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Citation style: Sułkowska Mariola. (2003). Henry Johnstone's theory of philosophical argumentation : "argumentum ad hominem" and new methods of philosophical polemics. W: A. Kiepas, A. Noras (red.), "Rationality today : challenges, problems, changes" (S. 11-21). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego



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Mariola Sułkowska

**Henry Johnstone's
Theory of Philosophical Argumentation:
Argumentum ad hominem
and New Methods
of Philosophical Polemics**

At the beginning, let me introduce Mr Henry Webb Johnstone, Jr. He was born on 22 February 1920 in Montclair, and died on 18 February 2000.

A distinguished philosopher, Henry Webb was teaching for four years at Williams College. Then, between 1952 and 1984, he taught in the department of philosophy at Penn State University.

He was the author of eight books (for example: *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation*; *What is Philosophy?*; *The Problem of the Self*; *Validity and Rhetoric in Philosophical Argument*) and more than 160 articles on philosophy, logic, argumentation theory, rhetoric and classics. Henry Johnstone founded and for 22 years was editing the journal, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*. While at Penn State, he also served as the acting department chair, director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanistic Studies, and the assistant of the vice-president for research. He held a Belgian-American Foundation Fellowship at the Free University of Brussels and — as a Fulbright Scholar — he was a visiting professor at Trinity College, Dublin; the University of Bonn, Germany; and the American University of Beirut.

Henry Johnstone elaborated theory of philosophical argumentation.¹ He thought that all effective philosophical polemic is at root a valid type of *argumentum ad hominem*. Possibility of using this form of argumentation in philosophical speculation and deliberation as well as in philosophical debates and in the criticism of philosophical systems, is a feature which distinguishes philosophy from the empirical science on the one hand, and from logic, on the other.

In his article *The Logical Powerfulness of Philosophical Argument*² Johnstone presents similar argumentation to Gilbert Ryle who points out that “philosophical arguments can be or fail to be logically powerful in a sense of ‘logically’ closely related to the sense in which a proof may be or fail to be logically rigorous”.³ Ryle shows that philosophical arguments are not proofs, for proofs require theorems and premises. But “there are no philosophical theorems”.⁴ Moreover, when the philosopher attempts to infer from the explicit premises, then “the debate instantly moves back a step. The philosophical point

¹ See for example: H.W. Johnstone, Jr.: *Philosophy and Argument*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1959; Idem: *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and Argumentation*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965; Idem: “Philosophy and *argumentum ad hominem*”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 49 (1952); Idem: “The Methods of Philosophical Polemic”, *Methods*, 5 (1953); Idem: “The Nature of Philosophical Controversy”, *Journal of Philosophy*, 51 (1954); Idem: “A New Theory of Philosophical Argumentation”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 15 (1954); Idem: “Some Aspects of Philosophical Disagreement”, *Dialectica*, 8 (1954); Idem: “The Logical Powerfulness of Philosophical Arguments”, *Mind*, 64 (1955); Idem: “New Outlooks on Controversy”, *Review of Metaphysics*, 12 (1958); Idem: “New Outlooks on Controversy”, *Review of Metaphysics*, 12 (1958); Idem: “Truth, Communication and Persuasion in Philosophy”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 23 (1969); Idem: “Bilaterality in Argument and Communication”, in J.R. Cox, C.A. Willard (eds.): *Advances in Argumentation Theory and Research*, Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1983; Idem: “Argumentation and Formal Logic in Philosophy”, *Argumentation*, 3 (1989); Idem: “Philosophical Argument and the Rhetorical Wedge”, *Communication and Cognition*, 24 (1991).

² See above.

³ G. Ryle: “Proofs in Philosophy”, *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* (1954), p. 151. See also Idem: *Philosophical Arguments. An Inaugural Lecture*. Delivered before the University of Oxford, 30 October 1945, Oxford 1945.

⁴ Idem: “Proofs”..., p. 152.

at issue is seen to be lodged [...] in those pretended premises themselves.”⁵

But it is important to notice that Johnstone clearly distinguishes *argumentum ad personam* from *argumentum ad hominem*. For philosophical polemic is an appeal for purposes or principles whose endorsement, explicit or implicit, by philosopher under attack, is essential for his argumentation. Moreover, this valid argumentation should be distinguished from these uses of *argumentum ad hominem*, which have led to its customary condemnation as invalid. It is invalid when the defendant's endorsement of the purposes or principles to which it appeals, would not be necessary.⁶

Let us see the glaring situation. If two men disagree over how many l's there are in “philosophy”, or whether methyl alcohol has a higher boiling point than water, or whether there is a water vapour in the atmosphere of Venus, each can interpret the disagreement as consisting of the fact that the other has made a statement incompatible with the one he has made. Both can, without any difficulty, understand the statements in question. Moreover, both can, at least imagine what it would be like for his opponent's statement to be true. The opposite statements are, thus, at least logically commensurate.

