

We Should be Studying the Norms of Debate

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What is There to be Studied?

Several of my colleagues on this panel have relied on one of truly durable pieces of scholarship in the field—O’Keefe’s essays distinguishing argument-1 and argument-2 (1977, 1982). We need to recognize, however, that this distinction no longer completely maps our territory. In the generation since its first publication, more attention has been paid—especially by the Alta community—to the place of argument in controversies. In this section, therefore, I want to make a quick survey of the enlarged terrain.

Micro-level: The Unit of Argument.

As O’Keefe noted, one of the primary ordinary uses of the word “argument” is to refer to “something one person makes (or gives or presents or utters)” (1977, p. 121).¹ We have an extensive technical terminology for talking about such micro-level arguments: premise and conclusion (or the variants data/warrant/claim and reason/claim); fallacy (and particular fallacies); schemes (or forms or types, and particular schemes). The norms for assessing the *cogency* of units of argument are under discussion within Informal Logic (well reviewed in Johnson, 2000), but it seems safe to say that a good argument will have premises, which are adequate in themselves, relevant to the conclusion, and sufficient to support them.

Middle-level: The Debate.

A second use of the word “argument” is to refer to “a particular kind of interaction . . . something two or more persons have (or engage in)” (O’Keefe, 1977, p. 121). An ordinary prominent subcategory of “argument” in this sense is “debate” (technically, the argument-2 with arguments-1; O’Keefe, 1982).² We have an extensive technical terminology for talking about this sort of argumentative transaction: resolution, advocates affirmative and negative, presumption, burden of proof, (stock) issue(s), case (strategies), refutation. The norms for assessing the goodness of debates are somewhat up in the air—a subject I’ll return to at the end of this paper.

Macro-level: The Controversy.

Demonstrating its accordion-like nature, the word “argument” can stretch to include even the very large-scale and long-term disputes we call

controversies.³ Even as many units of argument will typically be deployed in a debate, and many particular debates (or argumentative transactions generally) will typically occur during a controversy. I may have to demur from the remarks of Zarefsky, my colleague on this panel, here; I believe we have in the past decade built an extensive technical terminology for talking about controversies: the public, in particular, with variants like (counter/reticulate/subaltern) public sphere and divisions into technical, public and personal spheres; related terms like public opinion, memory, and reason, social imaginary and knowledge, discourse (formations) and oppositional argument. The norms for assessing controversy are, not surprisingly, disputed by political theorists (as played out, for example, in the essays collected by Bohman & Rehg, 1997), but we can say that in general a controversy is good if it occurs in and leads to *legitimate* (non-dominating, non-oppressing) social and institutional arrangements and/or policies. In particular, a good controversy expresses or even constitutes rationality, and/or produces consensus, and/or enacts civic equality.

What Should be Studied?

We all agree that the basic answer to this question is: everything. Argument on every level needs more inquiry. Still, it is fair to say that at this point in time, both micro- and macro-level studies have reached the point where they need mid-level studies to complement and extend their results.

What the Micro-level Theorists Need.

Informal Logicians have begun to recognize that assessing units of argument requires attention to the argumentative transactions in which those units are deployed. At the recent OSSA conference I have attempted to document this in detail (2001), but a glance at recent book titles suggests as much. We have Johnson's *Manifest Rationality: A Pragmatic Theory of Argument* (2000), Tindale's *Acts of Arguing* (2001), and Walton's *A Pragmatic Theory of Fallacies* (1995). Nor is this trend surprising. A unit of argument is made in a context and for a purpose, and we will only gain a full understanding of how it can be good if we understand that context and purpose.

Consider, for example, the idea of premise sufficiency—as noted above, one of the three leading norms for assessing argument at the micro-level. As Ralph Johnson has recently confirmed for me in conversation, Informal Logic has paid little attention to sufficiency. This is perhaps because of the puzzles it is going to raise for them. Any theory of sufficiency is going to have to deal with its conspicuous variability. An argument that O.J. Simpson killed his ex-wife, for example, must be “beyond a reasonable doubt” to be sufficient in a criminal case; supported by “the preponderance of the evidence” in a civil case; not be made with a “reckless disregard for the truth” if published by a U.S. newspaper; and probably just supported by some shred of evidence if put forward in gossip (see also Johnson, 2000, p. 205). To be sufficient is to be sufficient for something, and it is necessary to look to the transaction in which the argument is embedded in order to determine for *what*. What do advocates do to create for themselves this “for what”? The theory of the micro-level assessment of units of argument is here waiting on developments in middle-level theory.

What the Macro-level Theorists Need.

The political theorists have been talking about deliberation for long enough now to make their fogginess about how people might actually do it embarrassingly apparent. The few appearances of specific forms of talk in this literature come as breaths of fresh air: Young's mention of "greeting, rhetoric [sic] and storytelling" (1996, p. 120) or Rawls' footnote on religious witnessing (1999, p. 156, n. 57). The many appearances of hypothesized norms for deliberation occur without much attention to whether we find ourselves bound by them in practice, or whether they could support actual deliberations under non-ideal conditions (compare Kauffeld's panel remarks on this). As one of the theorists himself remarked, "for all their talk about deliberation, few theorists or philosophers describe it at all, and few of those who describe it do so in sufficient detail to make clear why it is democratic, what putting it into practice would mean, or how it is possible under the social conditions of complex societies" (Bohman, 1996, p. 17).

