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# Feminism and Argumentation: A Response to Govier

Phyllis Rooney  
*Oakland University*

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Title: Feminism and Argumentation: A Response to Govier  
Author: Phyllis Rooney  
Commentary: T. Goodnight

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My paper is addressed to two related questions: What are the feminist issues concerning argument/argumentation? What can feminist theorizing contribute to the philosophy of argument /argumentation theory that is not readily available in other (not-specifically-feminist) approaches to theorizing argument? While these two questions presage a larger project, I will, in this paper, address them largely within the context of a response to Trudy Govier's chapter "Feminists, Adversaries, and the Integrity of Argument" (Govier 1999, ch. 4; also ch. 14). Govier pays particular attention to feminist concerns with the *adversariality* of argument in many understandings of argument, so this will also be a primary focus in my paper.

It is now widely acknowledged that the adversariality of argument and argumentation is illustrated and significantly reinforced by the "argument as war" metaphor, a prominent metaphor in conceptions of argument (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Ayim 1988, Cohen 1995). While it is also regularly acknowledged that metaphors often prove to be helpful, if not necessary, devices in theorizing, the concern with *argument as war* (and related metaphors-- confrontational sports metaphors, for example) is that it is such a dominant one that it has restricted, if not seriously limited, theorizing about and, thus, conceptions and understandings of argument. One of my goals below is to explore specific ways in which feminist reflections contribute to this discussion. In particular, I will argue for a more direct exploration of the relationship between metaphors of battle or war and metaphors of gender, particularly as both of these metaphors have informed conceptions of reason and rationality which bear on conceptions of argument. This exploration, I will maintain, opens up another dimension of the discussion about argument as war. In addition, it opens up another dimension of the feminist debate about adversariality, and it circumvents some of the difficulties that have arisen as a result of the way in which adversariality has so far been advanced as a feminist issue.

I should mention a few things about how I understand the terms "argument" and "feminist" in my discussion. Following Govier, I will confine attention to arguments that have some kind of a dialectical context--arguably all meaningful and interesting arguments. In particular, these are arguments (including arguments with oneself) which have claims that are "*in some way at issue*, and the practice of argument is then engaged with a recognition that difference and disagreement, and thus possibilities of rational persuasion, exist" (1999, 46-51, my emphasis). (Though, of course, what exactly constitutes "rational" persuasion is itself a central issue in theories of argument.) As for the term "feminist," I use it largely in a descriptive sense: it indicates theorists and a body of work (reflections, positions, discussions...) significantly concerned with issues of sex, gender and, often too, other power- or status-inflected social divisions. In contrast to cultural and some academic stereotyping (still), the term "feminist" in any given area of theoretical concern rarely refers to one position or claim, or one set of such claims, that all feminists in that area supposedly agree to. Indeed, the continuing growth and impact of feminist theorizing in many areas is significantly energized by practices of

argumentation that engage distinct differences and disagreements. It would, therefore, be strange to suggest that many feminists disparage argument and argumentation, which is not to deny that many of them might have specifically-feminist concerns with particular conceptions or metaphorical depictions of argument.

Feminist concerns with argument have involved two (not unconnected) issues. The first issue relates to possible gender differences in reasoning and arguing, and raises questions about whether traditional understandings of arguing and argument have favored "masculine" modes, styles, or methods of reasoning and arguing (Orr 1989, Gilbert 1994, Verbiest 1995, Fulkerson 1996). In these discussions the "masculine" mode is typically described as linear, abstract, separating emotion from reason, and antagonistic, whereas the "feminine" mode is narrative, context sensitive, relational, and supportive. However, there are problems with the way in which this issue is advanced as a feminist one, since these kinds of gender difference claims have been quite contentious in feminist theorizing. There is notable debate about whether "essential" differences exist in any significant degree, and, if they do, how they might be theoretically explained and understood. Many argue that purported differences rest on gender stereotyping in perceptions and social regulation—though, if so, they can carry cognitive weight. Others argue that differences may be explained by the kinds of cognitive tasks or situations that evoke different reasoning methods—with gender a factor in how such tasks are distributed. In addition, I would add in this context that it is often not clear what modes or qualities such as "linear," "abstract," "contextual," "relational," or "supportive" mean when it comes to spelling out their operation in the specifics of argumentation, particularly when they are presented as oppositional modes. Abstracting well or appropriately from a given situation often involves a careful assessment of the contextual particulars and nuances of the situation. Linear reasoning may be quite appropriate in deductive reasoning contexts, while narrative expansion is often very appropriate in eliciting and then reasoning about the relational complexities of moral situations. (For a discussion of these concerns, specifically in connection with debates about gender and moral reasoning, see Rooney 2001.)

