On Defining Argument

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Traditionally, argument has been treated as the means by which knowledge claims were justified. Physicists, chemists, historians, philosophers, and the experts in other fields discovered knowledge, while argumentation theorists provided the means of justification. Over the last twenty years this view of the function of argument has been replaced by one treating argument, particularly dialectical argument, as an independent means of discovering as well as of justifying knowledge. For example, Perelman characterizes the New Rhetoric, which is primarily a theory of argumentation, as "the indispensable instrument for philosophy." Rescher argues that "Disputation and debate may be taken as a paradigmatic model for the general process of reasoning in the pursuit of truth." Similarly, Ehninger treats argument as a method of discovering truth, and Hardwig applies the method to moral questions. Wenzel supports a similar perspective: "Argumentation is the methodology above all of rational undertaking." A consensus among argumentation theorists is emerging which identifies argumentation as "the epistemological method."

Some theorists go farther and claim that argument is not only the method through which individuals discover knowledge but is also the means through which a society creates social truths. In this view, social knowledge is created through dialectical interchange between arguers. Farrell writes: "Such argument actualizes social knowledge premises by requiring their conscious application to generalized human interests." Goodnight makes a similar point: "Deliberative rhetoric is a form of argumentation through which citizens test and create social knowledge in order to uncover, assess, and resolve social problems." The view that knowledge is created through argument has even been extended to science. For instance, Weimer argues that rhetoric subsumes both logic and dialectic and that it is through rhetoric that scientific truths are created.

In sum, there is growing agreement that argumentation is more
than a means of justifying knowledge claims, but is actually the means through which individuals, citizens, and even scientists discover knowledge. This agreement about the function served by argument would seem to bode well for the study of argumentation. In *Human Understanding*, Toulmin argues that agreement on disciplinary purpose is one of the pre-conditions for consistent progress in a field. Unfortunately, while argumentation theorists are in general agreement about the function of argument, they agree about little else. Some treat argument as a propositional form while others see it as primarily a social process. There is similar disagreement about almost every other question at issue in the study of argument. The remainder of this essay will explore this disagreement and consider an alternative conceptualization of argumentation.

The Problem

The problem facing argumentation theorists today can be explained quite simply: there is no agreement on the defining characteristics of argument form, the theory which should undergird the study of argument, the proper method of evaluating that study, or even the meaning of the term argument itself. This disagreement is so fundamental that some theorists believe that others are not even studying argumentation. In order to sketch the breadth of the dispute I will focus on three aspects of it: the disagreements about form, theory, and methodology.

For centuries theorists focused on argument as a highly structured form of propositional logic. They treated the syllogism as the model for all argument and tested arguments by applying a set of precisely defined formal rules. Led by Toulmin, contemporary argumentation theorists have moved away from this perspective, because they claim that a strictly formal model cannot explain real-world argument. Real-world argument is less formal, but far more interesting and important than the argument typically found in a syllogism. While most argumentation theorists have rejected a purely formal approach to argument, many still define argument in formal terms as a type of propositional discourse in which premises are combined in support of a claim. Thus, Natanson writes: “An argument consists of at least two propositions, one of them being held to follow from the other.” Although Toulmin rejects a definition of argument as a species of formal logic, his description
of argument in the Toulmin model focuses on form.\textsuperscript{13} Many other theorists also treat argument as a type of propositional discourse. As Rieke and Toulmin note, "the theory of argument taught still tends toward formal rules as the paradigm of all argument."\textsuperscript{14}

While many theorists continue to treat argument as a thing, a type of propositional discourse, a growing number of theorists reject this interpretation in favor of a view of argument as a process.\textsuperscript{15} In their view, argument is not a thing which people make, but a process which people go through with each other. For example, Willard rejects a definition of argument as a thing in favor of a definition of argument as a type of interaction.\textsuperscript{16} He writes: "Formally, argument is a kind of interaction in which two or more people maintain what they construe to be mutually exclusive propositions."\textsuperscript{17} In this view there are no formal characteristics which must be present before a certain interchange is labeled as an argument. Rather: "The more holistic view of human nature toward which the communication discipline seems to be moving invites us to regard 'argument' as simply any act of conjoining symbolic structures (propositions or otherwise) to produce new structures."\textsuperscript{18} Here, Willard is primarily concerned with the process of argument: "Argument as process ought to be the organizing model [for argumentation theory]."\textsuperscript{19} His process view of argument is so broad that virtually any discourse can be treated as argument. This raises difficulties I shall discuss later.

