.

Turn finally to the third difference. The dialectical approach to argument has, especially recently, focused on the analysis and criticism of arguments already made. The sentences constituting the argument have already been uttered; it is the job of the model to sort them out into different "slots." Thus there arises, for the Toulmin as for all other dialectical models, the ordinary problems of reconstruction: how much the analyzer is allowed to cut out, fill in, re-arrange and otherwise modify the existing argument in order to make it conform to the prescribed structure. The Toulmin Model, having more functional "slots" than most, suffers proportionately more from this difficulty. In many cases, the warrant will need to be added, and the backing for the warrant, and the modal qualifier, and the reservations, and even on occasion the claim--each of these raising its own problems of reconstruction.

But this problem can be avoided when the Toulmin Model is used not to reconstruct existing arguments but, as Hegelund & Kock use it, as a rhetorical tool to construct new ones. As both Johnson and Freeman have pointed out, the problems with warrants and so on would be much reduced if argument is viewed productively. Then instead of trying to reconstruct the original, unstated "answers" to the Toulmin questions, the argument producer (or her interlocutor) merely has to ask the questions herself (Freeman 1991: 50, 78; Johnson 1996: 125). From the point of view of production, the Toulmin Model serves as a kind of prompt, encouraging the student to continue to develop her presentation until she has asked and answered all the relevant questions. As Hegelund & Kock put it, the Model thus used may have a liberating, rather than a constricting effect on [the student's] intellectual creativity.

And this orientation to production is again in line with the rhetorical tradition. The first office of rhetorical art has always been invention: the discovery or
creation of the means of persuasion. Skill at judgment has been deemed secondary, if it is discussed at all. Heuristics that may be dialectically inadequate for the analysis of arguments may yet be rhetorically quite useful when arguments need to be constructed.

(Invention has of course its own problems. If rhetoricians avoid problems of reconstructive charity, they will still be faced with the difficulties of invention, and in particular with the problem of figuring out when to stop or how much is enough; I refer the reader again to Kaulfeld's paper. Perhaps this problem will not arise much in the context of the academic paper, where the student is often writing with a fixed page limit. Still, a complete art of rhetoric will need some principles of selection parallel to, and probably as complex as, the dialectician's principles of charity.)

To summarize, then: Hegelund & Kock salvage the Toulmin Model by adopting a rhetorical approach to argument: by focusing on macro- as opposed to micro-level functions, by considering one "local" type of arguing as opposed to aiming for universalism, and by sticking to the production as opposed to the analysis of discourse. Considered as a macro-level, local, productive tool the Toulmin Model has a usefulness unaffected by the legitimate criticisms offered from the dialectical perspective.

I still wonder, however, whether starting from Toulmin an even more useful rhetorical model of the academic paper could be developed. Hegelund & Kock's work, for example, contains at least one clear advance over the Toulmin Model--one functional "slot" in the academic paper that the Model does not include. In their standard outline for the academic paper, Hegelund & Kock ask the student to fill in some of the nonargumentative background from which her specific question emerges "as a relevant one that calls for an answer and may be plausibly addressed by the paper." This advice seems also to fall securely within the rhetorical tradition; it's comparable, in particular, to the tasks the classical textbooks assigned to the Exordium or introduction to the speech--the tasks of rendering the auditor attentum (attentive), docills ("teachable" or oriented) and benevolentum (favorable). Further investigations--especially of the practical sort exemplified by Hegelund & Kock's work--might suggest yet further functionalities of the academic paper, enabling us to develop a yet richer and more refined rhetorical model for it. Or in other words, the rhetorical approach which can salvage Toulmin may still find it worthwhile to go beyond him.

REFERENCES

