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That Obscure Object of (Philosophical) Desire
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Résumé de l'article

Cet article est une réponse à « Arguing with Arguments » de H. Siegel d'un point de vue rhétorique sur l'argumentation. J'aborde d'abord le concept siegelien d'« argument dans son sens propositionnel abstrait » et tente de montrer qu'il ne s'agit pas du tout d'un objet évident qui devrait incontestablement être le centre privilégié de la théorie de l'argumentation. Je défends ensuite la perspective rhétorique de C. W. Tindale sur l'argumentation contre certaines erreurs de lecture de Siegel ainsi que contre certains de ses désaccords légitimes concernant les relations entre persuasion et justification rationnelle et la manière dont nous devrions comprendre la source de la normativité argumentative.

That Obscure Object of (Philosophical) Desire

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Abstract: This paper is a response to H. Siegel's "Arguing with Arguments" from a rhetorical perspective on argumentation. First I address Siegel's concept of 'argument in its abstract propositional sense' and attempt to show that it is not at all an obvious object that should unquestionably be the privileged focus of argumentation theory. I then defend C. W. Tindale's rhetorical perspective on argumentation against some of Siegel's misreadings and also some of his legitimate disagreements regarding the relations between *persuasion* and *rational justification* and the way we should understand the source of argumentative normativity.

Résumé: Cet article est une réponse à « Arguing with Arguments » de H. Siegel d'un point de vue rhétorique sur l'argumentation. J'aborde d'abord le concept siegelien d'« argument dans son sens propositionnel abstrait » et tente de montrer qu'il ne s'agit pas du tout d'un objet évident qui devrait incontestablement être le centre privilégié de la théorie de l'argumentation. Je défends ensuite la perspective rhétorique de C. W. Tindale sur l'argumentation contre certaines erreurs de lecture de Siegel ainsi que contre certains de ses désaccords légitimes concernant les relations entre persuasion et justification rationnelle et la manière dont nous devrions comprendre la source de la normativité argumentative.

1. Introduction

Harvey Siegel's "Arguing with Arguments" discusses the role *if any* that the concept of argument-in-its-abstract-propositional-sense should have in argumentation theory. Of course, the caution *if any* is rather ironic as throughout his piece, Siegel does not

really contemplate the possibility of a nil answer to the posed problem. In fact, his chosen title rings with the same obvious tones as the one it mirrors, namely Michael A. Gilbert's *Arguing with People* (2014), which seems to demand an emphatic 'who else?' after its reading. Likewise, Siegel seems to be saying 'arguing with arguments, *what else?*' with the self-assurance of a smiling actor.

'Argument' does not necessarily mean argument-in-its-abstract-propositional-sense, and Siegel acknowledges a variety of theoretical and practical interpretations of the concept of argument. These include—besides his choice meaning (a) argument-in-its-abstract-propositional-sense—(b) the *speech act* sense of 'argument,' (c) the *social/dialogical/communicative* sense of 'argument,' and (d) the extended argumentative episode sense (a peculiar English usage that is not present in other European languages and that has been the cause of many rather untranslatable clarifications in argumentation theory, see for exampler van Eemeren (2018, pp. 2ff); Leal (Leal and Marraud 2022, pp. 21-22). It is Siegel's contention that if one wants to put some order in this catalogue, the *crucial* divide should be placed between *argument in its abstract propositional sense* and the rest of its meanings, as the former does not need and does not refer to actual arguers or actual acts of arguing while the latter ones do. He also suggests that the term *argumentation* should be used instead of *argument* for (c) and (d) and seems to regret that not all theoretical constructs of (b) fit so well that same label of *argumentation*.

There is, however, one sense of 'argument' that is pretty common (among lay speakers but also among linguists, including pragma-dialecticians),[1] which is not present in Siegel's list or discussion but that I find particularly important for the points I would like to make. I am talking about the use of the term to refer

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[1] "The utterances advanced in the argumentation are reasons or, as we prefer to call them, arguments relating to a standpoint. It is their function that makes arguments and standpoints different from other utterances [...] In the communication between language users, with a standpoint, a point of view is expressed that entails a certain position in a dispute; with an argument, an effort is made to defend that position" (cf. van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992, p.13)

to considerations offered in favor of or against a specific (but also qualifiable) viewpoint, that is, roughly referring to the reasons, premises or data part of the logical-philosophical construct of argument as a premises-plus-conclusion complex. Most native speakers of most European languages I know of use 'argument' mainly in that sense (e.g., "I see your point, now give me your arguments"), and there might be interesting insights behind this.