Recently, Hample has argued that argument is best defined not as a product or a process, but as a form of cognition.\textsuperscript{20} In its most basic sense, then, argument is a form of reasoning.\textsuperscript{21} Thus arguments are not found primarily in discourse or in interaction, but "within the people who are arguing."\textsuperscript{22} Hample goes on to claim that the reasoning process includes a "thinking out" step, memory and retrieval, reconstruction, information processing, and creation.\textsuperscript{23} In his view, the cognitive process of argument is an essential attribute of argument as both interaction and product and is thus the most basic definition of argument.

There is also widespread disagreement about the proper theoretical model to be applied to the study of argument. Some theorists continue to treat argument as the informal branch of logic. These theorists emphasize the value of logical theory for explaining argument.\textsuperscript{24} At the same time, a number of theorists point to other sources for argumentation theory. For example, Willard focuses on the psychological dimensions of argument. He claims that argu-
ment "is a psychological phenomenon having no existence apart from the individuals who use it." Willard borrows the man as scientist metaphor from Kelly, who argues that humans define the world in terms of construct systems which they use to gain knowledge and solve problems. Drawing on Kelly, Willard explains argument as the process of social interaction through which people come to understand the world. In his view, people argue when their construct systems interact. Although they share a constructivist approach to argument with Willard, both Kneupper and Burleson come to very different conclusions about the nature and function of argument. Kneupper and Burleson treat argument as both a form of social interaction and a symbolic form possessing certain definable characteristics. They represent a middle ground between a formalist and a psychological approach to argument.

One might suspect that, even if there were disagreement about the defining characteristics of argument and the best theory for explaining it, theorists would agree about general methods of describing, explaining, and evaluating arguments. Surprisingly, there is little agreement even at the level of methodology. This disagreement relates primarily to two issues: the utility of models for describing argument and the legitimacy of evaluation as a goal of argumentation.

Until 1958, the dominant model used to describe argument was the syllogism. Argument theorists often described real-world arguments by first categorizing the premises in the argument and then placing them in syllogistic form. Since 1958 and the publication of *The Uses of Argument*, one main method for describing argument has been the Toulmin model. Although the model is no longer as widely accepted as it once was, it is still used in many basic argumentation textbooks as a method of breaking down and categorizing arguments. Recently, the use of the Toulmin model in particular and of models in general has been challenged. Willard argues that the Toulmin model is too simplistic to be useful. In his view, three models are needed, one each for the hearer, the arguer, and the discourse itself, in order to describe an argument adequately. Willard also claims that the Toulmin model misleads the critic by de-emphasizing the importance of situational and psychological factors in discourse. The model is, he claims, too simple to produce a useful description of real-world argument. Not only does Willard attack the value of the Toulmin model, and by implication any other model for categorizing argument, but he also argues that a
critic should not focus mainly on texts in the descriptive process. The problem with texts, according to Willard, is that they contain only part of the data found in real-world argument. They cut the critic off from the social situation in which the argument occurred and from non-discursive communication, which he believes is an essential element in argument. Willard writes: "I think it intuitively obvious that all kinds of communication may be construed along discursive and/or non-discursive lines and that arguments, because they are a kind of communication, reflect the same duality." He goes on to argue that non-linguistic communication plays an important part in argument and is no less rational than strictly propositional discourse.

