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Theoretical Pieties, Johnstone's Impiety, and Ordinary Views of Argumentation

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The greatest single influence on rhetorical theory throughout its long history, and likewise on its daughter or sister enterprise, the theory of argument, has without doubt been students.

In part, the influence has been bad. Docile students have (it seems) offered little resistance to their teachers' theoretical hobbyhorses, being willing to cram for the exam, or the speech, fantastical systems of *staseis*, *topoi*, *figurae* and five or seven part formulae for developing arguments. Even the more realistic bits of lore have proved so eminently learnable that as Sperber and Wilson (1990) have pointed out, students have not pressed us, teachers and theorists, to elaborate them further over eighty generations of basic courses.

Recalcitrant students have also caused us problems, and it is this bad influence that I want to examine here. Some students, we think, resist argument. They bring negative attitudes to our classrooms. Their misconceptions shut down learning; they are wrong; moreover, they are somewhat insulting. So we have in response been tempted to a sort of preachiness, an apologetic stance—a piety about our subject. I suppose we've all caught ourselves doing it; I know I have: the first day of class defense of the dignity of argument.

Like most defensiveness, this reaction feels unsatisfactory. We seem to be prisoners of what we take to be our students' limited views. In this essay, I am going to enlist the aid of Henry W. Johnstone Jr. to help show us an escape. Impiously, Johnstone accepts and even elaborates some of our students' common critiques of argument. He challenges us, teachers and theorists of argument, not to resist these critiques, but to acknowledge and embrace them. And in this way he invites us to a more complex understanding of our subject and to a deeper conversation with our students.

I want to close this essay by opening such a conversation, listening to what students actually say about their experiences with argument. To begin, however, let us recall the conversation we open with our students in our textbooks, starting with chapter one, page one.

1.

We frequently say things such as “Yesterday, Rhonda and Janice had a terrible argument” or “those two are always arguing.” Much of our ordinary usage of the term *argument* implies two people engaged in interpersonal conflict. *Argument* thus becomes a synonym for verbal hostility (Rybacki and Rybacki 2004, 1).

Argument is conflict: this is what we think many students come to the basic argument class thinking. The idea turns up even in the earliest works of the American debate tradition—for example, in George Pierce Baker’s recognition that “many people” believe argument to be mere “contentiousness” (Baker and Huntington 1905, 2). Our best textbooks ever since have opened by constructing an ordinary student/reader who takes argument to be “a kind of (usually unpleasant) interpersonal exchange,” like “quarrels” or “squabbles” (Inch and Warnick 2002, 6, 7), “angry,” involving a “desire to win” (Rieke, Sillars, and Peterson 2005, 11), “unhealthy, destructive of human relationships and thus [to] be avoided” (Hollihan and Baaske 2005, 7), “futile” (Foster 1908, 280), and “aggressive, hostile, and stubborn” (Patterson and Zarefsky 1983, 6). And at least some textbooks from the tradition of teaching written argument in English departments project a similar reader, one for whom “that word”—argument—“sets off alarm bells . . . because it evokes images of quarreling or worse” (Williams and Colomb 2001, xxviii).¹

Our textbooks propose a variety of sources from which students could have picked up this view. The debate process itself, with its attack and defense, its victory and defeat, Ehninger and Brockriede admit, may “understandably” induce “the casual observer” to regard it “as a species of competition or conflict” (1963, 19). Some textbooks go on to blame “the traditional model for teaching argumentation and debate” (Inch and Warnick 2002, 68)—that is, other textbooks—for actually promoting the idea. More broadly, the negative conception of argument can be traced back to the associations of argument and war “entrenched even in our language” (Williams and Colomb 2001, 3) and pervading “the conceptual system of western culture” (Rieke, Sillars, and Peterson 2005, 52).

So it seems our students, being like “many people,” come to our classes ready to say that argument is conflict. What do we reply? Emphatically, “no.” “That is not the sort of argument with which this book is concerned” Inch and Warnick declare (2002, 7). Or as Rybacki and Rybacke put it bluntly, “if ... your definition of *argument* or *having an argument* is based on verbal hostility and escalating emotions, it is our intention to change your perception. In this textbook, we want to open your eyes” (2004, 1).

