CHAPTER 2

ARGUMENTATION AS INQUIRY

Sharon Bailin

1. INTRODUCTION

Blair and Johnson (1987b) have stated that an outstanding issue in the area of argumentation is how argument should be conceived and further, whether there is one central notion of argument. In this paper it will be argued that from both an epistemological and a pedagogical perspective, argumentation is most usefully conceived as inquiry.

2. EPISTEMOLOGY

When viewed from the point of view of epistemology, the process of argumentation is, essentially, the process of inquiry, which I shall define, with Blair, as "an investigation into whether a questioned or problematic point of view is acceptable" (1987, p.193).[12] There is a tendency in argumentation theory and pedagogy to emphasize the assessment of arguments but it must be remembered that argumentation also involves the construction of arguments and ultimately of entire belief sets or views. It is the process whereby knowl-

1. We subsequently define inquiry as "the process of carefully examining an issue in order to come to a reasoned judgment" (Bailin and Battersby 2016).

2. In a later paper (2016), Blair suggests the terms "investigation" or "exploration" as an alternative to the term "inquiry."

edge is assessed, but it is also the process whereby knowledge is constructed, and the evaluative and constructive dimensions are closely intertwined (Bailin 1987, 1988).[3] In the process of argumentation, claims are put forth on the basis of reasons, the claims and reasons are challenged and tested, they may be reformulated, alternative arguments may be proposed, these will be tested and perhaps reformulated, and in the end a view is arrived at which takes into account the strengths and weaknesses of the various arguments and synthesizes the strongest elements into a coherent whole (Bailin 1990). This process may also involve some alteration in existing beliefs and is best viewed in the context of the larger dialectical process of belief formation and testing, as a moment in that ongoing process (Blair and Johnson 1987a).

This dialectical process can have a variety of forms in actual practice depending on the context. It may involve two or more individuals engaged in a genuine attempt to resolve a dispute, one individual engaged in attempting to resolve a puzzlement, or two or more individuals arguing different sides of an issue without any intention to co-operate.

The speech act model of argumentation as put forth by van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1983, 1992, 2004) takes as fundamental the first of these, that is the two party argumentative discussion aimed at resolving a disagreement, and Blair (1987) argues that the other forms of argumentation can be assimilated to this model as well. Although it may appear that individual inquiry would not fit the model since it does not necessarily involve dialogue or dispute, Blair argues that it does, in fact, exhibit the requisite features. That this form of argumentation is conducted by one person does not alter the fact that it is a dual-role activity, although in this case both roles are occupied by a single person. Similarly, individual inquiry does involve disagreement, although the disagreement

3. See also "Is Argument for Conservatives? or Where Do Sparkling New Ideas Come From?" in this volume.

in such cases arises from an incompatible view rather than from another individual. Blair further argues that the lack of public performance of the speech acts involved in argumentation is irrelevant since one would expect the inquirer to be able to reconstruct the various moves in the argumentative inquiry. Finally, Blair argues that argumentation conducted with no intention to co-operate can fit van Eemeren and Grootendorst's model since the object of such argumentation may be to convince a third party rather than to resolve a disagreement between the disputants. Thus Blair concludes that a speech act analysis is applicable to all these cases of argumentation, and that, from this perspective, all can be seen as instances of co-operative dispute-resolving argumentation.

I find this reasoning compelling with respect to viewing argumentation from a discourse analysis perspective. I would argue, however, that from an epistemological perspective, the process in all these cases can be viewed as one of inquiry. The inquiry may be undertaken by one person or several, with the possibility of people sharing roles or even exchanging roles; the division of labour within the argument situation is irrelevant. What is relevant is the epistemological structure, which is one in which knowledge claims are formulated, tested and adjusted in order to arrive at the best justified position.[4]

It may appear initially that the case of individuals involved in a disagreement would not conform to the inquiry model since the aim of each might be to persuade the other of the correctness of his or her position rather than to inquire. Nonetheless there are normative constraints on arguers in rational arguments (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1983, 1992, 2004), for example openness to the possibility that one's own position might not deserve acceptance or willingness to concede to the most defensible position, which require that claims be put to the test of reason and that those which are

4. For more on the role of roles, see "DAMed If You Do; DAMed If You Don't: Cohen's "Missed opportunities"" in this volume.

to be accepted be the ones which have the strongest warrant. Thus, even if the psychological aim of the participants might be to win, provided that they are willing to abide by the rules of co-operative argument, the epistemological structure of the enterprise necessitates inquiry. Van Eemeran and Grootendorst's model, in viewing dispute-resolving argumentation as co-operative, recognizes this dimension, and as Blair states in referring to this model: "The parties resolve their disagreements only if they are prepared to inquire together into the implications of their different commitment stores" (1987, p.194). Indeed, the rules of dialectical interchange which van Eemeren and Grootendorst propose are really rules which ensure that the disputants, whatever their predisposition at the commencement of the discussion, do in fact inquire. These rules make explicit the inquiry dimension.