In addition to the disagreement about the proper methodology for describing argument, there is also disagreement about what to do once that description has been completed. For most traditional argumentation theorists, the next step was obvious; after describing the argument you evaluated it. Thus Toulmin argues: "If I'm talking about arguments, I am concerned with the appraisal of argument, whether or not some arguments are stronger than others, or in better taste than others." This view has been defended in a number of recent essays. Willard has called the evaluative focus of argument studies into question by building a case for a purely descriptive approach to argument criticism. He argues that the standards usually used to evaluate arguments aren't useful. For example, even an argument built on inconsistent assumptions may be true in some situations. His conclusion is that "the form of an argument guarantees neither its truth nor its moral worth." Willard also argues that in principle there can be no ultimately justifiable standards for argument evaluation. The problem is that any proposed standard for evaluating an argument must itself be justified. And in turn that standard must be justified by another standard, and so on. This leads to an infinite regress out of which the critic cannot break. Based on this reasoning, Willard rejects evaluation altogether in favor of description as the goal of the study of argument. In sum, while many critics treat evaluation as an essential element in argument criticism, Willard and others warn that evaluation is inherently unjustifiable.

At this point, the problem facing argumentation theorists should be obvious. There is disagreement about the goal of argument criticism and the proper method of attaining that goal. Nor is there agreement about the theoretical presuppositions upon which the
study of argument should be built. Finally, there is no agreement about the defining characteristics of argument itself. Some treat argument as an interpersonal process, while others define it in purely formal terms. It seems that the one point upon which nearly all critics agree is the epistemic function of argument. Yet, this very agreement raises questions. If critics do not agree on the definition or method of analyzing argument how can they agree on its function? Something deserving to be called argument seems to exist and to justify detailed examination philosophically and otherwise. But until some agreement can be reached about what "argument" and "argumentation" are, there can scarcely be scholarly dialogue that is clear.

The Answer

The problem facing theorists studying argumentation is a definitional one. I believe the way in which most theorists have approached defining an "argument" has been self-defeating. The theorists have generally reasoned from what they believed were typical examples of argument to the defining characteristics of "argument." Traditionalists have treated propositional discourse as representative of all argument, which has led other scholars such as Willard to object that this way of defining what argument is ignores the features of ordinary-language social interaction that certainly occur wherever communication can fairly be called "argumentation."

It is not possible to develop an adequate theory of argument by working from allegedly typical examples to theory. This approach will not work because there is no way to identify a typical example drawn from the class "argument" without first knowing what argument is. It does Willard no good to argue that non-discursive argument is more typical than is propositional argument. One has to know what the term "argument" itself means before we can evaluate whether non-discursive or propositional argument is more typical. Argumentation theorists have developed very different definitions of argument because they have treated it as a thing in the same sense that a table is a thing. Argument is a concept which has no existence apart from our definitions of it. Arguments as such do not exist in the real world. They are concepts which come into existence only after we define them.

Here, Richard Robinson's distinction between real and nominal definitions is relevant. According to Robinson, some definitions
are about things (the definition of the characteristics of a certain animal) while other definitions are about words or concepts. The definition of argument fits in the second category. The definition of a thing may be evaluated by comparing it to the thing, but the definition of a concept can be evaluated only by considering the function of the concept and asking how well a particular definition serves that function. It is pointless to argue about whether typical arguments are discursive or non-discursive, verbal or non-verbal. The answer to these disputes is inherent in the definition of argument which one chooses.

I have argued that to be useful a definition of argument must be nominal or stipulative. If I am correct, the next task is to discover how such a stipulative definition can be produced. Here it is important to recall the one point upon which nearly all argumentation theorists are agreed, the epistemic function of argument. This agreement on purpose should be treated as a useful clue in defining argument. If the function of argument is to produce knowledge for individuals and society then any definition of the concept should explain that function. The theorist should begin with the assumption that there is some symbolic form out there which serves epistemic and justificatory functions, and reason back to the characteristics which allow a form to serve those functions. Here, the key idea is that form and structure are shaped by function.

