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The aesthetics of arguing truth to power

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Published in:
Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground

Publication date:
2007

Document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):
Kock, C. E. J. (2007). Commentary on G. Thomas Goodnight: Parrhesia: The aesthetics of arguing truth to power. In H. V. Hansen (Ed.), *Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground* (pp. 1-4)

Commentary on G. Thomas Goodnight: “Parrhesia: The Aesthetics of Arguing Truth to Power”

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Although there may not be many who have heard about *parrhesia* before, Tom Goodnight’s paper about it nevertheless explores a theme of high general importance to rhetoricians and argumentation theorists. *Parrhesia* means that one says “everything,” *pan* + *rhêsia*, i.e., that nothing is held back; whoever undertakes parrhesia openly denounces a policy of those in power to their face.

It is interesting that in a sense, the paper resumes the underlying idea in an earlier article by Goodnight, “A ‘New Rhetoric’ for a ‘New Dialectic’”(1993). There, he sketched how a normative or “responsible” rhetoric might be envisaged, and he wrote: “A responsible rhetoric is one whose argumentative practices take into consideration in the particular case both the need to engender effective deliberative outcomes *and* to preserve the communicative relationships that make such action meaningful to all concerned” (335). Now, in his paper today, Goodnight investigates whether and how dissent in the face of power may exist, as he says, “within a sustained communicative relation.” The arguer, he says, “is obligated to raise unwelcome claims while preserving a communication space that gives the interlocutor reasons to listen.”

In several substantial studies over a number of years (e.g., Olson & Goodnight, 1994; Goodnight 2006 and s.d.; Goodnight & Olson, 2006) Tom Goodnight has shown this interest in how one may articulate truly deep dissent and at the same time sustain dialogue so as to be heard. As I read him, to attempt that is the responsible thing, to use the keyword from the 1993 article, a word not occurring in today’s paper. Today, Tom Goodnight is primarily descriptive and explorative, inquiring into the predicament and the self-image of the parrhesiast, the one who is ready to speak truth to power without restraint and in the face of personal danger and risk.

Goodnight is among those who see parrhesia as an acute dilemma and as a problem in rhetoric. In that he follows Sophocles in his portraiture of dissent in the play *Antigone*. But we are also to understand that the “critical study of justified dissent” – and that means people like us – ought to recognize the dilemma and the rhetorical problem. Among those who do not see it, according to Goodnight, is the younger tragic playwright Euripides (we are not told in which plays) and the philosopher Michel Foucault, who represents the protester against power as simply the speaker of unfettered truth against outrageous wrong, and who recognizes no dilemma in that situation at all and no rhetoric, but rather the very negation of all rhetoric.

Kock, C. (2007). Commentary on G. Thomas Goodnight: “Parrhesia: The aesthetics of arguing truth to power.” In H.V. Hansen, *et. al.* (Eds), *Dissensus and the Search for Common Ground*, CD-ROM (pp. 1-4). Windsor, ON: OSSA.
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I think this is the kernel of Goodnight's view of public argument: he is acutely aware that there, we find deep dissent, but at the same time he wants to see how a communicative relation is or may be preserved, or, on the other hand, how it may be irresponsibly destroyed. In a simpler phrase, the predicament is that on many issues we are in deep disagreement, and consensus or resolution of our dispute is not to be expected, yet we may act either responsibly or irresponsibly, depending on whether we preserve a communicative relation. I would like in passing to ask Tom Goodnight whether it is in fact his view that conflicts in the public sphere are often deep enough to be irreconcilable, as I believe, or whether he maintains his strong Habermasian inspiration in the sense that he believes consensus is after all the theoretical if not the attainable goal.

Be that as it may, I think Tom Goodnight's examples – from Sophocles' play and from a US Senate debate – are extremely well chosen and illustrative. Both are about controversial policies or proposals – one about the banishment of Antigone for burying her brother, the other about President Bush's proposed troop "surge" in Iraq. In this kind of issue, the dilemma is that there may be undeniably relevant considerations on both sides, pro and con, yet there is no 'umpire principle' that will help an individuals weigh those considerations objectively against each other and reach consensus on which is weightier. I have suggested that we call such issues multi-dimensional in the sense that the relevant considerations on the two sides belong to different dimensions and thus cannot be translated, as it were, into the same common denominator. Both arguers have a perfectly relevant and weighty reason supporting their view. Goodnight, in a recent article (2006), has defined something he calls "type II complex cases"; these are cases "where reasons point in multiple, relevant, different directions in supporting and contesting a claim"; this is, I believe, just another description of the same phenomenon.

The conflict in *Antigone* and Goodnight's discussion of it reveals what may happen when claims that appeal to irreconcilable and incompatible warrants are allowed to clash. Creon, the ruler of Thebes, fails to understand that just because he has a relevant and warranted consideration supporting his standpoint, this does not mean that all considerations used to support the opposite standpoint are irrelevant and deserve no hearing. What we have is a dilemma, but Creon only understands his own motivating arguments: the untouchability of authority, law, order and, as he says, "regard for my own office." So when Haemon, his son, pleads for a hearing, in a way that reflects the young man's attempt to preserve a communicative relation, Creon does not reply to what he says, but instead resorts to one-dimensional, tunnel-vision insistence on his own driving considerations: "So men of my age are to be taught sense by a man of your age?" and "Is it a merit to show regard for those who cause disorder?"