Philosophers tend to dismiss this use of 'argument' as a perhaps not absolutely awry but just an *inaccurate* sense (a kind of sloppy metonym). Logicians know better than that; they know for certain that they need *the whole argument* (premises *and* conclusion) in order to correctly identify and evaluate it. But is this what our argumentative practices are made of? Let us advance a little bit more before I try to provide an answer to this question.

Siegel is not only convinced that the argument (in its abstract propositional sense) should be part of argumentation theory, devoting most of his paper to criticize approaches to argumentation that, he claims, either relegate or downgrade its role, but he also maintains that his choice sense of argument has a certain *priority* over any other interpretation and that it should occupy *the center* of our theoretical efforts, representing *the gist* of what we are after. Pressed by his discussants, he is prepared to concede, though, the following:

> There is a case to be made that argumentation is *causally* prior to arguments (in the abstract propositional sense) in the sense that the latter are, as Ralph Johnson puts it, 'the distillate of the practice of argumentation' [that is, argument in the social dialectical sense] (2000, p. 168)" (Siegel 2023, p. 517, my emphasis).

However, he still thinks that the *conceptual priority* he attributes to the logical-epistemic construal of argument is enough to sustain both his critical and his positive claims about how argumentation theory should and shouldn´t be conducted. He also does not think that Dutilh Novaes's (2021) account of the dialogical 'emergence' of deduction should threaten his idea of a *conceptual priority*. Because what Siegel is absolutely convinced of is that "arguments [*what else?*] are what arguers traffic in when arguing" (2023, first instance on p. 471), a sentence that is repeated up to *seven times* in

his paper (of course, without my emphatic addition). Well, maybe this is not so obvious after all or can be interestingly qualified.

What do people (*who else?*) do when arguing? It might be claimed that they exchange considerations (including counter-considerations) and qualifications about an issue (that might admit of differing approaches, interpretations, or opinions) and about the considerations and qualifications that have already been presented in the same (vaguely defined) interchange; the positions the inter-locutors favor at the beginning of their dialogue might be modified by the end not only because one party may adopt the other party's views (taking into account the adduced considerations and qualifi-cations), but also because the issue itself and the possible views about it might be reoriented throughout the exchange. There might be a joint final conclusion, after all that, an aporetic (unresolved) closing, or the parties might still keep their differences while advancing, converging, or diverging towards more clarified posi-tions. That is what an argumentative exchange, be it domestic-familiar-personal, technical-professional-scientific (even philo-sophical), or public-political (Goodnight, 2012 [1982]) looks like.

Arguments *in the linguistic sense*—that is, reasons and also considerations that, without being reasons, might be relevant for the discussion of the issue (conditions or presuppositions, modifi-ers or qualifications, etc. cf. Marraud 2020)—are *no doubt* pre-sented (given), asked for, and examined (granted, dismissed, or contested) throughout the exchange; partial conclusions, claims for which those reasons are relevant, viewpoints, or sub-viewpoints might be eventually settled or identified.

An argumentative exchange is, moreover, *always and constitu-tively*, a normative practice insofar as those who take part in it are expected to calibrate the strength and import of the considerations and qualifications presented to them and are likewise expected to clarify and even refine their own reasons so that their strength and import can be recognized by others. Those evaluative activities typically involve counter-arguments and the comparative weighing of reasons so that inter-argumentative relations (between argu-ments, counterarguments, argumentatively oriented questions, and answers, etc.) and the argumentative structures they construe are not at all the strange complications of sophisticated *meta-*

discussions (or just the mark of the analyst's skill) but the *basic fabric of argumentative interchanges* as such (at all levels and linguistic registers).

The *isolated* argument *in its abstract propositional sense*, composed of a definite set of premises plus a conclusion, which is supposed to be a well-defined product that one (one trained enough, for sure) should assess *based on its own merits* is not at all an *obvious* component of such a practice. I am not saying that it plays no role, just that an argumentative exchange is not, or not obviously, an exchange of such atomic, monadic, items. So, is it really 'arguments' in that sense that arguers *traffic in* when arguing? And, if not, when do such pristine objects of philosophical desire appear and what is their role?

Siegel is appalled by the possibility that some of the examples he offers in the first section of his paper would not be relevantly considered 'arguments' if too much stress is placed on *the dialectical nature of argument*: "The 'intrinsically dialectical' conception of argument entails that the ontological argument, as rendered in example B above, is not an argument!" (Siegel 2023, p. 487).