There is some support for the view that argumentative form follows function. In a number of recent essays it has been argued that fields of argument are shaped by their social functions. In this view, the force which unifies a given field is the shared problem-solving purpose of a group of arguers. The arguers in the field choose a subject area, argument form, set of evaluative criteria, disciplinary organization, and so on because they believe that those characteristics will best fulfill their purposes. Thus, precise evaluative standards, competitive procedures, and a high degree of formality have developed in law because those characteristics are thought necessary to achieve justice and balance the rights of the individual and society. In science, by contrast, where the purpose is to attain scientific truth, informal procedures and mathematically precise evaluative standards are the norm because they best fulfill that purpose. In both cases form follows function. If the characteristics of various fields of argument can be traced to the shared purposes energizing arguers in the area, it is reasonable to suspect that the general characteristics shared by all argument may
also be traced to shared purpose, in this case the general epistemic purpose apparently served by all argument.

In sum, a good definition of argument should explain the form (whether as interaction or product) and function of argument, as well as the link between form and function. In addition to defining what argument is it should define what argument is not. In other words, any definition of argument should distinguish arguments from other symbolic forms. If all communication can be considered argument then the term argument lacks any independent meaning.41

It should be possible to begin the process of defining argument by focusing on its epistemic purpose. However, it is not enough to say simply that argument is epistemic. Argument serves two related epistemic functions: justification and discovery. Much argument serves the function of justifying previous conclusions. A teacher justifies conclusions which he or she discovered in studying a subject. A scientist justifies conclusions drawn from an experiment. It might appear that the justificatory and epistemic functions are independent, and it is true that an arguer discovers no new knowledge when he or she justifies a claim. However, justificatory argument can be classified as epistemic when it produces new knowledge in the audience. Here it should be noted that while argument is an epistemic method it is not the epistemic method. Knowledge may be discovered through other means than argument. Willard has built a compelling case supporting intuition as a means of discovering moral and empirical truths.42 However, while knowledge may be discovered through intuition or other non-argumentative methods, it is through argument that this knowledge is transmitted. Absent telepathy or some other method of directly sharing my intuitions, I rationally persuade you to accept the knowledge I discovered via intuition, by going through a process of justification. The method of rational justification is what constitutes and distinguishes argument. It may be rational for me to believe my own intuitions simply because I feel them to be true, but it is rational for me to accept someone else’s intuitions only if good arguments support them.

In addition to justification, argument is an independent method of discovering knowledge. This discovery process occurs in dialectical argument when an arguer tests his or her claims against competing claims. It is the give and take of the dialectical process which reveals new truths. When I am forced to answer your arguments
against my position, I may discover that I am wrong or be forced to modify my beliefs. Alternatively, I may convince you that you are wrong.

To this point, I have claimed that the method of rationally solving problems is argument. Through argument I may justify a previous position or discover the answer to a previously unanswered problem. The next step in securing a functional definition of argument is to identify the characteristics which allow argument to serve this rational function. The answer is obvious: argument solves problems by providing reasons for a particular view and by testing those reasons against competing positions. The epistemic purpose of argument requires arguers to support their positions with reasons and evidence and to test those reasons against competing reasons and evidence. It is the reliance on reason-giving which distinguishes argument from other symbolic forms and makes it rational. At this point, argument can be defined in relatively simple terms. Argument is discourse in which people attempt to solve problems rationally by supporting their claims with reasons and evidence.43

It might seem that this view rejects any analysis of argument as a process in favor of an exclusively formal definition of argument. However, a closer look reveals that the proposed definition treats argument as both a form and a process. As a form, argument is that type of discourse in which reasons and evidence are presented in support of claims. An individual uses the formal characteristics of argument in order to justify a claim to an audience. This represents a unilateral application of argument; there is no give and take. In argument as process, an individual tests his or her claims against the claims of other arguers. Alternatively, a single individual may engage in what might be called an internal dialectic, in which he or she tests every claim against counter claims. Argument as process occurs as long as all of the individuals in a dispute support their claims with reasons and evidence. As soon as one party or another refuses to support a position with reason and evidence, or refuses to answer the arguments of the other side, the dispute ceases to be an argument. The process of argument occurs when people produce arguments as product against each other.44 We cease to argue as soon as we move away from the resources of argument as product.