In some sense this denial is a laudable attempt to carve out a space for learning. Every teacher has to say “no” to some things students bring with them. But I want to question whether we can maintain our denial of students’ ordinary views of argument. Our textbooks adopt three “eye-opening” strategies—three ways of distinguishing argument as we teach it from the hostile and futile argument of the “many people.” But Johnstone, we will see, has warned us against the limitations of each.

Take a first approach to “eye opening.” Perhaps the conflict apparent in so many arguments is merely that: an appearance. In this view, the disagreements that occur on the surface of argument can only proceed because they rest on deeper agreements. Argument may look like conflict, but as Ehninger and Brockriede assert in their classic articulation of this thesis, “considered as a whole” debate is “clearly a co-operative endeavor” (1963, 20, 22).

Our textbooks identify several types of agreement underpinning argument. James Herrick offers a particularly sophisticated discussion of the possibilities. Arguers may agree about the starting points, premises, or “*evidence*” for their arguments; they may agree about “*procedures*, the rules or guidelines according to which the argumentation will take place,” including “the most basic agreement . . . *to enter into argumentation*” at all; and they may agree about the “*goals*” of the dispute (2004, 14, 15). This final possibility has been the one most frequently taken up. One early textbook declares that “adversaries in debate should have at least this common purpose,—the search after truth” (Foster 1908, 310). Ehninger and Brockriede elaborate the same theme:

Every debate that ever has occurred or ever will occur must be dominated by a basic harmony of aim. Unless the opposing debaters hold the same goal in view—peace, prosperity, social welfare, national security, or whatever it may be—no debate is possible. There is no ground upon which they may come together in argument, no area where the thrusts of proof and the counterthrusts of refutation may meet and interact. Interpretations, inferences, and values may vary; on the ultimate goal itself, there can be no disagreement (1963, 20).

In this view, argument begins in apparent disagreement, but ideally ends by revealing the consensus that was implicitly present all along. As Herrick puts

it succinctly, “argumentation depends on *agreements* that permit resolution of the disagreements that led to argumentation” (2004, 15).

Johnstone acknowledges that this pious attempt “to reduce philosophical disagreement to appearance” has its attractions (1959, 15). But he intransigently reminds us that this answer does not stay true to our experience of argument. As we well know, there may be no agreements about evidence, since each arguer’s position “has in advance stipulated what is to constitute evidence” in such a way that the opponent’s attempts at proof are ruled out even before they are made (1967, 52).² There may be no agreements about rules or procedures, either, since the dispute, “rather than being governed by fixed rules, represents the effort of each disputant to enforce his own rules” (1959, 12). And there may be no agreements about ultimate ideals, since the ends we observe emerging in discussion are often diverse (1959, 15).³

In Johnstone’s view, “hopeful theories” of controversy such as those put forward in our textbooks try to avoid admitting that “philosophical antagonism may be so radical as to preclude any but the most trivial reconciliation” (1959, 132). Philosophical argument begins when we encounter someone who disagrees, and although we can try to evade the argument by seeking some agreement in which to rest, if the controversy is truly philosophical we will find no such common ground. There is no deeper “level” (Ehninger and Brockriede 1963, 20) of agreement; disagreement is not merely a “stage of an activity destined to eventuate in unanimity” (Johnstone 1962, 118). Johnstone rather invites us to acknowledge the “abyss,” “impassible gulf,” or even “intergalactic spaces” between opposing philosophical positions (1959, 3; 1967, 50; 1978a, 56). Philosophical disagreement is therefore “radical” (e.g., 1959, 3, 19; 1962, 118), and “controversy,” not agreement, “ultimately real” (1978a, 86).

Now, the textbooks might defend their “hopeful” assertions by noting that Johnstone is only talking about *philosophical* controversy, not the garden-variety kind we invite our students to enter. And there do seem to be some non-radical disagreements: Johnstone gives the example of a dispute over the date of the first atomic bomb (1967, 48). But it will be impossible to protect our students entirely from philosophical controversy in Johnstone’s sense. “Philosophers are by no means the only ones who experience [philosophical] confrontations,” Johnstone explains; “we all do. . . . All of our fundamental commitments are philosophical” (1967, 56). And we all *have* fundamental commitments, however “unsophisticated, undeliberate, and even altogether unconscious” (1959, 127) they may be. So many civic and interpersonal issues seem painful and irresolvable because even the smallest can implicate the deepest conflicts between worldviews. One suspects that Johnstone’s dispute over dates could reveal some

new epistemological “intergalactic space,” since “the most innocent statements are sometimes, in fact, violently controversial” (1959, 36).

