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Commentary on Michael Yong-Set, “A Ludological Approach to Argumentation”

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There is so much to say about Mr. Yong-Set’s project, that, arguably the first thing to say is that there is a lot to say, because the fact that there is a lot to say, says something very important. I will return to this in a moment.

Despite the wordplay, I don’t mean to be playing games here. Rather, my intention is to improve our cognitive fields with respect to what he has proposed. However, since my understanding of what counts as cognitive improvement is not limited to increases in knowledge, imparting information is not necessary. I count an increase in understanding as a significant cognitive gain, whether or not there is an accompanying increase in propositional knowledge. I’d say the same thing about increasing one’s ability to engage with a topic – e.g., to be able to voice appreciation, offer a judgment, raise an objection, or ask a good question. Argumentation may be the epitome of engagement, as well as the primary vehicle for understanding. What could be a better sign that an argument has been a good one than that both the proponent and opponent come away with a better understanding of their differences and their own standpoints, even if neither one has changed her beliefs?

Metaphor may be even more effective than argumentation as a way to engage us and enhance our understanding. Think of the transformation in our understanding of religion – but not of our knowledge – due to Marx and Engels’ provocative identification of religion as the opiate of the masses. Think, too, of how that metaphor compels us to make sense of its semantic anomaly, because we already know that religions are not opiates. A metaphor that piques our interest or helps us appreciate a new way of looking at the world surely deserves credit for those positive cognitive changes.

What that means is that when we argue about the metaphors we use for arguments, the possibilities of something good coming from it are very good indeed!

So let’s focus on Mr. Yong-Set’s metaphor of arguments as fit objects for ludological analysis. In treating his proposal as a metaphor, I am not assuming he meant for it to be taken that way. But in the spirit of generosity, that is how I take it. One reason I take it as a metaphor is that it does not work as a literal claim: despite important points of congruence, arguments are not literally games. The differences are too salient to ignore. A more important reason is that metaphors act like instructions: “See this thing through the lens provided by the cluster of concepts associated with that other thing.” They require active engagement in the form of interpretive contributions from their audiences for completion. The ludological perspective needs that work. But the most important reason that I take it as a metaphor – but most definitely not as a mere metaphor – is that it is too meaningful, too interesting, and too important to be treated as merely a factual claim. It deserves better.

The important question thus becomes whether it is a good metaphor.

I do not yet know the answer to that question. It could turn out to be a good metaphor, but the jury is out and it will stay out until some of the interpretive work I just referred to gets done. I suppose the fact that a verdict is not yet in could be counted as a negative – either as a failure to do the necessary developmental work or as a failure to demonstrate the vitality of the metaphor – but that would be (forgive the phrase) a “premature evaluation.” It would be an impatient response betraying a stunted appreciation for how metaphors work and how arguments work. In both cases, the cognitive effects often occur well after the relevant speech acts.

Consider the war metaphor for arguments. It is dominant, entrenched, and an almost clichéd way of talking about arguments. We are all familiar with the similarities – adversariality, strategies, attacks-and-counterattacks, winning-and-losing, etc. Those similarities make it a viable metaphor. We are all also well aware of the limits of the metaphor: we argue instead of going to war; arguments are not failures of diplomacy; arguments do not deploy armies with weapons that kill innocent people, etc. Those differences make it a metaphor rather than a literal description. And then there are the things that make it a terrible metaphor, such as its emphasis on the destructive elements of argumentation, the deforming consequences that such an emphasis has on how we argue, and the privileging of aggressive modes of intellectual activity at the expense of other forms of inquiry. But – and this is where the story gets really interesting – there are also things that make it a terrific metaphor despite its flaws. In generating lists of similarities and differences, where do we put the war-related concepts of, say, exit strategies and collateral damage? Are there counterparts in argumentation? Once the question is asked, we can see that there are. And what about Just War Theory? Are there Just and Unjust Arguments? Why, Yes, there are! What an interesting and important question to ask – but it’s not a question that we even could have asked in just that form without the backdrop of the argument-is-war metaphor. There is still meat to be extracted from that old chestnut.

How does a ludological perspective on argument stack up? Is it a viable metaphor that generates a comparably fruitful research program, hopefully without the negative consequences? What I am asking amounts to four questions, all as preparatory for a fifth question, the most important one. The four questions are as follows:

1. What are the relevant and important similarities, the points of congruence, between games and arguments?
2. What are the dissimilarities? What are the important ways in which arguments are not games and not even like games?
3. What might the effects be of thinking about arguments as games on how we argue? Might we be inclined to argue more playfully? Would that conception exacerbate or mitigate the negative effects of the argument-as-war metaphor?
4. What insights into argumentation might be gained by adopting the ludological perspective that would be inaccessible or less accessible from other approaches?

It is only after we have answers to these questions – even if just partial and provisional – that we can address the fifth question:

5. Should we engage with this metaphor? Do we have sufficient reason to adopt a ludological perspective?
As could have been expected, Yong-Set has focused on identifying similarities between games and arguments while downplaying differences. Leaving the differences to others is not an advisable strategy because others will be all too happy to oblige. This is where Yong-Set brings in Wittgenstein on games, but with curious, unintended, double-edged effects. Many morals can be drawn from Wittgenstein’s discussion, but anti-essentialism has to be one of them. The range of application of the word is too vast, diverse, and loosely connected for strict definition. And that arguably applies to arguments, too. But here Yong-Set reverses course: he does offer a definition of games in terms of formal systems, possibility spaces, and unequal outcomes; he doubles down by offering a definition of arguments, too, in terms of intended cognitive improvements; and he cements it all in place with references to the argument language game, rather than games in the plural. Besides being antithetical to the Wittgensteinian spirit that informed the earlier part of his discussion, it practically demands legalistic counterexamples and contrarian objections. Arguments aim for cognitive improvement? Is that what our arguments about whether to go for Thai food or Chinese food, about empty gas tanks, and how much of a raise the striking workers should get are all about? We can, of course, squeeze those arguments into the cognitive improvement model, but that insults the theory by trivializing it.

The third and fourth questions are more important: What effect would a ludological perspective have on how we think about arguments and how we argue? On the side of praxis, would we be likely to argue less agonistically – entering arguments with a “lusory attitude” – since a game requires prior agreement on which game we will play and its rules? Would we take argumentation less seriously? Is argumentation an optional activity? Above all, what theoretical advantages and insights might result? How does a ludological perspective enlarge the possibility space for argumentation theory? That question has not yet been answered.

So, back to the last question: do we have enough reason to justify adopting the ludological perspective? Sadly, I think the answer is that we do not. Not yet. But, as I said, there is a lot to say about Yong-Set’s proposal. So, while we may not have sufficient grounds for adopting the ludological perspective, he has given us more than enough reason to explore his proposal. And, happily, that is the kind of engagement that good arguments – and good metaphors – deserve.