This explanation of the relationship between argument as prod-
uct and argument as process is appealing in its simplicity. The characteristic which defines all argument, reason-giving, is also the characteristic which, when applied in a dialectical situation, has the potential to produce new knowledge. Arguments as product and process are really two sides of the same coin. That coin is human rationality, for, as Weimer argues, the defining characteristic of rationality is the ability to respond to counter-arguments and support a claim with a reason. Argument is, then, a unit of discourse. It is also a process. Neither sense is more basic; they are inextricably connected.

The view developed here also clarifies Hample’s claim that argument is best defined as a cognitive process. At one level Hample is clearly correct that arguments have no existence outside of the human brain. We would not know of arguments were it not for the brain, and the enthymematic nature of argument means that we interpret arguments through our cognitive structures. However, this same point could be made about any human creation. Language, art, and music all require cognitive interpretation. We would not know of their existence, were it not for our minds. Since humans know the world through their brains, all human constructions are in one sense cognitive. However, in another sense arguments do exist in the world as a form of discourse. The point is that, for argument to serve its epistemic function, a reason or group of reasons must be present. And since argument is a species of communication, that reason or those reasons must be symbolic and thus analyzable apart from a consideration of cognition. Hample is right that the reasons in an argument are interpreted by the human brain, but just as it sometimes makes sense to talk about the notes played by a violinist as opposed to the psychological responses of the audience to those notes, it also may make sense to discuss the reasons and evidence presented in a unit of discourse.

Moreover, the breadth of Hample’s definition of argument undercuts its value. If argument is defined to include information processing, retrieval, creative energies, and so forth, then the concept has become so loose that it is not very useful. In addition, when it actually comes to studying argument, Hample admits that the critic must return to texts of some kind. At that point the independent value of his cognitive view of argument is undercut. Argument serves its epistemic function by generating reasoning,
but it is the symbolic form of argument that allows it to serve this function. Reasoning and argument are closely related but not identical concepts.

**Implications**

The functionalist approach to defining argument, which I have sketched, has a number of important implications for argumentation theory. One of the primary benefits of the approach is that it recognizes that argument is an inherently normative concept. We argue in order to solve problems rationally. If we don't argue then we give up on rationality itself. A purely descriptive approach to argument ignores its social function. In a recent essay, Willard cites the opinion of Elliot that "evaluation is a pleasant avocation of critics; and like other human activities it must be earned. No human has a right to evaluate another unless he convincingly can argue that he fully understands that other and he can defend his standards." Willard goes on to defend description as the primary goal of argument study. Here, Willard misunderstands the social function of argument and argument criticism. A literary critic can focus exclusively upon description because the social function of art is to create aesthetic pleasure. Description by itself can enhance that pleasure. Evaluation is not needed. But the social function of argument is different from that of art. Argument is the method by which we evaluate all knowledge. Consequently, argument is inherently normative.

The rational function of argument makes evaluation a necessary component of any adequate theory of argument. When humans attempt to solve problems they don't want just any solution, but the best solution. Thus, it is imperative that we be able to distinguish the relative quality of the arguments which we produce to solve those problems. This analysis leads to the commonsense conclusion that some arguments are better than others and that it is possible to distinguish which ones are better. It is easy to imagine a public debate in which one speaker advocates handgun control based on five or six compelling reasons, while a representative of the National Rifle Association says simply, "Only Commies and queers are against guns." In that situation it would be easy to evaluate the arguments for gun control as superior to the one against it. Although this example is extreme, it is revealing. It suggests that in at least some situations it is possible to evaluate the
relative quality of competing arguments. Once it is admitted that
evaluation of some type is both feasible and useful, it is only a
matter of identifying the most rational standards for evaluation
and adapting them to specific circumstances.