This clash illustrates the essential element of parrhesia: on one side, there is always the undeniable and even sacred principle of authority and order, but on the other side is an equally undeniable principle belonging to another dimension – in the case of Antigone a divinely instituted respect for the dead, and hence for the gods, because the dead belong to them. In the congressional debate the spokesmen of power have on their side not only the authority of the President as commander-in-chief, but also, among other things, the consideration of how the enemy would react if he were forced to yield; the parrhesiasts, on the other hand, point to the folly and the failure of the President's undertaking. So, based on these two examples, we might say that instances of parrhesia

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are really just special cases of the more general phenomenon of multi-dimensionality or “type II complex cases”: contested political issues where relevant but incompatible considerations representing different dimensions create a dilemma.

I wish that Goodnight, to supplement his important theme, his wonderfully illustrative examples, and his insightful discussion of them, would have been more explicit in pursuing his old concern of what responsible rhetoric on such issues might be, that is to say, how a communicative relation is preserved in situations of deep dissent between incompatible considerations, or, on the other hand, of how this communicative relation may be irresponsibly destroyed. In fact we see just that happening before our eyes in the passage Goodnight has selected. Gradually, as Antigone’s fiancé, Haemon, challenges his father, Creon is driven into wilder and wilder excesses of irresponsible *ad hoc* argumentation, such as expressions of crass contempt and ridicule because Haemon defends a woman, or groundless accusations of selfish motives in Antigone, and eventually even in the prophet Tiresias, who appears on stage later in the play, etc.

For example, when Haemon says that the people of Thebes does not think Antigone is driven by “regard for an evildoer,” Creon replies: “Is the city to tell me what orders I shall give?” But in saying that he does not answer what Haemon actually said: he never said that the people of the city should take over command and tell Creon, the ruler, what to orders to give; what Haemon did say was that the opinion of the people might cause Creon to reevaluate the opinion on which he has based his orders so far, and so he ought to give the people’s opinion a hearing. In every line of the following stichomythia, which Tom Goodnight rightly calls “searing,” we hear Creon committing similar irresponsible fallacies. Haemon exclaims, in the translation Goodnight has used: “there is no city that belongs to a single man!” For “belongs to a single man,” the original text has a genitive construction, *andros esth’ henos*, which might just as well be interpreted as saying that no city “is for a single man,” or “is of a single man,” i.e., consists of a single man, or other nuances within the broad semantic spectrum allowed by the genitive. Creon, however, in a clearly deliberate move, again bypasses the obvious point of that remark (namely that the city is a collective body), and instead he replies: “Is not the city thought to belong to its ruler?”, using, for “belong to,” the word *nomizetai*, from *nomizô*, a verb that much more specifically signifies ownership and thus bypasses the notion of the city as a body of many people – as if Haemon had denied that the *polis* is owned by its ruler (a view presumably acknowledged by citizens in the dynastic autocracies of legendary Greece). So again Creon, giving an ever so slight twist to what his son has said, responds to a straw man version of his argument and, in doing that, manages more or less to spread a smokescreen over the fact that he did not address his real point. When Haemon, who gradually gets infected with Creon’s eristic attitude, sarcastically retorts, in frustration: “You would be a fine ruler over a deserted city!”, Creon again dodges his point and resorts to something we might call stark *ad hominem propter feminam* ridicule: “This man, it seems, is fighting on the woman’s side,” intensifying that sentiment later to all-out sexist disdain: “Contemptible character, inferior to a woman!”

So in the very passages Tom Goodnight has selected we may, if we choose to analyze them more closely than his space has permitted, find the detailed nuts-and-bolts workings of irresponsible controversy. We can see here what it is exactly that people may stoop to, and just how a communicative relation is transformed into a shouting match. Goodnight’s declared aim is to study the “communicative predicaments that are

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distinctive and common to cultural moments of formulating argumentation as disagreement, criticism, and dissent,” and he has done that in several admirable studies, including this one. Yet I would like him to go further and not only show us these maneuvers and predicaments, but also to attempt two tasks that he must be particularly well equipped for on the basis of such studies.

One task is to identify, as I have tried to do in a very sketchy way, the nature of each of these maneuvers. The other task is to assume a normative stance and reflect on how to draw a line between maneuvers that are legitimately and unavoidably part of public debate, and those that cross the line of legitimate (or ‘responsible’) argumentation. We recall that in Goodnight’s optic, such argumentation is characterized by preserving a communicative relation, not, we may suppose, by necessarily leading to consensus. I think Goodnight is absolutely right to insist that we are talking about debate over dilemma issues, and so he rightly sets up a dichotomy between a dramatist like Sophocles, who models the dilemmas of dynastic politics, and on the other hand Euripides or a thinker like Foucault, who “would figure one side as right and oppose directly the other as wrong.” What Sophocles acknowledges, and what “the critical study of justified dissent” should also recognize, is that in public debate over dilemmas (which includes most political issues) there are relevant arguments of some weight on both sides. Accordingly, critical study must recognize that it cannot decide, on the basis of argumentation theory or through reasoning and calculation, who is right; nor can it expect or demand that debate should lead debaters to mutual agreement on issues where their views might be irreconcilable. But even so, the critical study of justified dissent should, I suggest, attempt to say which moves, maneuvers or speech acts are responsible, and which are not; and why this is so.

[link to paper](#)

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