If we cannot rest with the idea that conflict is merely apparent, we might adopt a second strategy for “opening the eyes” of our students: admitting that the deep disagreement in argument is real, but asserting that we can distinguish a good, argumentative way of handling it from a bad, non-argumentative approach. Although “the situations that spark conflict will never disappear,” nevertheless “the potential for conflict and even war” can be avoided through “*arguing*—the process of resolving differences of opinion through communication” (Hollihan and Baaske 2005, 4). Argument is in specific preferable to “*coercion* . . . the threat or use of force” (Freeley and Steinberg 2000, 11) and to “violence or coercion” (Herrick 2004, 51) as a way of managing disagreement.

Hitler probably remains the paradigmatic case of the alternative to argument, for example:

Critical choices and decisions are . . . the ideal toward which wise men strive. For though they fall short in the attainment, the striving itself sets them in the proper direction. Hitler bellowed, “Wir denken mit unserem Blut” (“We think with our blood”), and led the world into war. Adlai Stevenson speaks for a saner and happier society when he emphasizes the importance of critical decision-making in our own democratic culture (Ehninger and Brockriede, 1963, 5).

But more contemporary examples can also be cited. Hollihan and Baaske juxtapose “effective argumentative dialogue” against “the alternative: terrorist assaults, the bulldozing of homes, and other acts of violence that could potentially escalate to a full-scale war that might kill thousands of people” in the Middle East (2005, 12). Inch and Warnick, possibly remembering events in Seattle, contrast argument with “extralegal protest . . . because violating the law and being violent . . . use force as opposed to argument to compel a decision” (2002, 70).

Argument (or indeed communication generally) is our most promising alternative to war. That pious thought runs deep in the rhetorical tradition, so it comes as a surprise to see Johnstone dismiss it almost off-hand. “Throughout recorded time,” Johnstone reminds us, “men have always based their conflicts upon arguments. Every war has been preceded by the search for an excuse for fighting.” Argument is therefore not the opposite of war, except in the trivial sense that it is hard to both fight and argue at the same time; otherwise, Johnstone remarks, the best argument would be the one that puts everyone to sleep (1963, 36).

Argument is implicated in war; war, or at least some force, is also implicated in argument. Johnstone persistently urges us to be curious about modes of persuasion “that on other theories would be dismissed as uses of force” (1990,

334): extralegal protests such as “shouts, obscenities, sit-ins, and interruptions of lectures” (1971, 80), the “psych-out” (1982), commands (1963, 1990), and most frequently, threats (e.g., 1963, 1980, 1990). “A threat is a form of argument,” Johnstone asserts, albeit a “degenerate” one (1963, 31). Threats and arguments both break into an ordinary existence in which the self is simply taken for granted. Both require a person to pay attention to her limits: in the case of physical threats, to death, the limit of her life; in the case of arguments, to the limits of her deepest commitments, marked off by their now-conspicuous conflict with the equally deep commitments of others. Both thus open—wedge open, Johnstone says—a space for the person to recognize the nature of the risk, to consider it, and to choose a response in which she freely chooses limits for herself. On the bright side, this means that both threats and arguments are deeply human modes of address, as contrasted with the stimuli we direct to animals, or the input we feed into machines (1990). But there is another side, too: in both threats and arguments we experience a demandingness that is reasonable to call *force*.⁴

A final approach to “opening the eyes” of our students might be to admit that disagreement in argument is real, and that the argumentative way of proceeding cannot be distinguished cleanly from other uses of force, but still to assert that argumentative conflict can be contained if argument is done right. “The problem, as we see it, is not that arguments per se are unhealthy,” one textbook insists; “rather, too many people have never learned how to argue in a constructive and socially beneficial fashion” (Hollihan and Baaske 2005, 7). Or as another puts it, “we hope to rehabilitate that [negative] image of argument by focusing not on its tone but on its form and intention. We’ll show you how we use argument not to upset social relationships, but to establish and strengthen them” (Williams and Colomb 2001, xxviii). What “fashion” or “form” is appropriate? To keep their arguments contained, our textbooks advise students to contain *themselves*; to not take or make argument personal, but to maintain “disinterestedness” (Ehninger and Brockriede 1963, 6). “Ego” is a common cause of painful argument, Fahnestock and Secor point out, at least in face-to-face encounters:

We often defend our positions the way a bird defends its territory—fiercely, automatically, without stopping to think. We often fail to see when ego is involved in any position we hold. After all, if we hold it, we undoubtedly have good reasons. Ego also forces us to defend positions just because someone else holds the opposite, and we cannot see that our attitude toward our audience or opponent is crippling our judgment. . . . All of us find it difficult to “give points” to the people we resist, for whatever reasons we resist them, deep-seated or trivial, temporary or long-standing (1990, 8).

To transact argument well, the arguer must therefore give up a bit on her own ego. She also must refrain from involving others' egos in the way that's ordinarily called *ad hominem*. A "destructive use of argument" occurs when the "self-concept of another person" is attacked "instead of, or in addition to, the person's position on a topic," an attack that "has the effect of inflicting ... psychological pain" (Rieke, Sillars, and Peterson 2005, 210). We can manage argumentative conflict, in this pious view, if we avoid such personalisms.

Johnstone is of course best known for his challenge to this position. In his view, all valid arguments are *argumenta ad hominem*—that is, they possess force because they show the addressee the self-contradictions within his own commitments. After all, once we accept that controversy is radical, there seems to be no other way of proceeding; there are no facts external to the dispute. We might hope to distinguish such Johnstonian *ad hominem* arguments from the personal attacks that our textbooks term fallacies. Unfortunately, this distinction too will prove difficult to maintain. The belief that an *ad hominem* argument draws upon is not just "a whim, prejudice, or dogma that any given individual is free to choose or reject, as he may choose or reject a brand of cigarettes" (1959, 17). Rather, the relevant belief is his *own*: he has an interest in it (1963, 33), it counts among the commitments that define him as a person. When the person finds that he is out of accord with such a commitment, he must take it personally in order to maintain his sense of being a person at all. Indeed, "it is precisely the aim of the *argumentum ad hominem* to force, or at least invite, an interlocutor to apply this epithet ["unwitting asserter of a contradiction"] to himself; i.e., to "admit ... assume responsibility for," and "take the blame for" being "caught up" in a contradiction (1989, 258–59). Thus in a Johnstonian *ad hominem*, "the argument is addressed to the man" (1978a, 54).

Self-recognition in these circumstances is almost inevitably going to hurt. Johnstone may be drawing on his own experience here. In the autobiographical introduction to *Validity and Rhetoric* (1978b) he recounts how he encountered from colleagues at his first teaching job an unexpected challenge to his whole way of philosophizing. Not only was he unable to overcome the challenge, he began to realize that while his colleagues were granting a partial legitimacy to his position, he was unable to respect theirs in turn. He was not being generous. The result of this self-recognition was he says "a painful period during which it was nearly impossible for me to carry forward any intellectual project at all." What emerged from this silence and "desperation" (1978b, 2) were some of Johnstone's earliest words on argument: "To become aware for the first time of the existence of philosophical disagreement is surely one of life's darkest moments" (1954, 245).

We now find ourselves in a painful moment somewhat like that Johnstone experienced. Facing our students on the first day of a basic argument course, or addressing them on the first page of a basic argument textbook, we realize that some are recalcitrant. They seem to think argument is angry and futile. We try to deny that argument is like that, saying “that’s not what we teach,” and attempt to alter their perceptions and “open their eyes” to our perspective. We build a case in support of our view: we argue that conflict is merely apparent, that managing conflict with arguments is an alternative to using force, and that argumentative force can be acceptable when it is impersonal. Our students may not resist such pieties, but, as we’ve seen, Johnstone does. He reminds us impiously that controversies are real, that arguments have force, and that their force is inevitably personal. Argument can indeed be painful, never-ending, and conflict-ridden. What then can we say to our students in defense of the dignity of our subject? Are we reduced to silence?