A second implication drawn from the functionalist view of argu-
ment relates to the proper methodology for analyzing arguments.
When viewed functionally, an argument is a claim supported by a
reason and evidence. In formal terms, the basic triad of the
Toulmin model serves as a good definition of argument. Here, I do
not deny that real world arguments are often complex. Such argu-
ments may be supported by any number of reasons and bits of
evidence. Moreover, much of the support for an argument may be
implicit. In an enthymeme, an arguer draws upon shared values or
social knowledge to support a claim. It also may be difficult for the
critic to distinguish between the reason and data presented in sup-
port of a claim. However, although it is often difficult to break an
argument into its component parts, this in no way denies the utility
of models for describing arguments. Models such as the Toulmin
model may be difficult to apply, but if the essential form of argu-
ment is that of a claim supported by a reason and evidence, they
can serve as useful, if flawed, descriptive devices. Here, it is impor-
tant to understand that the critic of argument should not be con-
cerned with all the persuasive appeals presented in a speech or
essay. Nor should the critic be concerned with why an audience is
influenced in a particular way or with the motives behind a speak-
er's actions. The argument critic should be concerned with argu-
ment as the rational method of solving problems. He or she is
concerned with the reasons and data supporting a conclusion and
not with the other aspects of the discourse or situation. In this
regard, Willard's objections to the Toulmin model point to its
limited value as a method of rhetorical criticism, but not necessar-
ily deny its worth as a means of argument criticism. In addition, by
focusing only on the descriptive value of the Toulmin model, Wil-
lard ignores its most important function, as an evaluative tool. I
suggest that the primary value of the Toulmin model is as a means
of identifying weaknesses in arguments. By identifying possible
rebuttals and by testing the material validity of an argument via a
consideration of backing, the critic can evaluate some aspects of
the overall worth of the argument.

A rationalistic definition of argument as a problem-solving de-
vice also illuminates the methodological dispute about the value of
texts as sources of arguments. While a text is an imperfect record of an argument, most of the problems associated with texts lose their importance when it is understood that the argument critic is concerned primarily with the reasons and evidence presented in support of a claim, as opposed to other aspects of the discourse. Although a text may not reflect all of the motives of a speaker, the subtleties in a particular situation, or the non-verbal aspects of a speech, it will contain the reasons and evidence presented in support of a claim. It is those reasons and data which should be of concern to the argument critic.

The functionalist interpretation of argument also suggests a possible means of resolving some of the issues in the discursiveness dispute. Willard may well be correct that much communication is transmitted via non-discursive symbols. He also may be correct about the importance of non-verbal communication. However, the primary function of argument is to resolve problems through reason-giving. And reasons by their very nature are symbolic. In answering this objection Willard points to the crucial role which nondiscursi ve elements play in shaping the reasons behind an action and notes that people often argue for reasons that are explicitly stated in their discourse. He suggests that a definition of argument as a form of propositional discourse ignores the role of such non-discursive reasons in argument. Here, Willard trades on ambiguity in the meaning of the word "reason." In discussing non-discursive argument he in effect defines a reason as the motive behind an action. In this regard, he is clearly correct that non-discursive elements often function as motives or illuminate an arguer's motives. However, Willard proves that non-discursive elements act as reasons only by choosing an improper definition of the term. In argument, a reason functions not as a motive but as a justification, an inference rule supporting a claim. While non-discursive elements may function as motives, they cannot function as rational justification for a claim unless they are translated into a shared symbol system. Reason-giving in the sense of justification is by its very nature symbolic. It is interesting that Willard has yet to cite an example of a non-discursive element that functions as a reason in the sense of justification. Non-discursive forms such as art or music may be perfectly rational and may be important forms of communication, but they cannot function as reasons without being translated into a shared symbol system. The final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony could be used as part of an argu-
ment supporting international cooperation, but in such an argument it would not be the notes of the score that were important, but the link between the symphony and the United Nations.