What the intrinsically dialectical nature of argument entails, though, is that example B is just an abstracted representation, in a very particular, normalized format (which is not in Anselm's text), of Anselm's argumentation to prove God's existence[2] and that, in order to fully understand and assess (that is, discuss) it *seriously*, we must read *at the very least* a substantial part of the *Proslogion*. Philosophers who have actually discussed the so-called ontological argument have not responded with their own two or three premises plus a conclusion, nor have they simply assessed the truth or acceptability of its premises and the strength of its logical-epistemic link, thank God, but have gone deeper into its presuppositions and consequences and into its dialogical meaning, comparing it with other previous strategies and balancing considerations and qualifications of various imports. Kant's well-known response, a response that we could likewise summarize with the motto "exist-

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[2] Such rendering of Anselm's argumentation rings more like "the handiwork of the non-participant logical analyst who is telling us how we are to understand it" (Levi 1995, p. 83).

ence is not a predicate" cannot be considered to be equivalent to that motto.

Siegel would probably say that I am talking about pieces of *argumentation* and not about individual *arguments*, but what I am trying to stress is that argumentation *is not* a collection of arguments (in their abstract propositional sense) but something much more entangled and web-like than that. And out of this entanglement, sometimes, some people—duly trained people of course—conducting a rather peculiar operation, identify a particular structure that they artificially isolate in order to probe their also peculiar theories of argument correctness. But that is like drawing constellations on a sea of celestial bodies. It is surely useful for some purposes and at some times, but constellations are not what the heavens are made of.[3]

Nevertheless, it is still possible to defend Siegel's *conceptual priority* but only as a theory-laden choice. The argument in its abstract propositional sense is conceptually prior for a theory construed on the basis of interpreting argumentation as based on the argument in-its-abstract-propositional-sense. That is what analytic philosophy has been doing for the past hundred years with (in my opinion) not so wonderful results, but maybe there is still hope. Good luck!

But I have been invited to respond to Siegel's piece on behalf of the rhetorical (specifically Christopher Tindale's) approach to argument and argumentation and I have not done that so far, have I? I hope at least to have suitably prepared the ground for it.

First of all, I was surprised by Harvey Siegel's bibliographic choice from which to discuss Tindale's rhetorical model of argumentation, namely *The Anthropology of Argument: Cultural Foundations of Rhetoric and Reason* (2021). In fact, he says that he is discussing in concrete what he calls "the AA approach." Thus, AA seems to be taken as the latest concretion of Tindale's rhetorical model—its most up-to-date version. And I might be wrong, but I do not read this book that way. I would say that Siegel should have engaged with *The Philosophy of Argument and*

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[3] For a more detailed and sharp critique of what this sort of operation (the PC paraphrase conducted under the assumption of the PC requirement) amounts to, see Levi (1995).

Audience Reception (2015) which, in my opinion, does indeed present Tindale's rhetorical approach to argumentation at its summit. This one is, indeed, a work that responds to or, at least tries to respond to, all the philosophical perplexities and questions that a rhetorical model of argument might provoke (among which are some of those posed by Siegel).

The Anthropology of Argument is, in my view, a very different project. A project that naturally emerges from Tindale's interests and approach but that is still more exploratory than conclusive. To me, the book shows the (amazing) number of things we should start looking at if we really are interested in understanding argumentation and in using arguments to understand each other, and it does a wonderful job revealing a possible path open before us, but I do not see it as the standard source of *a rhetorical approach to argument*.

Moreover, probably because of its concentration on the possible differences between argumentative cultures and its openness to allegedly non-Western models of reasons, *The Anthropology of Argument* sometimes may seem to accept a picture of Western argumentation that, in my opinion, is based on terms that are too philosophically traditional and that is the source of what Siegel reads as *concessions* to the logical-epistemic approach with which *The Philosophy of Argument* does not necessarily align. So, some of Siegel's dismay as well as some of Siegel's relief while reading and responding to *The Anthropology of Argument* I think are similarly misallocated.

The Anthropology of Argument might be read (and Siegel does, even approvingly, so) as an invitation to avoid 'Western intellectual imperialism' when analyzing non-Western discursive exchanges: "I applaud Tindale's anthropological approach, and his insistence that we look Western intellectual imperialist hegemony squarely in the eye, recognizing it for what it is" (Siegel 2023, p. 500). Imposing Western intellectual tradition on the reason-giving experiences of other cultures results in mutual misunderstanding, in the closure of our different worlds and, if inequality conditions allow for it, in downright injustice (discursive or other). And all this is, of course important enough, but, for the purposes of this response, let me be less 'generous' (that's Siegel's term) than

Tindale and concentrate on the dangers of imposing Western intellectual tradition on the reason-giving experiences of Western people.

