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Sophisticated Modernism and the Continuing Importance of Argument Evaluation

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I want to tweak the panel's topic by suggesting that if there is a problem with an overabundant pluralism in argumentation theory, one way to address the problem is by agreeing on shared purposes for the study of argument. Some years ago Robert Rowland argued that one way to identify an argument field is by identifying a discourse community's shared purpose (1981). While it is difficult to identify a common theoretical framework for those writing under the sign of "argument," we may have a better chance to constitute a shared identity by asking about what we do with our theories. Indeed, I don't believe it is likely that we can reach consensus about theoretical issues apart from asking the pragmatic question of *why* we generate theory; that is, what is the purpose for theory? There are many defensible answers, of course, and in this paper I want to explore one of them.

A decade ago at this conference I argued for the importance of the scholarly practice of argument evaluation. I advocated more scholarship that renders an explicit judgment such that "an argument might be judged valid or invalid, sound or unsound, good or bad, strong or weak, ethical or unethical" (Schiappa 1991, 39). Argument evaluation is not a unitary method or theory, rather, it is a shared purpose. I have tried to heed my own suggestion by publishing a collection titled *Warranting Assent: Case Studies in Argument Evaluation* (Schiappa, 1995) and encouraging such scholarship in my role as editor of *Argumentation and Advocacy* (1999-2001). I wish again to advocate the centrality of argumentation evaluation as a direction and purpose for research in argumentation studies. I begin by summarizing the impediments to such research, and then outline the potential contributions of argument evaluation for our pedagogy, scholarship, and civic engagement.

Reviewing the Impediments to Argument Evaluation

I have argued previously (1991, 1995) that there are three methodological injunctions or scholarly norms that tend to discourage argument evaluation. While I don't want to repeat old arguments, it may be useful to note whether and how these norms have changed.

The first I described as the "enduring versus ephemeral" injunction that suggests that the primary goal of argumentation scholarship is to contribute to theory development. The title of this panel, for example, implies that our future lies in theory. Too often case studies are considered worthwhile only as vehicles for theory development, not as self-sufficient scholarly projects. For the most part, the fetishizing of theory continues in the humanities, and it is a fair

generalization to say that most editors prefer to publish work that creates or significantly adds to current theory rather than tests or illustrates the utility of extant theory. There is room, and need, for both sorts of research. For example, in *Warranting Assent*, several studies clearly advance our theoretical understanding of argumentation while also providing excellent case studies. And a special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy* (Spring 2000) on Douglas Walton's theory of *ad hominem* argument nicely illustrates the utility of testing and refining a theory with a series of detailed case studies. I am heartened by such efforts, but I think it is fair to say that case studies featuring an explicit evaluation of argument still do not get the respect they deserve.

The second norm is the "truth-avoidance" injunction that says (for reasons modern or postmodern) that critics should avoid making assessments of the truth-content of advocates' arguments. One would think that this norm would have grown stronger in the past decade with the continuing popularity of various postmodern theorists, but the opposite is the case. The reason, I suspect, is that argumentation scholars long ago carved out a theoretical space for themselves that can be described as "Sophisticated Modernism." Long before the label postmodernism became popular, the most significant philosophical tenets associated with postmodernism—antiessentialism, antifoundationalism, antiabsolutism, for example—had already been adopted by American pragmatists. Kevin DeLuca describes Modernist Philosophy as emphasizing as "the Cartesian subject, scientific reason as the universal method to foundational Truth, and linear progress" (1999, p. 68). But these notions were all under assault a century ago (Menand, 2001). What is often caricatured as Modernism might be better labeled "Naïve Modernism" (Modernism pre-Freud and pre-Darwin). The rise of Logical Positivism muddied the waters a bit, but most theorists had jumped that philosophical ship by the early 1960s in the wake of critiques by Quine (1980) and Kuhn (1970), and such philosopher/argumentation scholars as Toulmin (1958) and Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969). The point is that argument scholars figured out decades ago that one can recognize that our facts are socially constructed and our knowledge claims probabilistic and contingent, yet still value argument and be willing to make and defend claims.

The norm that has all but disappeared from view is the methodological "principle of nonpartisanship." Phil Wander can no longer raise eyebrows by describing scholarship as inescapably ideological and value-laden (1983). The only variance I can detect is just how explicit critics may be about identifying the values and political beliefs that inform their selection of projects, methods, or analysis. But to the best of my knowledge no argument scholars pretend that "objectivity" means anything other than trying to be fair and reasonable.

In sum, I would suggest that the methodological injunctions that sometimes have functioned to discourage argument evaluation as a scholarly endeavor are less potent than they used to be. I provide additional evidence in the second part of this paper as I cite examples of productive argument evaluation.