In her response to these difference claims, Govier argues that there is nothing in the practice of argument *as such* that requires formalism and rigidity, and that excludes attention to the "feminine" factors or modes such as attention to contextual details or supportiveness. Indeed, this is significantly the case with the kinds of identification and analysis of argument encouraged within the informal logic movement, to which Govier has significantly contributed. Govier is also skeptical about claims concerning distinct gender-inflected thinking and reasoning styles—justifiably so given feminist debates, as I noted above. However, she adds that even if there are such differences, "there are *good independent reasons*... [for] pay[ing] attention to context and nuances of meaning..." (52, my emphasis). She continues:

If there are such things as "narrative arguments" and if those arguments are genuinely arguments,...then they merit attention and analysis. If we should come to believe that some narrative arguments are cogent, we will then seek an understanding of how narrative makes premises relevant to a conclusion and sufficient to provide good grounds for accepting it (1999, 52).

My main concern with Govier's position here is that the feminist question as such largely drops out. While I agree that there are many good "independent reasons" for claims emerging out of feminist work, I want to leave open the distinct possibility that feminist work (work that keeps

gender issues right there as an important focus in the discussion) can provide understandings of argument and context that are not available without such a focus. The question about which arguments are "genuinely arguments" is very much an open question in many forums (including this one here in Windsor). This leaves open the possibility that feminist reflection may contribute in a unique way to questions such as whether narrative arguments (or other kinds of arguments) are genuine arguments. Feminist work, for instance, provides important insights into the ways in which contexts and narratives can be experienced quite differently by those in different social and cultural locations. Thus, many feminist theorists challenge the facility with which theorists appeal to "we" of different genders and different cultures and ethnicities, in, for example, projecting that "we" can come to some kind of general transcultural agreement about how narrative arguments are cogent. Narratives are often compelling (including in an argumentative sense) when they dovetail with the narratives of our individual lives and experiences. For example, battle and war narratives are typically more compelling in war cultures and with people whose lives and identities involve or might involve warring or war-like activities. Thus, making claims and arguments *about arguments*--about what arguments are, how they are valuable, what it is to be successful or effective with an argument, and so on--in terms of battle or war narratives are likely to be more meaningful and compelling with those engaged or expected to engage in such activities.

This brings us quite directly to the adversariality issue, the second main feminist issue with argument, though it is also connected to specific gender differences claims-- that males are likely to be more antagonistic and adversarial in arguing, while females are more supportive and conciliatory. Here our attention is often drawn to the surrounding contexts and practices of argumentation and debate. These contexts are often infused with aggression, confrontation, coercion, and put downs, and particularly in a way that may put women at a disadvantage (Moulton 1983, Ayim 1988, Tannen 1998). Social and cultural norms of gendering still condone, if not encourage, male aggression and confrontation as "natural" (after all, "boys will be boys"). However, those same norms, even with feminist change, still consign similar expressions of aggression in females to somewhat mixed perceptions and descriptions--as in: "it's good that she speaks up, but isn't she somewhat brash and uppity?" (We all know, of course, how strident feminists are, whereas men who speak up on behalf of social and political justice rarely, if ever, are!) As a result of what now may be the more subtle forms of gender conditioning and gendering in perceptions (which can also affect written argumentation), the sometimes quieter or more tentative voices of many women and some men often don't get heard-- in both literal and metaphorical senses of "heard" (including "carry weight or authority").

Feminist concerns with this specific aspect of adversariality can and have been addressed in both practical and theoretical ways. The ongoing encouragement and support of women's public speaking continues to be addressed in many educational and political contexts. On the more theoretical side, many dialectical rules of procedure endorsed by most argumentation theorists, from Paul Grice's "cooperative principle" to the specific rules of the pragma-dialectical school, clearly impugn such displays of aggression and adversariality in argumentation. These rules encourage respectful listening and careful assessment of differences in positions and points of view. They are not simply recommended in order to make argumentation more pleasant or, given cultural norms, more hospitable to women. They are required by generally accepted epistemological norms of good argumentation which endorse a careful weighing of all the evidence, particularly when that evidence emerges from different experiences, perspectives, or points of view.

The point that I have advanced here is significantly similar to Govier's response to feminist concerns with hostile and quarrelsome argumentative practices. However, Govier adds, such feminist concerns do not impugn argument per se, since she submits "that argument is not *necessarily* confrontational and that adversariality can be kept to a logical, and polite, minimum... [A]rgument may embrace the positive goals of persuasion and justification without necessitating adversariality in any negative sense" (55). In a later chapter, titled, "The Positive Power of Controversy" (ch. 14), Govier expands on this idea by drawing a distinction between what she calls *ancillary adversariality* (the hostility, name-calling, and rudeness that sometimes accompanies argumentation) and *minimal adversariality* that Govier thinks may be an inevitable, and not necessarily negative, part of argument.