This idea is of course also present in *The Anthropology of Argument*, which I personally read as an invitation to take the revelations of *encounter rhetorics* as an opportunity to rethink our own conception of (our own) argument.[4] This is because our reason-giving practices are also embedded in contextual parameters that have been eminently overlooked by our philosophical (especially our logical-epistemic) tradition. In this sense, I would say that *intercultural encounters* make obvious what is less obviously present but equally significant in all-Western encounters between:

a) different argumentative fields:
People do move between fields, and others, like the science journalist, can work on the periphery of fields, conveying ideas out into a wider community of interested parties. Closed systems (like those examined in encounter rhetorics) cannot remain closed for long, natural curiosity, and the desire to understand new experience discourages this. (Tindale 2021, p. 74);
b) or even between our very different selves, subject to divergent personal experiences:
we all experience such deep diversity of conflicts almost routinely, developing various strategies to manage them (Tindale 2021, p. 168).

The analogy works both ways and, of course, Tindale also encourages us to use our everyday experience of rational diversity and of moving between fields and practices to address, in a less chauvinistic way, our intercultural encounters. But the main (and in my view, more radical) point is that there is something wrong with our so far too narrow model of reason and rationality that makes it ill-suited to truly understand *our own practices*. Western people (even philosophers and scientists, see for example, Morgan et al. 2022) also use dreams, rituals, landscapes, and narratives as

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[4] For the sake of the argument, I'm talking as if I qualify as Western, something that, of course, depends on the way one divides the world.

(good) reasons, only they forget about it when doing argumentation theory.

However, all this (except perhaps for the bracketed 'good' of the previous sentence) could well be acknowledged and even welcomed by Siegel: All this does not emphasize what I think to be the *main philosophical conflict* between the epistemic and the rhetorical approaches to argument. Their central disagreement regards the *charge* made from the advocates, among others, of the epistemological approach to the rhetorical approach of confusing and conflating *justification* and *persuasion.* And I must say that Christopher Tindale offers a better and more complete defense against that charge in *The Philosophy of Argument and Audience Reception* than in *The Anthropology of Argument.*

First of all, with regard to the scope of Siegel's apparent *concessions* to Tindale's viewpoints, he sometimes seems to be prepared to agree on a certain (although not as extensive as Tindale's) openness and *contextualism* in the identification and characterization of reasons:

> […] it should be noted that no respectable epistemologist thinks that 'the goodness of reasons is integral to them and independent of any context in which they arise' because the relation 'is a good reason for' is *a relation*; it relates the reason to its target […] (Siegel 2023, p. 506).

This paragraph is, however, indicative enough of what counts as *context* for Siegel. His *context* results, in fact, in the discursive *decontextualization* (by means of atomization) of the role of any consideration adduced by *tying it up* to a target (assertion, *what else?*), and thus it reconstructs, again, the argument-in-its-abstract-propositional-sense as the sole object of philosophical desire, analysis, and interest.[5] I would rather defend the claim that the predicate 'is a good reason' does, in fact, express *a relation*, but it is a much more complex one between a reason and not only a

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[5] This kind of approach has been criticized by D. S. Levi (1995) as "a failure on the part of logicians to appreciate the importance of the rhetorical context of an argument" (1995, p. 67) due to their insistence on what he calls "the Premise-Conclusion Requirement" (1995, pp. 79ff).

possible (but also moving) target but also the participant agents (the mains focus of rhetoric), the specific more or less institutionalized reason-giving practice (the main focus of procedural dialectic), and other reasons and considerations adduced in it (the main focus of a certain kind of *contextualized* logic, cf. Marraud 2020).

And with these participant agents (people, *who else?*) and likewise with the specificity of situated reason-giving practices, comes the conflict regarding the nature of the relation between *justification* and *persuasion*. Siegel says:

> Let us grant that myths and narratives can and do have rhetorical force. Does it follow that they also have epistemological, probative, justificatory force? Clearly not. Rhetorical analysis is one crucially important dimension of argument evaluation, but it is not, and cannot be, the whole story. (Siegel 2023, p. 502)

But this kind of distinction is made as part of what characterizes, in fact, a very particular argumentative practice, namely epistemology. Epistemology, dealing with (historically changing) concepts of science and knowledge, differs from other reason-giving practices in which the distinction between *successful persuasion* and *effective justification* is not so relevant or poignant in that people practicing it tend to finish all their judgments with "but we might be wrong."[6]