When two men disagree over fundamental philosophical issues, however, neither is quite entitled to be able to imagine what it would be like for his opponent's statement to be true, even though one or another may be under the illusion that he can. While stating their systematic positions, in effect they claim that these positions include all relevant evidence and therefore there are no statements adducing evidence against them, they are impossible.

For example, if one takes the position (apparently taken by existentialists) that authentic existence is more important than technological progress, one will not be able to think of technological progress as having any importance at all, except to the perhaps accidental extent that it enhances authentic existence; so it will be impossible,

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ See H.W. Johnstone, Jr.: “The Methods...”.

strictly speaking, even to imagine technological progress as more important than authentic existence. Therefore, Johnstone's conclusion is that "the view is thus not logically commensurate with views that oppose it".⁷

Next, he notices, that to a neutral observer of the issue, whether the authentic existence is more important than the technological progress, the logical incompatibility of the opposed statements at issue may, of course, seem to be obvious. This is because such an observer need not endorse a claim of either position to include all relevant evidence. Even a defendant of one of the positions involved, may, of course, at times, assume a role of a neutral observer. The existentialist can speculate about relative merits of existentialism and pragmatism. But when he does, he is neglecting, for the moment, the fact that existentialism can be an actual philosophical position only when it claims that no other position is even possible.

So, the fact that philosophers argue need not be proved. Generally, however, they have not taken the official cognizance of their own argumentation. Philosophical views, as to the nature and function of philosophical controversy, have occurred only sporadically. But we can say that "theories of philosophical controversy, generally, tend either to doubt that argumentation results in a net gain in insight or to hope that it may".⁸

For Johnstone, the doubtful theories are exemplified by Hume, Kant and Logical Positivism. Such positions are characterized by a polemical zeal that is incomprehensible and morally impossible unless it is genuinely motivated by the desire to promote new insights. "The philosophical argument" — concludes Johnstone — "to the effect that philosophical arguments make no contribution is surely itself intended as a contribution, and so, undercuts itself."⁹

On the other hand, hopeful theories of philosophical controversy would be represented by the traditional views of the dialectic prior to Kant. Johnstone points out that "the common them, here, appears

⁷ H.W. Johnstone, Jr.: *Philosophy and Argument...*, p. 2.

⁸ Idem: "The Nature of Philosophical Controversy...", p. 294.

⁹ Ibidem.

to be the assumption that philosophical arguments can be resolved within a universe of discourse that each of opposing philosophies, and whose discovery enlarges human insight".¹⁰ Therefore, what is overlooked by such theories is the fact that philosophical antagonism may be so radical as to preclude any, but the most trivial reconciliation of this kind. The real rub, of course, is that the hopeful theories are themselves irrevocably opposed to the doubtful ones.

Let us notice that views of both types base their assessment of philosophical controversy on cognitive grounds, in the sense that they are both fundamentally concerned with the question of promoting insights. Thus, to avoid deadlock between them, it is reasonable to search for non-cognitive basis of the assessment. Moreover, it is very important to note that the assumption that the philosophical controversy must be evaluated on the non-cognitive grounds does not necessarily convince anyone to view that there is no connection between the arguments of philosophers and the enhancement of insights. Such enhancement might be as well the result of controversy, if not the purpose of it.

Thus, philosophical opposition is not fundamentally logical. Moreover, it is more radical than any other pure, logical opposition holding between statements. Johnstone tries to show that the only proper response to disagreement, as radical as the one found with respect to philosophical positions, is the participation in genuine controversy.¹¹ Consequently, not only is it impossible to cross the abyss that separates opposing philosophical positions unless the partisans of these positions are willing to argue with each other, but also the argumentation is the sole medium through which a position can communicate its content, even if, it faces no opposition. Thus, argument seems to be a fundamental philosophical method. Moreover, any philosophical statement viewed apart from its argumentative context is

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 294—295. See also M. Adler: *Dialectic*, New York 1927 and J. Passmore: *Philosophical Reasoning*, London 1969.