Consider just one example of a mid-level question raised by recent theories of system-wide controversy. Several theorists of macro-level argument have asserted that religious and ethical considerations either do not count as reasons at all, or must be severely limited (e.g., Ackerman, 1989; Rawls, 1999). In practice, however, it is easy to find admirable examples of such arguments—King's "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail," for one. When are such arguments relevant and even necessary, and when should they be excluded from a debate? What do advocates do to create for themselves an obligation of civility, binding each to ground her case in reasons she shares with the other advocates? The theory of the macro-level assessment of controversy is here waiting on developments in middle-level theory.

What Should be Studied?

The pair of considerations just sketched provides reasons why *someone* should be taking up an inquiry into argument in the middle range. In this section, I want to propose two practical reasons why "someone" should be *us*—the Alta community: students of argument in U.S. Communication departments, generally with a background in rhetoric or communication theory.

Mid-level Research will Support our Teaching of the Undergraduate Argumentation Course.

Here I want to join fellow panelists Farrell and Schiappa in their vigorous advocacy of argument theory in the aid of argument pedagogy. Many of us in the Alta community are responsible for teaching or leading our campus's basic argumentation course. My guess is that these courses remain dominated by mid-level practice—that is, by debates. Good! Debate continues the emphasis on oral, embodied practice established in our basic public speaking course; it is a reliable way of teaching critical thinking; it is an essential skill for all citizens. But without active research on mid-level arguing, the debate course is in trouble; the decline in research is leading to a decline in the preparation of the teachers and a decline in the coherence of the textbooks.

Once upon a time, there were graduate courses in advanced debate (Gronbeck, 1972). As recently as 1986, Benoit's survey of graduate instruction in argumentation revealed the majority of programs still teaching courses covering mid-level concepts like presumption and burden of proof. But graduate curriculum tends to follow a field's current research interests. Take my department as an example. I believe that all graduate students in rhetoric who have taken their degrees since I've been there have gone on to teach their school's argument course. None of them had coursework covering mid-level argumentation concepts. Nor are we unusual. My informal survey suggests that only Schiappa at Minnesota and Keith at Oregon State are preparing graduate students for the content of the undergraduate argumentation course. (I invite readers to correct me on this.) Now, I am not saying that any one teacher must have had some prior knowledge in order to do her job. Equally, however, it seems evident that we as a community have cause for concern that the overall low preparation for teaching will result in a decline in the quality of instruction overall; or, alternately, in a recognition by our administrators that the argumentation course could be taught by anyone who can argue, which they may take to mean, anyone.

An unprepared instructor could be helped out by solid textbook—which of us hasn't learned by teaching! But the quality of our texts is also in decline. I don't want to point any fingers here, but I assume that many will agree that our argumentation textbooks have been doing little more than recycling old wisdom now for twenty or more years, with each generation a bit thinner-blooded than the one before. The exceptions prove the rule. Inch and Warnick (1998) have incorporated material on argument diagramming coming out of the micro-level work of our cousins in *Informal Logic*. Reike and Sillars (2001) have enriched their book by drawing from the macro-level work on argument fields. But even in these texts the middle-level material forming the backbone of the course—on forming the proposition, assigning burden of proof, employing stock issues, planning case strategies—could have been pulled out of any book since Ehninger and Brockriede's 1963 *Decision by Debate*. This is not, after all, the authors' fault. There is not much mid-level vitality, because there is not much mid-level scholarship.

At this point, it would be useful to see work on *any* of the words we list on exam review sheets; as Winans once said, "we shall not only stand better but teach better, when we have more scholarship" (1915, p. 18). Take the concept of issue as an example. The standard treatment has "issue" defined by clash. But it is obvious that in practice not all disagreements actually get argued. Some are evaded by one side, or even expressly excluded (as by saying "assume for the sake of argument"). Thus it appears that for there to be an issue, advocates not only have to disagree about something, they have to *make* an issue of it. What do advocates do to create issues for themselves? Giving an account of issue formation ought to be a key research question facing scholarship on the middle level of argumentation.

Mid-level Research will Support our Association with the Tradition of Intercollegiate Debate.

The U.S. argumentation community is uniquely blessed with a long and deep association with intercollegiate competitive debate. That association is in

now in trouble. Debate coaches are no longer tenure line faculty in our departments. Debate is no longer producing future faculty. (It sometimes seems that every Communication faculty member over 50 debated, coached or judged every other. That is no longer the case.) And at my university, at least, debate is no longer even producing undergraduate majors.

