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Commentary on Browne & Hausmann

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ON ARGUMENT AS AN ACT OF FRIENDSHIP: A RESPONSE

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Browne and Hausmann favor a view of argument's end as development of self and other—this in preference to the common view of argument as an effort at victory over the other in verbal warfare (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). They have thereby been led to the image of argument-making as an act of friendship. Let us call this the argument-as-friendship metaphor, as opposed to the argument-as-war metaphor.

Inherent in friendship, so they claim, are mutuality, cooperation, reciprocity and the absence of coercion or manipulation. So viewed, friendship makes possible the Habermasian ideal of conversation in which neither party seeks to dominate. Moreover, it encourages conversants to attend carefully to their own arguments as a precondition for attention to the other's arguments. This adds to the quality of the conversation. By means of argument, then, two people—two *friends*—are able to grow, to develop; hence the connection between argument, development, and friendship.

Few people are opposed to friendship, as Browne and Hausmann acknowledge. "Friendship," they say, "is a virtue word, a premature universal—an idea that receives immediate nonanalytical support." And, since students are often skittish about the reflective study of argument, why not package argument-making attractively as an act of friendship? Why not indeed?

The principal argument against argument-as-friendship, especially as it is used against the verbal warfare metaphor, is that it is too feeble. More important than bruised egos, says the verbal warrior, are flawed ideas. Hence, the purpose of argument is to test out arguments in John Stuart Mill's marketplace of ideas. And this, maintained Mill, may require "violent conflict" between defenders of truth and the "enemies in the field" (quoted in Brown, 1994).

Perhaps two distinctions are in order, says the verbal warrior. First, the traditional view of verbal warfare does not permit attacks on the person except in well delimited cases. When I seek to demolish your ideas, the effect may be to weaken your ego or widen the interpersonal gulf between us, but that's not something I intend and neither is it a necessary consequence of my defeating your argument. The distinction, then, is between attacking ideas and attacking persons. Only the former is fully sanctioned by our rules of warfare.

Second, distinguish between private and public controversy. Browne and Hausmann speak of self and other engaged in argument, as if there were no one else present to hear or overhear the dispute. In a private quarrel, as between intimates, empathy toward the other may be pre-eminently important. But in a public controversy, that is, one staged before an audience, the primary obligation is to the audience, not to the other disputant. And the other disputant understands and accepts this—or ought to—as a condition of the contest. This being the case, there is no inherent incompatibility between argument as verbal warfare and argument as friendship.

My Position

I am generally sympathetic to the position expressed by Browne and Hausmann. In fact, I have elsewhere presented support for the conversation among good friends, as opposed to the legal tribunal, as a model arena for advancing the consideration of moral conflicts (Simons, 1995). In joining with Browne and Hausmann, I don't want to paint a picture of "friendly argument" as free from contestation. To the contrary, whether one is speaking of personal friendship (Rawlins, 1983) or of civic friendship (Brown, 1994), criticism plays a necessary role. Indeed, one might argue that good friends have a greater obligation to criticize each other's arguments than do mere acquaintances. Richard Bernstein exemplified this very point at a philosophy colloquium some time ago. The occasion was a lecture by the Marxist dialectician, Gregor Markos, at which Bernstein served as a respondent.

Bernstein prefaced his commentary by telling the audience of his long association with Markos, of their common interests and mutual respect, and of his delight at sharing the stage once again with this gifted philosopher. As to the substance of Markos's paper, said Bernstein, it reminded him of a time, many years earlier, when he had submitted his dissertation to his esteemed mentor, the late Paul Weiss. Weiss had begun his commentary by congratulating Bernstein on the level of scholarship and erudition displayed in the dissertation. He allowed that Bernstein was in thorough command of its subject matter, that he had prepared his case thoughtfully and creatively, and that the dissertation's style was graceful and arresting. "But," said Weiss, "it's conclusions are all wrong."

Having in this way introduced his own commentary, Bernstein proceeded to take apart the Markos paper, and by the time he was through its conclusions were effectively called into question. Turning, then, to his friend on the platform, Bernstein acknowledged that his criticisms had been candid, even harsh, and that on most public occasions he tended to be more circumspect in his criticisms. In this case, he said, he felt it was his obligation to furnish as powerful a critique as he could muster. "After all," said Bernstein, "what are good friends for?"

The essential difference between argument as friendship and argument as war, as I see it, is that friendship *combines* support for the other with criticism, whereas argument as war need not and often does not. Bernstein could not have taken Markos' arguments apart until he had evinced his great respect for Markos. Likewise, Weiss prepared the way for criticism of Bernstein's dissertation with a display of support for Bernstein. Although criticism in these cases dealt strictly with ideas, criticism in friendship may legitimately extend to the person. Beginning in childhood and continuing through life, one function of the friendship circle is to teach us who we are and what it means to be in community (Rawlins, 1983; Simons, 1995). Browne and Hausmann thus have it exactly right when they speak of the development of self and other as a primary goal of argument as friendship.