¹¹ Compare: Ch. Perelman: "A Reply to Henry W. Johnstone, Jr.", in: M. Natanson, H.W. Johnstone, Jr. (eds.): *Philosophy, Rhetoric and Argumentation*. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1965, pp. 135—137.

profoundly ambiguous. No philosophical statement can be true, except the one, relative to the argument through which it tends to be established. Respect of the relation between truth and argument is precisely what differs philosophy from science. The truth of scientific statement is not relative to the argument. But the truth of philosophical statement is always relative to the argument. This apparent flouting of the Law of Contradiction may seem to be reaffirmation of a familiar bit of metaphysical nonsense. The Law of Contradiction, however, applies only to propositions. Philosophical statements — claims Johnstone — are not propositions. The truth of philosophical statement seems to be much more complicated matter than it is in the case of a proposition. Thus, we can say that no philosophical statement is absolutely true. “One important reason for supposing that the truth of such statements is relative to argument is that if no argument for or against the statement has been produced, it is impossible to decide what the statement means, and impossible, therefore, to think of it as true.”¹²

As I said, for Johnstone, in philosophy, there is nothing more authoritative in principle than the argument. There is, for instance, no philosophical way of advocating a philosophical doctrine except from producing arguments in its favour. And when arguments are brought to bear on a doctrine, if the proponents of the doctrine wish to continue to maintain it as a philosophical doctrine, they have no choice but to argue in its defense. Also, when it is shown that a philosophical doctrine rests upon a specious argument that is sufficient to discredit any philosophical claim the doctrine may make, even though the critic may admit the possibility of the doctrine's being, none the less, true. Only the discovery of better argument can restore the philosophical credit of such a doctrine.

Of course, to say that in philosophy there is nothing more authoritative in principle than the argument does not mean the deny of the existence of philosophical grounds equally authoritative to the argument. Johnstone admits that there may exist, for example, philosophical data or insights with the same degree of authority. But, as he notices,

¹² H.W. Johnstone, Jr.: *Philosophy and Argument...*, p. 25.

“no statement merely reporting datum or insight is in itself philosophical; it is rather psychological or autobiographical”.¹³ A statement may be philosophical, but only when it appeals to datum or insight in the attempt to establish a conclusion of a certain type, or to refute the proposed philosophical thesis. This appeal would constitute an argument. So even if argument is not necessarily the only basis of authority in philosophy, it is, at least, an authoritative feature, common to all philosophical discourse.

Besides, Johnstone notices that controversy is one of the channels through which a person may seek power. And important feature of power that philosophical argumentation attempts to secure is that it is bilateral. It is power that can be posed only by granting it to others: it is clear that if I condemn your philosophy for violating the Law of Contradiction, or the Principle of Parsimony, I must be prepared to meet your charge that my view fails to satisfy the standards. Bilateral power contrasts most of power, such as physical force, control through reward and punishment and persuasion through propaganda. On the other hand, in philosophical controversy, power of a given disputant is enhanced by his subjection to it, because that subjection serves to increase the number of critical principles available for their own use.¹⁴ As we can see, then, philosophical controversy is the quest for a kind of power that must be distinguished, on the one hand, from the unilateral use of physical, psychological or economic force, but on the other hand, also, from the bilateral criticism manifested in the empirical knowledge and logic. “The arguments of philosophers concern positions which exclude each other but at the same time express totalities. The consistency of these requirements depends upon the possibility of criticism that is internal rather than merely external. And internal criticism is power, because it is ‘control over another insofar as he is in control of himself.’”¹⁵

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

¹⁴ See H.W. Johnstone, Jr.: “The Nature...”, pp. 295—296. See also *Idem*: “A New Theory of Philosophical Argumentation...”, pp. 244—252.

¹⁵ Johnstone: “The Nature...”, p. 299. Author quotes here the phrase of Professor J.W. Miller of Williams College.

At this point Johnstone has to deal with a problem posed directly by his study. He inquires: can a philosophical argument actually succeed in supporting or attacking a philosophical statement? Is it possible, in other words, for such an argument to be valid? Obviously, not every argument serves to clarify the meaning of a given philosophical statement or to cross a given philosophical abyss. The clarification or transit can occur only if the argument is valid in some relevant sense. In other words: how are valid philosophical arguments to be distinguished from persuasive ones? In the first place, in Johnstone's opinion there is an obligation to accept the conclusion of a valid argumentation and, in the second place, whether this obligation is, in fact, associated with any given philosophical argument, is altogether independent on the extent to which the argument is persuasive.

In his book, *Philosophy and Argument*,¹⁶ Henry Webb Johnstone attempts to ascertain the sense, in which philosophical arguments can be valid. It is important, because no philosophical statement is true or false except the one relative to the argument. The consequence is that a given statement might be relatively true to one argument and relatively false to another. It may seem obvious that in this situation both arguments could be invalid. He shows that while *argumentum ad hominem* is not usually regarded as sufficient to establish any conclusion (indeed, it is usually simply dismissed as invalid), there are cases in which *argumentum ad hominem*, alone, suffices to establish a philosophical conclusion. Furthermore, the abyss that separates conflicting philosophical systems precludes any use of *argumentum ad rem*; for to appeal the evidence in attacking a position that claims to include all the evidence, is to pose the question. Thus, every valid philosophical argument is *ad hominem*.