2.

We can begin by accepting recalcitrance as a legitimate response to argument. We can try to remain true to the full range of our experience, and attempt a reply that takes up the insights that even our recalcitrant students offer. Here is what Johnstone might have us say.

We argue because we have to. “The individual who attempts to speak and act in such a way as to remain true to himself must come into radical conflict with others no less true to themselves but according to different beliefs” (1959, 19). In such a conflict, we are obligated to defend our ground; to do anything less would be demeaning. Indeed, it is only because we encounter others who disagree that we become aware of and able to articulate the contours of our own commitments. The meaning of our position is dependent on the arguments that support it, and those arguments arise in real controversies.

We argue, then, to own up to the responsibilities of our positions. But in arguing we also have to answer back to the other. Inevitably, we must reply to them *ad hominem*, imagining their position with “tolerance, intellectual generosity, or respect,” from the inside, in order to demonstrate to them its inadequacy (1963, 34).

Arguing thus requires us to endure a contradiction, holding at once both our own and others’ positions within the embrace of what can only be called the self (1967, 54). “A person who chooses argument does in fact choose him-

self,” and from the argument earns a perspective that “tells the self who it is and where it stands.” In Johnstone’s terms, “philosophical arguments ... have a morale function” (1963, 35, 38, 39):

Philosophy is the articulation of morale. Good morale is not associated with a dull or confused person. It belongs only to those who have to some extent broken out from illusion and confusion. They know what they are about, and they have a sense of their own competence. Morale is thus a certain rather explicit self-confidence. (1978b, 69)

Now, I doubt that we could look at our students and tell them that argument has a “morale function,” or explain that argument constitutes a self as the locus of responsibility and transcendence. But as I will try to show, there are resonances of Johnstone’s ideas in the ordinary views of argument students bring with them to class.

It’s useful to take one of the more commonplace terms in Johnstone’s account as a starting point. I began to notice a few years ago how many students were telling me that they enrolled in argumentation classes to gain “self-confidence.” That was surprising. I wasn’t sure what they meant. So in the 2004 fall term I decided to explore this question with the twenty students enrolled in one Argumentation and Debate course. Throughout the course, I ask students to commit to their goals, to reflect on their performances, and to articulate their views of what argument is and why it should (or should not) be cultivated. In the following I untangle some of the themes evident in their work.

Even at the very beginning of the course students were interested in where argument would place them. For example, at the end of the first week, half the class listed the ability to argue impromptu among their main learning goals. Some students expressed this in temporal terms: they wanted to learn to argue “fast.” But more stressed a disposition in space: arguing “on the spot,” “on their feet,” or even “on their toes.” This vocabulary of posture was elaborated later in the semester by talk of “standing” to argue. At times, the students’ references to “standing” seem literal, since I do make them rise to debate. The following student, for example, may be speaking just of that physical act when he/she says:

I thought standing up in front of class speaking and giving our side was a good experience, but was kind of frustrating because we needed more evidence and proof to stand behind us.⁵

Notice though that even here the physical standing up is coupled with a figurative “standing behind.” Most frequently in the students’ reflections refer-

ences to “standing” and arguing have a wider significance, whether they evaluate it positively or negatively. For example:

Having skills as a debater would help me stand up for things I want or am passionate about in general [14].

I dislike conflict because I am forced to stand up for my own views and I tend to feel that my self-worth is under attack. I don't feel conflicts are worth my feeling bad about myself or my views so I just avoid them [3].

In addition to talk of the upness of “standing” we find also talk of its outness, as when one student noted that in a democracy,

anyone can come out in public and take a stand for anything they believe in. Whoever takes a stand must be ready to defend doubts and objections, but all reasonable arguments are valid [1].

It is notable that in all these passages, what arguers are “standing up” or “out” for are quite personal—“things I ... am passionate about,” “my *own* views,” what “they believe in.” More radically, students sometime speak of argument as a disposing “out” of the *self*:

I think that if you are arguing you are putting yourself out there in a way [5].

I personally prefer the research part of the debate because if I do eventually have to put myself out there to be attacked I want to have as strong a defense as possible, to protect myself from humiliation [3].