Apart from that (and I am not at all saying that it is a trivial characteristic—maybe it is the mark of the healthiest way of reasoning and arguing), what epistemologists do is give, ask for, and evaluate reasons (in complex exchanges in which the argument-in-its-abstract-propositional-sense is as *elusive* as in any other exchange) according to different criteria whose relevance they also try to defend in those same exchanges. And sometimes they *per-*

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[6] This is not exclusive to (philosophical) epistemology or to scientific reasoning, of course. It is a distinction that may appear in any argumentative practice although it will tend to have, in each case, the same kind of consequence: namely, a reluctance to use *consensus* itself as a reason for the acceptance of the quality of reasons, avoiding, thus (to a certain extent) some kinds of arguments (those based on *mere* tradition, common usage, authority, etc.) But this does not mean that the standards of reason-assessment used in those settings would not have to be *accepted* by the relevant community in order to be applied.

suade each other about the *justificatory force* of some kind of reason-giving standard although they keep discussing it because they know that "they might be wrong."

What they (or we, for that matter) currently call *objective* (rational justification) is what is deemed objective at that particular moment of epistemological discussion, usually as a way to make explicit the acceptability of certain kinds of reasons *as opposed to* other kinds of reasons (deemed at that time likewise non-objective), and that is as it should be *because there is no alternative* (no God's eye view available to us as epistemologists).

Despite some appearances, epistemologists are also people, people who take seriously, and argue with other people *about*, the objectivity of certain ways of arguing that might obtain the effective *justification* of some content (of a specific type). And when they agree on their judgments and are mutually *persuaded* by their reason-giving practices, they advance (use and defend, at least for some time) a certain *theory of justification*…that may eventually be considered wrong in a subsequent reason-giving exchange.

All this is not intended to sound as provocative as it may seem. Joking aside, it regards a discussion about the *sources of normativity* that I already addressed when reviewing *The Philosophy of Argument and Audience Reception* for this same journal (Olmos 2018). As I emphasized in my review (Olmos 2018, pp. 180-181), in the last chapter of his 2015 book, Tindale explores the possibilities of his proposed, explicitly rhetorical, theoretical framework to deal with the normative requirements of a theory of argumentation. Tindale faced this task assuming from the beginning the difficulties that rhetorical perspectives have always endured in dealing with normative matters:

> Generally, we aspire to standards that are measurable and avoid relativism. Such standards have always been difficult for rhetorical argumentation, which is by its nature case-based (Tindale 2015, p. 212).

However, he thought he could make his case with considerations such as the following:

> To the objection that since the audience is the measure of reason-
> ableness then judging the unreasonable here would involve a rela-
> tivistic clash, we should again appeal to our experience that has
> shown us the presence of biased, irrational, and illogical views
> among groups and individuals. We recognize and reject the illegit-
> imate bias, the irrationality, and illogicality, thus showing that a
> standard has been appealed to against which these flaws appear.
> […] It is fair to have recourse to this standard of reason because *it*
> *is one that the particular audiences share in; it is drawn from the*
> *communities in which they operate*. The wider our experience of
> audiences, moving among different communities, the more accu-
> rate our picture of what serves as current conceptions of the rea-
> sonable. It is this distillation that we look for in identifying reason,
> not the artificial exercises of the logic class (Tindale 2015, p. 217,
> *my emphasis*)

This is followed, just a few lines below, by what is, in my view, the clearest claim about the practice-related source of argumentative normativity: "There is no alternative source for our standard of what is reasonable other than the activities of reasoners themselves" (Tindale 2015, p. 217), which I tried to paraphrase or maybe interpret with my own "there is no space for rational grounding beyond argumentative practice itself" (Olmos 2018, pp. 181-182).

The difference between *currently recognized* standards of reasonableness and *correct* standards of reasonableness is a difference that any person can appeal to when discussing standards of reasonableness and especially when trying to propose a new one. This kind of move is usually intended such that the new standard becomes a *currently recognized* standard of reasonableness, which may itself be opposed by future discussants with another *correct* (or *more correct*) one.

Philosophers (among others) have tried to look for a theory of rational *justification* that would grasp something more than the mere *persuasive* power of reasons (even more than their persuasive power *in idealized conditions*). And one of the conceptual instruments they have devised for that is an analysis of our complex argumentative practices in terms of artificially isolated, atomic arguments-in-their-abstract-propositional sense. My own as-

sessment of that endeavor is that it has not been so successful…
but, of course, I might be wrong.

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