The Contributions of Argument Evaluation

Pedagogy

Evaluation is what undergraduate argumentation pedagogy is all about: We want to teach our students how to make sound, good, strong, ethical arguments rather than unsound, bad, weak, unethical arguments. Though our theory literature problematizes all of these adjectives, most argumentation teachers recognize that the inability to make absolute theoretical distinctions, or set forth formal evaluative criteria a priori, does not prevent us from teaching students how to be better advocates and better consumer/critics of arguments they encounter. We live in an argument-saturated environment, no matter how narrowly one defines "argument." One cannot participate effectively in civic affairs, evaluate ideological arguments that preserve or challenge the status quo, or succeed in most professions, without some ability to generate coherent arguments and to evaluate the claims, reasoning, and evidence of advocates. The undergraduate argument class is one place where the historic philosophical justification for our discipline matches up well with the politics of modern-day Academia, since our mission in such courses enacts the best-known goal of a liberal arts education: to produce citizens who are thoughtful critical thinkers and articulate advocates.

Most of us who have coached debate or taught undergraduate argumentation courses recognize that our undergraduate argument pedagogy is one of our most important missions. This mission suffers, I believe, if we pay insufficient attention to the possible links between scholarship and pedagogy. Within most Rhetoric/Composition programs there is a strong social norm that theorizing *matters* for how rhetoric/composition is taught to undergraduates. By contrast, as Leff (1992) and Swartz (1997) argue, the chasm between what goes on in the scholarship of rhetorical theory and what happens in the basic course of most Communication Departments is huge. Most of us want little or nothing to do with the basic course and receive little recognition or reward for what effort we invest in them; accordingly, it is not surprising that very little of contemporary communication and rhetorical theory trickles down into what or how we teach our basic courses. In argumentation studies, we need to lean closer to the Rhetoric/Composition model and away from the historic neglect of basic communication courses.

Useful steps in such a direction can be found in a special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy* edited by Carol Winkler and David Cheshier (Winter 2000). The articles published therein attempt to illustrate how various theory-inspired pedagogical innovations can transform the argumentation classroom. Now, as Winkler and Cheshier note, the ideas advocated by the authors (which range from importing feminist-inspired notions of "invitational rhetoric" to a call for "Debate Across the Curriculum") can be subjected to critique from both the Left and the Right (2000, pp. 103-104). Some practices can be described as not going far enough to challenge patriarchy and capitalism, others can be described as not preparing students to develop traditional critical thinking skills needed to survive in the "real world." The point is that the dialogue between theory and pedagogy has begun in earnest and, hopefully, will not end with one special issue.

No matter how the argumentation classroom evolves, evaluating arguments will continue to be a key component. The reason is simple: If one does not believe that one can "argue" (whatever that may come to mean) in a better or worse manner, then why would you ever teach or take a course in it? Conceptualizing argument as "cooperative" (Williams & McGee, 2000) or "invitational" (Mallin & Anderson, 2000) may mean that the evaluative criteria shifts from epistemological to axiological and ideological concerns, but evaluative criteria will remain as long as argumentation is an activity we think we can teach students something about. And as long as evaluative criteria remain, argument evaluation remains an important scholarly activity that can and should inform our pedagogical practices.

Scholarship

In this section I discuss recent research that illustrates the usefulness of argument evaluation as a discrete mode of scholarship. I have insufficient space to survey all that could be reasonably labeled argument evaluation and so limit myself to two examples. I begin, immodestly enough, with work appearing in *Warranting Assent* (Schiappa 1995). That collection is organized by evaluative approach—epistemological, axiological, or ideological. I limit myself to a description of those falling in the epistemological category since those studies are the most explicit about their aspirations not being to advance theory but to enact solid critical argument evaluation. Studies by Young and Launer, Winkler, Gouran, and Fielding illustrate that traditional analytical tools of argument evaluation can yield important insights about significant texts. These studies utilize concepts that are already well understood by theorists, such as sign reasoning, quasi-logical arguments, narrative analysis, the Toulmin model, and shifts in presumption. The studies engage texts that are socially significant: conspiracy arguments about the shooting down of Korean Air Lines Flight 007, former President Bush's narratives justifying the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the failed decision making that led to the disastrous launch of the space shuttle *Challenger*, and the controversial *Final Report of the Attorney General's Commission on Pornography*. In the hands of able critics, theoretically-ordinary concepts may yield insights that can go well beyond ordinary results. At a time when public argument performs an epistemic function, inducing adherence to beliefs literally about matters of life and death, it would be irresponsible for argument scholars not to produce such research because some may find the results "theoretically modest."

Second, I want to touch on scholarship that proceeds from a dialectical approach to argument. Most of us are familiar with Frans H. van Eemeren's and Rob Grootendorst's *Pragma-Dialectical Theory of Argumentation* (1984, 1992); since Professor van Eemeren is on the panel I will let him speak for himself. It is likely that fewer are familiar with the ever-growing *corpus* of Douglas Walton, a professor of philosophy at the University of Winnipeg, who has published more than 30 books and 80+ articles, most of which are devoted to informal logic, fallacies, and argumentation. While his work has much in common with the normative dimension of the Dutch pragma-dialectical approach, there are interesting differences. Van Eemeren and his collaborators proceed by moving from a general philosophical theory (Popper's critical rationalism) to articulate a generalizing theory of pragma-dialectics that results in the study of particular

argumentation (see, e.g., van Eemeren, Grootendorst, Jackson, & Jacobs, 1993). By contrast, much of Walton's work functions inductively. The characteristics of a particular type of argument (such as *ad hominem* arguments) are derived from a series of examples, criteria are generated that, in turn, are used to evaluate further examples. To be sure, Walton is guided by theoretical beliefs about human reasoning and dialogue, but what makes his books distinctive is the strong emphasis on engaging and evaluating a wealth of case studies. He has, for example, produced book-length studies on begging the question (1991), slippery slope arguments (1992b), arguments from ignorance (1996), appeals to expert opinion (1997a), appeals to pity (1997b), *ad hominem* arguments (1998), appeals to popular opinion (1999), and scare tactics in argument (2000).