As the two passages quoted from student [3] suggest, some experience the self-revelation of argument as decidedly risky. Being “on the spot” or “on your toes” is of course an unstable position. Further, the ground on which students are “standing” turns out to be a terrain of disagreement. Indeed, the basic act of argument may be a “standing up *against*,” as observed by one student:

In order for my generation to make a change we must stand up against what we don't believe in and inevitably that will entail debate and argument [2].

This means that arguing opens one to attack, as many students commented:

I felt sort of trapped and I needed to explain myself which I'm not used to.

I felt nervous as if I were in front of a firing squad. I was worried that when it came to my turn I wouldn't have anything to say. Arguing values also leaves people vulnerable. To argue your values leaves you open to scorn and ridicule from people who don't agree with you [13].

The "vulnerability" mentioned in this last passage was expanded upon by student [19], who had had considerable experience in public speaking prior to the course:

Standing before a [large] audience ... creates an incredible sense of vulnerability. As a speaker, offering yourself so wholly to an audience creates a human interaction whereas you are judged and examined for your ability to communicate but also the speaker experiences acceptance or rejection from the audience... Opinions about you are quickly formed by the other person. Debating puts a person in the position to be examined by another [19].

If one fails to meet the challenges of the argument, the consequences to the self can be severe. Student [3]'s negative views have been quoted twice above—his/her feeling of having "self-worth" under "attack," and being faced with "humiliation;" these reactions appear well-justified.

Success in facing such risks of argument gives students an immediate sense of "accomplishment and competency" [2]. One put it simply: "I truly felt empowered by the debate" [16]. And there are other rewards of arguing that help outweigh the risks. In part, students speak of "standing" as an opportunity—or compulsion—to consider more deeply where they stand. Another student with extensive prior experience articulated his/her view thus:

The more you're forced to defend an idea, the more you really grow to understand and gain a better view of your own opinion. I spend a lot of time defending [a topic]. Each time I find myself defending that issue, I just become that much more passionate about it and understand better why I believe what I do. Being challenged, and being forced to defend my own view only creates better understanding of where I stand. It gets to the point where I welcome a challenge because I always grow stronger as a result [9].

And again, what can grow stronger through argument is not only one's "own view" but one's *self*. "Being forced to define your ideas also forces you to define yourself," as one student explained. Others similarly pointed out the "self-discovery" [7] that can come from argument. For example:

I think arguing creates personal growth in everyone. It does make you listen to the other side of arguments and if nothing else, makes your arguments stronger. As your

arguments become stronger, so do you as a person as does your knowledge of the subject and others' views. I think arguing helps us learn about others, but we also learn about ourselves [16].

I think argumentation and debate have helped me define who I am as a person. It forces me to examine the facts and decide for myself what is important to me. People who choose not to take a stand on an issue would have a hard time defining their beliefs and values [7].

The themes in this last passage were picked up by other students who noted the negative effects of *not* "standing" for things. For student [16], the alternative to "standing up" was to "sit silently where no one can judge your ability to communicate, interact, think, or passions." Several other students commented on the personal costs of "sitting" the argument out, or of "sitting back, being passive." One recounted this experience:

There exists a girl in [an organization the student belongs to] that holds a very high position.... I see her as a giant pushover because she never expresses her views on anything; she simply lets people tell her what to think and how to feel about something.... If this girl would stand up and vocalize what she believes in, then I would have more respect for her in such a leadership role. A person should never be ashamed to voice something they believe in. I think that some people don't stick up for something they think is right because either they don't think it's that big of a deal or they so desperately want to avoid conflict that they won't say anything so they don't make anybody angry with them [6].

So "self-definition" through argument may be painful, but it also seems necessary.

As this last passage suggests, "standing up" has effects on more than just the self; it also gives the self a place or "voice" among others. As one student put it, "I believe that debate is about getting my voice heard and gaining respect" [14]. Student [9] articulated a similar thought, writing, "there are many reasons to argue, but to me, it's a way to voice opinions and be heard." Having a "voice" is here portrayed as a way of gaining "respect" from others. In another reflection, student [9] added that it is also a way of gaining "respect" *for* them.

I never changed my stance [when arguing one year] but I started to see things from another angle, and after being challenged I also developed respect for the other side. Having respect for the other side only makes you stronger [9].