Note, I am not here raising the question of debate's educational value; I agree that some form of competitive debate belongs on campus—somewhere. Nor am I saying that debate lacks theorizing. Quite the contrary; there are plenty of signs that debate coaches talk—among themselves—a lot. But so, I presume, do football coaches. Put simply, my question is this: Would an administrator bent on rationalization see any living connection between the debate program and the Communication department?

One living connection the administrator ought to see is between the practice of debate and scholarship on the middle level of argumentation. Competitive debate is the closest thing to a laboratory that any humanistic inquirer into argument is likely to get. The practice, done in a playful fashion by very smart people, is endlessly inventive; new strategies and new terminologies are constantly emerging and being tested to destruction. Our tradition of scholarship on argumentation began by trying to sort out, neaten up, and ground what the debaters were doing. The hardy stock issues model, for example, emerged first in an article in the then-*Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking* (Shaw, 1915); it was later refined and simplified (Brooks, 1941), and related back to the rhetorical tradition more generally (Hultzen, 1958).

No longer. The last time concepts from within debate were given an airing in one of our national journals seems to have been in a 1993 Forum in *Argumentation & Advocacy* on something called "intrinsic justification" (Bahm, 1993; Leeman & Hill, 1993). Zarefsky is probably articulating the general sentiment when he notes that debate-related research has long since become "passé" (1995, p. 34).

If so, the fault lies not in the practice, but in ourselves. Let me give just one example of a question that intercollegiate debate raises for us. (With the practice spinning off in its own orbit, I have been forced to do a sort of ethnographic investigation to find out what is happening there, so I apologize for my inevitable errors.) One recent development in policy debate is the critique (or "kritik"). This (it appears; see Bennett, 1996) is an attack not on what the other side has asserted, but on what those assertions presuppose. Thus instead of attacking the affirmative's case, the negative might attack the sexist manner in which that case was presented or the ideological commitments of an authority cited to support it. Now, from the point of view of mid-level argumentation theory, the critique is a very interesting phenomenon indeed. Sometimes critique is justified: the opposing advocate may be trying to frame issues in a way that begs important questions. A South African legislator ten years ago would have been praiseworthy for critiqueing a proposed modification of the pass laws, when the real question was whether to have a pass law at all. Other times critiqueing can get out of hand: no advocate should have to defend her case all the way down to the foundations (there are none), and allowing critiques willy-nilly means that ordinary issues never get decided. If I want to argue that a stop sign should be placed on my corner, I shouldn't have to defend the system of private ownership of cars, low gasoline tax and so on that makes driving and thus accidents possible. So what do advocates do to create for themselves the

obligation to reply to critique? Giving an account of the nature and limits of critique ought to be a key research question facing scholarship on the middle level of argumentation.

Renewed scholarly attention to intercollegiate debate would help re-confirm the association that midwived the Alta conference in the first place. It also might help re-establish the social bonds I mentioned at the beginning of this section. A direct link between debate practice and argumentation theory might help debate coaches show the research productivity justifying tenure-track appointments. The existence of some tough, mind-boggling and directly relevant theory might make a Communication major just as attractive as Economics and Political Science to the debaters themselves. This might in turn attract more of them to advanced study in the field. And finally, research on debate concepts might even help the practice of debate. More sophisticated models (such as of the limits and burdens of the critique) could aid judges in analyzing and assessing the debaters' performances, thus helping them rein in the extremes of the practice.

Summary and Conclusion.

So much for sketching a case that the Alta community should direct some of its scholarly energies towards inquiry into the mid-level argumentative transaction. As Kauffeld argues strongly in his companion paper, this inquiry should be predominantly normative. His conclusion is corroborated by the example research questions mentioned above; each asks about what arguers owe each other, where those obligations come from, and how they can be fulfilled. Let me close therefore by venturing a prediction about where a normative investigation of the argumentative transaction might take us.

Since its birth over a century ago, the U.S. argumentation and debate community has been embroiled in its own debate over how its central practice should be conceptualized. One position has always been that the argumentative transaction is fundamentally cooperative. Voiced in our tradition by the early advocates of "discussion" over "debate," this same view has re-emerged in the "dialogue" theories of Walton (1998) and the pragma-dialecticians (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1984). All these tend to see the argumentative transaction as a process of resolving specific disagreements by relying on more fundamental agreements—e.g., on starting points, argument schemes, and procedures.

My prediction is that if the Alta community takes up middle-level inquiries, an opposing view will be advanced. We have long been disagreeable folk. Our recent renaissance of work on controversy has consistently valorized dissensus over consensus, difference over uniformity: consider the investigations of the complex (Hauser, 1999) and counter public spheres (Asen, 2000), or Goodnight's Alta keynote on controversy (1991) and the studies since (e.g., Olson and Goodnight, 1994). On the communication theory side, we find the same predilection in the conception of the argumentative transaction as characterized by disagreement, pressed by Benoit and others (e.g., 1991; Hample et al. 1999). Bringing this occupational psychosis to the study of the argumentative transaction, we might be able to reach an understanding of how advocates who deeply disagree can nevertheless induce each other to listen to reason—if we turn our minds to it.

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