Moreover, many of the points which Blair raises in the course of his discussion seem to reinforce this point regarding the primacy of inquiry. For example, in discussing a proposed revision to van Eemeren and Grootendorst's rules, he states:

> This similarity between solo inquiry and the revised model I am suggesting for multi-purpose dispute-resolving argumentation is a point in favour of that revision, for it seems clear that dispute-resolving argumentation is possible only to the extent that the disputing parties co-operate with a view to reaching agreement – that is, function the way a solo inquirer does (1987, p.196).

At one point Blair is willing to view as a form of inquiry argumentative discussion in which the parties test beliefs by seeing how far they can be defended. He further states that disputes in which each side aims to win ought ideally to be preceded by argumentative inquiry and are unjustified if not so conducted (1987, pp.191-2). Yet surely the latter are also unjustified if the participants do not abide by the rules of argumentative exchange, if they are not willing to concede to a stronger argument for example, and so ideally dispute-

resolving argumentation is also a form of inquiry. Blair also draws a comparison between inquiry and the type of argumentation undertaken to convince a third party or parties by stating that the judge or jury in the latter type of exchange does not play an adversarial role in the proceedings but rather plays the role of an inquirer (1987, p.197).

3. PEDAGOGY

I have argued that, from an epistemological perspective, argumentation is best seen as inquiry. I also believe that a conception of argumentation as inquiry is helpful from a pedagogical perspective and that there are good reasons for stressing the notion of inquiry in pedagogy related to argumentation skills. Our goals, in teaching argumentative skills, are to have students "manage their belief systems" (Blair and Johnson 1988) in a logical and intelligent manner,[5] to engage in intellectual inquiry with skill and judgment, and to resolve disputes in a co-operative and fair-minded way. Yet as teachers of argumentation we realize what an exceedingly difficult task this turns out to be. Students display strong tendencies to avoid challenge to their own beliefs, to ignore contrary evidence, to straw-person the beliefs of others, to refuse to concede points, to start with conclusions and then look for arguments to support them, to want to win at all costs.[6] And perhaps these tendencies are not all that surprising given the images which tend to be associated with arguments. Numerous theorists have pointed out that the dominant metaphor for argument in our culture is that of struggle, usually violent (Cohen 2014; Hundleby 2013; Rooney 2010).[7] Thus Ayim

5. Cf. Cohen's (2014) formulation of the goal as "the bettering of our cognitive systems" and van Radziewsky's (2013) as "the bettering of our belief systems."

6. There is considerable contemporary research in cognitive science which confirms the existence of these tendencies. See, for example, Kahneman 2011; Mercier and Sperber 2017. See also our paper "Critical Thinking and Cognitive Biases" in this volume.

7. See also "DAMed If You Do; DAMed If You Don't: Cohen's "Missed opportunities'" in this volume.

(1988) notes the ubiquity in academic argumentation of the language of the battlefield, including talk of attack and defense, of tearing apart opposing arguments, of having the upper hand, of winning thumbs down. And Blair describes the situation thus:

> We speak of 'winning' and 'losing' the argument, 'winning someone over,' 'knock down arguments', and 'protagonists' and 'opponents'. We regard it as something to be proud of to have 'won' an argument, and conversely, something undesirable to have to 'concede a point' or 'admit defeat' (1987, p.193).

Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson argue that such language use is not incidental but actually shapes the practice:

> It is important to see that we don't just *talk* about arguments in terms of war. We can actually win or lose arguments. We see the person we are arguing with as an opponent. We attack his positions and we defend our own. We gain and lose ground. We plan and use strategies. If we find a position indefensible, we can abandon it and take a new line of attack. Many of the things we *do* in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war. Though there is no physical battle, there is a verbal battle, and the structure of an argument – attack, defense, counterattack, etc. – reflects this. It is in this sense that the ARGUMENT IS WAR metaphor is one that we live by in this culture; it structures the actions we perform in arguing (1980, p.4).

Granted that we, as theorists of argumentation, understand that what we mean when we talk of argumentation entails co-operation, open-mindedness and a willingness to concede to the strongest reasons; nonetheless our students are very likely in the grip of the conception of argument as battle, a conception which undermines open-mindedness and which may be exceedingly difficult to overcome. Thus I would argue that there are pragmatic reasons for stressing that argumentation, even when it is conducted by two individuals disagreeing, is really a process of joint inquiry into what the best position is and is a constructive enterprise.