I hazard the prediction that, decades from now, systematic research projects such as those by van Eemeren and Walton will be considered major achievements. Though I am sure my colleagues will correct any unintended oversights on my part, I can think of no U.S. research program in argumentation that is comparable in scope or have been as productive. For the purpose of this paper, the key point is that such research projects, which have argument evaluation as a central part of their purpose, can be an important and productive direction for argumentation studies.

Argument Evaluation as Civic Engagement

Last I want to note the importance of the practice of argument evaluation as a means of civic engagement. Often disparaged as "service," the idea of engaging a larger, public audience in our role as academic scholars has found renewed respectability (Applegate, 2001). For example, in 1999 a group of university presidents endorsed the "Presidents' Fourth of July Declaration on the Civic Responsibility of Higher Education." Signed by almost two hundred university presidents, this declaration calls for higher education to become engaged, through actions and teaching, with our various communities as part of our traditional mission of research and education. The declaration notes that there are many possible forms of civic engagement: for this paper I want to mention two.

The first form of civic engagement I want to describe is when a scholar gains the appropriate expertise to engage specialized discourse communities. In the process, such individuals may become less recognizable as "argument scholars," per se, and more closely identified with the role of a public advocate in a specific area of expertise. Argument scholar and environmentalist Robert Cox's role as president of the Sierra Club is an exemplary case in point.

Gordon R. Mitchell's efforts could be praised as producing exemplary pedagogy, scholarship, and civic engagement; indeed, his activities illustrate how such categories can have considerable overlap (Mitchell 1998). But it is his efforts to engage a wider public that I want to draw attention to here. His research (2000) on ballistic missile defense has reached a level of sophistication that he has been called upon to present briefing papers for such audiences as the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, the International Security Information Service, and the Federation of American Scientists, and he has published in *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (1997). Furthermore, Mitchell engages a wider public audience through a combination of T.V./radio appearances, newspaper and magazine publications, and as a facilitator of public debates. Mitchell's

work is unencumbered by the methodological injunctions described above, and as a result his work has enriched the discipline of argument studies and is engaging literally a worldwide audience of interested experts and citizens. It is my sincere hope that young scholars will be inspired his example.

The second form of civic engagement I want to describe is when scholars engage a wider audience specifically as an argument critic. Many of us perform this role when the presidential candidate debates roll around every four years or when we react to calls from reporters. But there are many more opportunities to be proactive as public argument critics. In the wake of the Minnesota Twins' efforts in 1997 to secure public financing for a new baseball-only stadium, a group of graduate students and I spent eight months conducting a series of studies of the failed campaign. The most relevant study is a chapter in which we evaluate and critique the arguments made for the economic benefits claimed by the Twins (Schiappa, 1998). The focus is a report by Arthur Andersen LLP that was commissioned by the Twins. Our evaluation drew upon scholarly literature by sports economists as well as our own statistical analysis of the claimed effects of new stadiums on fan attendance. In addition to the attention our report received from local media, we received requests for copies of the report from the state's legislature, various interest groups, and the Governor's Task Force on Sports Facilities. The point is that there are important contributions we can be making to our communities, if we are willing. As Mitchell notes, there is much to be gained in conceiving of criticism "as a 'productive' activity (in the classical sense), i.e. one 'searching for the means of persuasion' in many contexts and before many different audiences--not just the audience of disciplinary peers. By taking such a turn, one might conceive of graduate education as a more richly contoured enterprise, designed to produce not only QJS writers but sophisticated rhetors skilled in taking their message to wider public audiences" (2001).

Conclusion

The sophists of classical Greece moved easily among the roles of argument teachers, theorists, critics, and political advocates. Today we need to be sophisticated modernists who recognize that, in a sense, all of our work is "ephemeral," that we cannot help but make contingent and probabilistic truth-claims, and that even silence cannot be described as wholly impartial. The fragmentation of our individual selves as teachers, scholars, and citizens can be harmonized, at least in part, by valuing the shared purposes that can be advanced through our efforts as socially-responsible argument scholar-citizens. Similarly, the fragmentation of the academic argumentation community can be harmonized, at least in part, by valuing the shared purposes of argumentation studies. I submit that the critical evaluation of public argument is an appropriate candidate for such a shared purpose that can benefit our pedagogy, scholarship, and civic engagement.

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