Yet other students spoke of the "respect" as *mutual*. "Argument (debate) brings on respect for one another" [2] one said; or again: "Even when you don't

agree with others on key issues listening to them can lead to a mutual respect and understanding of the fundamental differences between humans” [13]. Still another wrote of a significant experience he/she had had:

I started out by thinking that arguing involves and frustration (I think) because I often argued with my parents and felt the emotions of anger and frustration. Then, I moved to [the city] my senior year of high school to work in the legislature and my views of arguing shifted. I saw people who would “argue” over a particular piece of legislation and still remain respectful and friends afterwards (and during I suppose). Even I would get into arguments with the legislators and it generally strengthened our respect for each other. I learned, by observing and by doing, that arguing can actually be very positive.

To summarize: it seems that for some students personal ontogeny indeed reduplicates Johnstonian phylogeny; they experience their initiation to argument as a moment in the constitution of a self. These students articulate their experience by talking of their stance. In taking a stand, a student makes a place for herself in the world. She makes her location visible, creating the conditions in which understanding, including self-understanding, is possible. Standing up is an uncomfortable position to be in, and dangerous, since there is no guarantee that she will be able to maintain her upright posture. But in taking this risk, she gains assurance in the stability of her self and her commitments. In putting herself out there, she earns respect and finds the grounds to respect others as well. This disposition of the self, achieved through argument, is as Johnstone put it, “a certain rather explicit self-confidence.” In the words of one student, folding together many of these themes:

To get up and speak and be respected for what I was saying, even if others did not agree, was truly, as is explained in [one course reading] exhilarating. There is no other way to describe the feeling when you’re in an argument and you’re stating your opinion and you know that you’re winning. I would like to feel like that again: confident and knowledgeable and eloquent [12].

What, then, if we adopted a defense of argument along these lines, stressing that in argument, even never-resolving, painful argument, we come to stand more solidly in the world? Rhetorically speaking, we could hope that by invoking students’ ordinary views of argument, our attempts to persuade them to buckle down and work would be more effective. In accord with Johnstone’s theory we would also be exhibiting a praiseworthy generosity in addressing students from within their own positions, instead of trying to preach from our

own. And finally, we might be defending argument in a way that makes evident its true dignity.

Argument is not fragile. It doesn't make us wait until we find ourselves in agreement. It doesn't need to be deferred until we transform social relations, based as they now unhappily are on coercion. It doesn't have to be put off until we transform ourselves also, into people who are above giving or taking slights. We can start where we are, following Johnstone's essentially tragic view with a cheerful confidence. When we take up our responsibility to argue, the worst will happen. The space we create in defending our deepest commitments will give to our friends, those who most disagree, the opening to end them.

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Notes

1. It is interesting to note that argumentation and informal logic textbooks from the tradition of teaching argument in philosophy departments appear to be remarkably unapologetic. I found none that projected onto readers the view that argument in philosophy might be taken too personally or get out of hand.

2. Johnstone elsewhere offers this amusing elaboration of the inadequacy of "facts": "You don't get a man to change his position in philosophy by beating him over the head with facts. You 'refute' him by pointing to hard evidence, but his mind will be unchanged. Having myself often been 'refuted' in this way, I would characterize it as a very confusing experience. Your interlocutor is yelling that such-and-such a fact proves you completely wrong, and insinuating that you are a fool unworthy of the attention of the roomful of people who came to hear you, but somehow you can't see where his words put pressure on your position" (1978a, 53–54).

3. Indeed, Johnstone became pessimistic that arguers could even make charges of inconsistency stick, since each could have a different conception of consistency constituted within his philosophical position; see the epilogue to *Validity and Rhetoric* (1978b) for an account of his struggle with this problem.

4. In remarks that appear just as impious as his examination of threats, Johnstone is also consistently willing to view argument as a use of power and an attempt to control an interlocutor. "Philosophical controversy is one of the channels through which a person may seek power," Johnstone asserts (1959, 133)—although paradoxically, it is a power gained only by a thoroughgoing sympathy with the position the person wants to remove (135), and that grants the opponent "the option of resisting us" (1963, 30).

5. Where the response was not anonymous, I identify the author by number. Spelling errors are corrected silently.

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