In suggesting that support must be combined with criticism in argument as friendship, I believe the first obligation is to try to get the other right. As Gadamer (1989:33) puts it, "both partners must have the good will to try to understand one another." This may involve practicing what some have called a hermeneutics of charity or collaboration as a precursor to a more critical reading. Should I be in doubt as to what it is you intended to say, I am obligated to give your remarks the reading most favorable to your case. Speaking of Aristotle's conception of civic friendship, Richard Brown (1994) remarks that "friends love the rational good that they bring forth in each other independent of external expediencies."

Additionally, good civic or personal friends should, as Browne and Hausmann suggest, build on shared common ground. Some time ago I had the honor of addressing a conference with Thomas Kuhn in the audience. Not by accident, in commenting on the relationship between friendship and scholarship, I singled out Kuhn as one who

was especially supportive of his adversaries. In particular, I noted that in the opening to his initial comments in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Kuhn, 1970), Kuhn took great pains to emphasize the similarities between himself and Sir Karl Popper before going on to identify their differences. Shortly after the conference session had officially been brought to a close, Kuhn came up to me, voiced appreciation for what I had said, and then, with tears in his eyes, expressed the wish that his philosopher colleagues had been equally supportive. Unfortunately, he said, they're too busy cutting each other up.

Finally, I would suggest that supportiveness is conveyed as much by how our adversaries are addressed as by what we say to them. Richard Brown (1994) tells the story of a conference he ran at the University of Maryland designed to forge a spirit of unity among representatives of the cultural left. At the conference "discourse tended to be exclusionary, with spirited attacks on opposing positions but little effort at conciliation conversationally, let alone politically. Nor was there much attention to the affective subcommunications that largely defined the relationships of the conversants." Said Brown, "it was a truism for all those attending that discourse creates reality. But we failed to ask what kinds of realities precisely were we creating with our own forms of speech, particularly our critical academic discourse."

Kenneth Gergen (1995) offers similar concerns about critical academic discourse. He goes so far as to suggest that "pure critique," which I take him to mean criticism without the necessary support for the other, is dividing academic communities into armed camps. The problem is not that our criticism is incompetent; rather, we in academe have gotten too good at it. In addition to the standard tests of quality of argumentation, we now have postempiricist critique, poststructuralist critique and ideology critique.

> We now stand with a mammoth arsenal of critical weaponry at our disposal. The power of such technology is unmatched by anything within the scholarly traditions of longstanding. There is virtually no hypothesis, body of evidence, ideological stance, literary canon, value commitment, or logical edifice that cannot be dismantled, demolished or derided with the implements at hand. Only rank prejudice, force of habit or the anguished retaliation of deflated egos can muster a defence against the intellectual explosives within our grasp (Gergen, 1995: 59).

What is more, pure critique polarizes. Responsive as it is to a preceding advocacy, critique sets up a binary—this versus that—which deflects attention from other issues, now considered peripheral. And once the debate is set in motion, it tends to get institutionalized, with "members" of each side ironically dependent on the opponent for their very identity. Where, for example, would we post-positivists and anti-positivists be without positivism?

Given this formalization, says Gergen, "the posture of one who is targeted for criticism can scarcely be anything but defensive (1995: 63). Critique thus begets counter-critique *ad infinitum*. Although each side puts forward its best evidence and most coherent arguments, nothing gets resolved so long as the interlocuter refuses the arguer's meanings. "The means for destroying the other's intelligibility are vast and varied," says Gergen. "Sentences may be lifted from context, concepts altered through recontextualization, arguments pressed to absurd extremes, examples transformed through parody, insidious intentions imputed, and so on....There are, then, myriad means of ambiguating, complexifying, doggerilizing or transforming an utterance to imbecility" (64).

The response to these critics is seen by the critics themselves as "cheap loutishness." And, indeed, it may well utilize in its response many of the same lines of argument as were initially deployed against it. For who among those of us who draw upon the arsenals of postempiricist critique, poststructuralist critique, and ideology critique are not themselves vulnerable to the familiar *tu quoque* riposte? Says Gergen, "To demonstrate the social basis of scientific fact is to reduce this demonstration to mere conversation; to attack the class bias underlying a given

policy is to transform the attack to a class bias; and to reconstruct the rhetoric of war is to transform talk of peace to a rhetorical flourish" (69).

Does this mean that all forms of critique, in all relational contexts, have such problematic consequences? Gergen says no, but refrains from elaborating on this important point. He does, however, suggest a variety of ways we could reduce the emphasis on ego, "the sense of authorial ownership of arguments and the threat of spoiled identities." In the spirit of mutual friendship and development, we can join together in formulating the best arguments we can muster on all sides of an issue. We can role-play opposing views. We can parody ourselves or in other ways use ourselves as abject lessons in how not to communicate.

Whatever else we do, I hope that we do not abandon criticism or other forms of contestation in the process of providing support for the other. As Bernstein said, "what are good friends for"?

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