In Johnstone's opinion, there is no identity of validity together with formal validity in philosophy. And exactly, if validity is not to be equated with formal validity, this seems to open the door to the possibility of valid, philosophical arguments.

¹⁶ See especially Chapter V and VI: "The Validity of Philosophical Arguments" I and II.

Now, I would give an example of philosophical argument that Henry Johnstone regards as valid and whose validity cannot be analysed as an example of formal validity.¹⁷

One of the arguments used by Eudoxus in an attempt to show that pleasure is the chief good and that "any good thing — e.g., just or temperate conduct — is made more desirable by the addition of pleasure".¹⁸ Aristotle, however, claimed that an argument of exactly the same type can be constructed to show that the chief good is not pleasure. For, as Plato had already argued, "the pleasant life is more desirable with wisdom than without",¹⁹ so wisdom would seem to be the chief good. Of course, this argumentation is not really isomorphic with that of Eudoxus, unless Aristotle intends to suggest that if wisdom be added to any good thing — not just to a pleasant life — the result is more desirable. Let us assume that this is what Aristotle did mean to suggest.

On this assumption, Aristotle's criticism is devastating. If Eudoxus did actually use the argument ascribed to him by Aristotle, it is difficult to see how he could conscientiously continue to use it in the face of this criticism. There does not even seem to be any way, in which he could revise it to meet the criticism. Any appropriate revision would require some proviso to the effect that pleasure is not really rendered more desirable by the addition of any other good (for example, wisdom), even though, it might appear to be. But the inclusion of such proviso would destroy the peculiar, argumentative force of Eudoxus' argument, for the proviso itself would be tantamount to the simple statement that pleasure is the chief good, and the argument as a whole, could then be impugned as question-begging. In view of Aristotle's attack, then, Eudoxus ought to have withdrawn his argumentation.

There can be no question that Aristotle's criticism of Eudoxus' argument is relevant to what it attacks. It would be extravagant to

¹⁷ I quote from: H.W. Johnstone, Jr.: *Philosophy and Argument...*, pp. 64—65. Compare: G. Ryle: "Proofs..."

¹⁸ See Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1172b 24—26.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 29—30.

claim that Aristotle in any way misses the point of Eudoxus' argument. Indeed, the very force of Aristotle's criticism is just the result of the way in which that criticism makes use of the point of Eudoxus' argument. No criticism can be forceful unless it is exactly relevant. Of course, a question-begging criticism would be exactly relevant but of minimum force. However, Aristotle's criticism, far from begging the question, has maximum force. The origin of this force is seriousness of Eudoxus' commitment to the principle of reasoning that he used in trying to prove that pleasure is the chief good. If he is serious, then he must be willing to maintain the above principle. But if he maintains it, then Aristotle can overthrow him by using exactly the same principle. So, to conclude Johnstone, the force of Aristotle's criticism derives from the fact that Aristotle uses Eudoxus' seriousness to undercut the very thing about which he is serious — he shows that Eudoxus has defeated his own purpose.

Aristotle's criticism of Eudoxus' argument is itself, of course, the argument. It is, in fact, an *argumentum ad hominem*, since it attacks Eudoxus in terms of his own principles. For the moment, it seems to be important to make the point that it would not be a rash to characterize Aristotle's argument, involving maximum force and exact relevance, as valid; but it would be, at least, misleading to call it formally valid. Aristotle does not attack Eudoxus' conclusion; he attacks only his way of reaching a conclusion. In other words, Aristotle does not seem interested in the validity of Eudoxus' argument. Instead of attacking his argument in general, he uses Eudoxus' argument to attack Eudoxus.

Aristotle's argumentation is addressed *ad hominem*. In spite of the common opinion, Johnstone claims that there is no reason to suppose that an *argumentum ad hominem* must necessarily be invalid. He defines: "[...] *argumentum ad hominem*, like any other argument, will be valid when it establishes the conclusion it claims to establish, and invalid when it establishes a conclusion independent of this".²⁰

Now it seems to be clear why there is no *argumentum ad rem* in philosophy. Let us notice, if the truth or falsity of any philosophical

²⁰ H.W. Johnstone, Jr.: *Philosophy and Argument...*, p. 73.

statement is relative to the argument that establishes or disestablishes it, then it is not relative to objective facts. Hence, there is no *argumentum ad rem* to establish or disestablish any philosophical statement. And, in the light of absence of any valid *argumentum ad rem*, we must suppose that all philosophical polemic is, in essence, addressed *ad hominem*. "And, in fact, the one common feature and peculiar to effective argumentation in philosophy is that it takes seriously the point of view it sets out to overthrow."²¹

²¹ *Idem*: "Philosophy and *argumentum ad hominem*...", p. 497.