Some might object that by limiting the definition of reason to a rule of inference or justification for a claim I arbitrarily limit the study of argumentation. However, it should be remembered that a good definition of argument both explains the link between form and function and distinguishes between argument and other forms of discourse. By defining reason to include motive as well as justification, Willard produces a definition of argument that is so broad that it is useless. All discourse involves reason-giving, if a reason is defined as a motive. Moreover, such a definition ignores the rational function of argument. Argument serves as epistemic method because in it reasons (in the sense of justifications) are presented in support of claims. Absent reason-giving, discourse cannot solve problems rationally and thus shouldn't be treated as argument. Against this view, Willard argues that since argument is a form of communication, all forms of communication must be present in it. Willard's claim is problematic. The fact that some communication is non-discursive does not mean that all forms of communication (in this case argument) must include non-discursive elements.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the non-discursiveness question is not an empirical issue. I am arguing that by definition argument involves reason-giving and that reason-giving is necessarily symbolic. This view cannot be defeated by citing ordinary-language research showing that much discourse is non-discursive. My position does not deny the non-discursive element in communication, but only notes that non-discursive symbols cannot serve as reasons, absent translation into a shared symbol system, and therefore are not essential to an understanding of argument. The dispute is over the value of a stipulative definition of argument as a form of reason-giving discourse. I suggest that such a limited definition is more useful than the amorphous definitions proposed by Willard and others because it identifies the form and function of argument, explains the linkage between form and function, and distinguishes between argumentative and non-argumentative discourse.

The stipulative definition of argument which I have proposed suggests that the dispute over the importance of language in argument also may be resolved quite easily. Willard is quite correct that argument is not necessarily linguistic. However, argument is by its
very nature symbolic, for the process of reason-giving requires a shared symbol system. As a result, most argument is carried on in language. Language is the most universal, precise, and powerful symbol system that humans possess. Robinson explains how language facilitates argument:

Words are the means to a knowledge of things. Without them an animal’s knowledge is confined to his own unanalyzed memories and perceptions of his own experience. Without them there is little analysis, little generalization, and no transmission of experience from one animal to another. When the cat comes home, he cannot tell you what he has seen. And this is not because he has no leisure, for the busy bees can tell each other that they have found honey; it is because he has no symbols. Without symbols history contracts into a plurality of incommunicable autobiographies, and science into each organism’s private rules of thumb.

Argument may be non-discursive or non-verbal, but in such cases it functions as argument only after translation into a discursive symbol system such as language.

The view of argument as a rational problem-solving agent also clarifies a number of other issues in argumentation. For example, Brockriede’s list of defining characteristics of argument can be illuminated by considering how function shapes argument. According to Brockriede, six characteristics define argument:

1. An inferential leap from existing beliefs to the adoption of a new belief or to the reinforcement of an old one.
2. A perceived rationale to support that leap.
3. A choice among two or more competing claims.
5. A willingness to risk confrontation of a claim with peers.

While characteristics (1) and (2) correspond to the definition of the form of argument which I have presented, the remaining characteristics are not essential to defining argument. Instead, in characteristics (3) through (6) Brockriede identifies those situations in which productive argument is likely to occur. For example, in characteristic (3) Brockriede claims that people do not argue if there is only one option for action. His point is similar to Willard’s claim that argument inherently involves disagreement. However, there are situations in which people support claims with reasons and evi-
dence, even though they believe there is only one possible course of action. A group of committed Catholics might continue to build what I have defined as arguments, supporting the existence of God, although they were all in agreement about that issue. It makes sense to characterize such discourse as argument. Despite the absence of disagreement, the committed Catholics are supporting their claims with reasons and evidence. However, while disagreement is not a necessary aspect of argument it is usually the force which motivates people to argue. Similarly, "a regulation of uncertainty" is not a necessary aspect of every argument; it is a goal motivating arguers.