I would also argue that the concept of inquiry is preferable to that of argument with respect to the development and presentation of argumentation, an activity which is central to virtually all academic enterprises. A common tendency among students writing argumentative papers is to conceive of the task as that of arguing for a position and so to decide first on a conclusion and then look for arguments to support that conclusion and ignore or downplay contrary evidence. The tenacity of this tendency despite our best pedagogical efforts is, I suggest, connected with the fact that the students generally do not understand the nature of the process in which they are engaged. They fail to understand it as a process of inquiry in which they are trying find something out. The rules of good argument and of appropriate dialectical interchange are helpful in providing guidance as to what moves are appropriate, but without an understanding of the epistemological grounding for these rules, the entire enterprise likely strikes many students as an arcane academic game for which they must learn the rules in order to succeed.

It may also be the case that some aspects of the way argument construction is taught are not very conducive to the development of this type of understanding. For example, in the section of the text *Logical Self-Defense* devoted to argument construction, a distinction is made between those arguments in which one begins with a settled position and those arguments which are forms of inquiry, meaning one has not made up one's mind on a position. Yet to what extent is this really a helpful distinction? Even in the former case, one cannot simply look for arguments to support one's conclusion and ignore contrary arguments, as Johnson and Blair (1983) fully acknowledge. Rather, one must assess the arguments for and against one's conclusion in a fair-minded manner, and must be willing to modify or even abandon one's initial position in the face of cogent counter-arguments. Thus even in the case when one begins the process with a position in mind, one

can hold this position only provisionally, as a hypothesis to be tested. In the case of argumentative inquiry, the text enjoins one to begin with a position which seems to one to deserve serious consideration and to treat it as a hypothesis. I submit that this is not significantly different from the process in the first case. The primary difference is with respect to the degree of conviction with which the initial position is held, but this is a psychological difference and is not one which has any bearing on the structure of the argumentation. In the final analysis, both are instances of inquiry.

In terms of pedagogy, I believe that there are problems separating these out as two distinct kinds of arguments and not indicating that both are instances of inquiry. Giving students a sense that a central type of argument involves making a case for a position one already holds will very likely reinforce their distorted beliefs about the nature of argumentation. Johnson and Blair do eventually inform students that they may have to qualify or even reject their initial position in light of compelling objections, and, in a subsequent section outline the problems of commitment to a view and post facto justification inherent in beginning with a position already set. I suggest that it might be preferable to begin with discussion of these issues, which are central to the epistemological structure of argumentation, and then go on to frame the task not in terms of constructing an argument to make a case for a pre-existing position, but rather in terms of inquiry, to find out what the best position is.

It might be objected that inquiry is an inappropriate metaphor to guide the construction of an argumentative paper since what we want to see in a paper is the product of the student's deliberation, not some reflection of the process. How the ideas were arrived at is irrelevant; what we want to see is the justification of the ideas. I would argue, however, that such a separation between the process of inquiry and the product of deliberation is highly artificial. We are interested

not simply in the conclusions of deliberation, but in the reasoning which leads to these conclusions. Thus the product that we want to see is a reflection of the deliberative process. Blair makes a point which lends support to this position when discussing whether someone engaged in individual inquiry could be viewed as performing the speech acts constitutive of argumentation. He states:

> clearly, the solitary inquirer who neither speaks nor writes cannot literally perform these or any other speech act. However, she does carry out mental operations strictly corresponding to the speech acts performed in verbally explicit argumentative disputes. Whatever 'goes on in her mind', we would not be satisfied that she has carried out an argumentative inquiry unless she could produce in words the challenge, the asserted point of view, the arguments, the clarifications and definitions, and the final concession or reaffirmation that we would expect to find at the various stages of a spoken or written argumentative discussion (1987, pp.193-4).

Nor does the product of deliberation refer only to justification if that means simply the testing of already held views. We do sometimes hold beliefs unreflectively, and such beliefs need to be tested. But inquiry also involves adding, deleting, modifying, and integrating beliefs. It is the process involved in the rational management of one's belief system (Blair and Johnson 1988). And it is a reflection of this process which we want to see in students' papers (or at least a rational reconstruction thereof).

Inquiry is the process we want students to use in arriving at their beliefs. Thus viewing argumentation as inquiry may be of help in conveying to students a sense that constructing arguments is not simply an academic exercise which is irrelevant to everyday life but that argumentation is a way of constructing knowledge, a way of inquiring into and deciding what to believe and do both in the disciplines and in real-life situations.

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