The final two characteristics identified by Brockriede—a willingness to risk confrontation and a shared frame of reference—also are not necessary attributes of argument. People often support their claims with reasons and evidence although they don’t share a frame of reference or risk confrontation. When the Soviet and United States ambassadors to the United Nations engage in debate, they support their claims, but there is no risk of self and no shared frame of reference. Thus, characteristics (5) and (6) are not essential to the definition of argument. Rather, they are essential to the successful resolution of argument. Without a shared frame of reference and a willingness to risk the self, there is little chance of rationally resolving a dispute.

Conclusion

The functional approach to the study of argumentation is valuable because it provides a clear definition of the scope of argumentation. It recognizes that while all argument is rhetorical, not all rhetoric is argument. One danger associated with some recent work on argument is that the term argument itself becomes so broad that it loses all meaning. If argument is defined to include all disagreement, all comparison of construct systems, and all instances in which an individual believes that he or she is arguing then essentially all communication is argument.

A more useful definitional move is to treat argument as the symbolic form(s) we use to solve problems rationally. This implies that argument is the method of reason. Such a definition sets the limits of argumentation and defines the form of argument in relation to the function of arguing. Moreover, so to define argument recognizes the role of evaluation in the study of argument. Merely
to describe an argument or set of arguments leaves their human significance out of consideration. Once the arguments of a speech, essay, or other verbal interaction have been described with accuracy, the next point of critical interest is naturally the arguments’ relative quality as efforts to induce closure. The value of examining arguments is undercut if description becomes the only aim of criticism of argumentation. A socially satisfying definition of argument and a useful theory of argumentation must provide at least trained theorists with grounds for distinguishing between weak and strong arguments, as the functional definition does.

Some will perhaps object that the functional definition of argument for which I have contended restricts a student of argumentation to study of propositional discourse. This is true in the sense that my definition identifies reason-giving as a fundamental characteristic of argument, and reason-giving is propositional. On the other hand, an issue that needs clarification in theory of argument, as I have shown, is whether “argumentation” and “rhetoric” are to be considered synonymous. If so, the concept of “argument” becomes unnecessary; the concept of “rhetoric” is sufficient. My contention is that arguments occur in rhetoric and need to be recognized, described, and evaluated in light of their unique functional and formal features. Arguments cannot be understood by applying the same kinds of analysis as we would apply if, say, rhythm were our point of interest. Arguments are formally and functionally different from rhythmic patterns, situational constraints, levels of vocabulary, and the like—all features of rhetoric. If argument is taken to be the means by which humans rationally solve problems—or try to, arguments can be identified, described, and evaluated critically as part of the broader enterprise of identifying, describing, and evaluating rhetoric. Across centuries, people have believed there is such a process as trying to arrive at preferred conclusions by rational means, rather than by non-rational means. That process, I have argued, entails distinctive verbal forms appropriate to the function of the process. It is at least useful to give such purposeful forms and function a name. Traditionally and contemporaneously “argument” is philosophically and etymologically the appropriate name.

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Notes

21. Ibid., 16.
22. Ibid., 3.
23. Ibid.
35. Willard, “Argument Fields, Sociologies of Knowledge, and Critical Episte-


41. For a similar position see Kneupper, "Paradigms and Problems," 221; Burleson, "On the Analysis," 138.


43. See Burleson, "On the Analysis," 141–42.

44. This view is similar to that of Brockriede; see Wayne Brockriede, "Characteristics of Argument and Arguing," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 13 (1977):129.

45. Weimer defines rationality in critical terms. A rational human is ready to support any of his or her positions against criticism. It is the capacity to answer any criticism with reasons which makes humans rational. See Weimer, 40, 47, 48.

46. Hample, 11.

47. Willard, "SNDT," 213.

48. For a more developed version of this argument see Rowland, "On Argument Evaluation."