The minimal adversariality implicit in argument arises, Govier notes, from the fact that people have definite beliefs or opinions. When an occasion arises where differences need to be addressed, disagreements, criticisms, challenges of others' premises, and so on, result. She illustrates this with what we might call the paradigm case of difference--where I hold X and you hold not-X. She proceeds to examine steps in our description of our disagreement: she notes where minimal adversariality can readily make an appearance, but it need not be considered especially negative or destructive (1999, 244). From this basic difference, Govier continues, it follows that I think that non-X is not correct (step 3). From there one could quite naturally say (step 4) that I think that you (or anyone else who holds not-X) are wrong, or are making a mistake. Govier does not question this move, but I suggest that there is already more confrontation elicited here than is necessary. To go from saying that I think that your belief not-X is mistaken or incorrect to "*you are wrong*" is surely an extra and unnecessary step. It also illustrates a problematic slippage that I think is a consequence of the pervasiveness of argument as war imagery--the slippage from a person's belief or claim to the person herself, her identity and worth. It makes more sense to think of people going to battle than to think of beliefs going to battle each other!

Govier *does* render "questionable" the next 2 steps or claims which, again, we might very easily and naturally make in describing this argument situation. "Should I need to argue for X, I will thereby be arguing *against* not-X" (step 5); "Those who hold not-X are, with regard to the correctness of X and my argument for X, my *opponents*" (step 6, my emphases). While I agree with Govier that we often quite comfortably and naturally say such things, I want to render these even more questionable. With regard to 5, could I not just as easily, and perhaps more accurately, say that I am arguing *with* not-X and *with* your argument for not-X, in that I am taking into consideration and *reasoning with* your premises and reasoning for not-X--even if at the end of the exchange I still hold X? Isn't this argument a particular kind of conversation (one where we are working through differences in beliefs), and don't we normally say we converse *with* rather than *against* people or their conversation? Relating to 6, why are you my "opponent" if you are providing me with further or alternative considerations in regard to X, whether I end up agreeing with X or not-X? What I want to suggest with these rhetorical questions is *not* that we should hold back the confrontational wording in order to be nicer or more polite, but that this wording is *misdescribing* the argument situation.

The fact that such (relatively mild) antagonistic and confrontational wording is comfortably embedded in what we might take to be very natural, neutral, and common descriptions (misdescriptions) of this and similar argument situations suggests that the boundary between Govier's minimal and ancillary adversarialities is more fluid or porous than we might initially think. (In rendering the last two steps questionable Govier perhaps thinks so too.)

Battle images and wording cut across both. War-like metaphors (shooting down points, attacking positions and persons, going after fatal flaws, and so on), often enacted more explicitly and problematically with ancillary adversariality, have their less bellicose cousins--but cousins still--work their way quite easily into our basic understandings and descriptions of argument and arguing. They do so to the extent that, as I maintain above, we barely recognize them as such, even when they are characterizing argument situations in erroneous and confusing ways. Such situations can often be described well, indeed more accurately, in terms of basic epistemological notions like beliefs, differences in beliefs, hearing and adducing new or different evidence in support of beliefs or their negations, modifying or changing one's beliefs, and so on. With such descriptions "losing" an argument is more accurately portrayed as an epistemological gain: one ends up with beliefs that, in their change or modification, are better supported and more likely to be true.

But now it looks like I have done what I was concerned earlier that Govier had done: I seem to have dropped this issue (concerning argumentation and adversariality) as also and significantly *a feminist issue*. My position above about problems with adversariality rests largely on relatively neutral and generally accepted epistemological concepts and claims about differences in beliefs and support for beliefs. But this is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of a new one. A central question now looms: Given some of the obvious problems with adversariality, now acknowledged in many circles (not just feminist ones), how did adversariality become so implanted in understandings and conceptions of argument in the first place, and why has it taken so long to see its problems? A better understanding of how we got ourselves into this problematic situation might also give us an understanding of how we might get ourselves back out of it. I will now proceed to examine this adversariality in a way that renews feminist attention on it, yet doesn't engage problematic assumptions about essential or natural gender differences in styles or modes of reasoning and arguing. (Though beyond the scope of this paper, I would argue that engaging the debate about sex differences (in styles of arguing) in terms of the larger historical perspective I now proceed to discuss would be a way to constructively expand that debate.)

The approach I advocate involves noting connections between metaphors of gender and metaphors of war or battle in philosophical conceptions of reason and rationality. Given that arguing has been understood as a paradigmatic example of reasoning--perhaps *the* paradigmatic example-- it soon becomes apparent why conceptions and understandings of argument could hardly escape the battling images inspired in significant ways by "the battle of the sexes," as that metaphor was embedded in conceptions of reason. In the space remaining, however, I can do little more than sketch these connections. Some of my positions clearly require more historical textual exegesis than I can give here, though I have undertaken more of it elsewhere (Rooney 1991, 2002). My main goal here is to reinstate concerns with adversariality as, in addition to other concerns, specifically *feminist* ones.

A central project in feminist philosophy involves examining the various ramifications of the long exclusion or discouragement of women from philosophy. Traditional core philosophical concepts and methods fall within the scope of such examinations. Feminist philosophers continue to explore philosophical texts, not simply with a view to what is written there about actual women, but also with a keen eye for the discursive role of the symbolic "woman" and "feminine." There is now a substantial body of work which draws attention to *woman* as a deeply embedded cultural, symbolic, and linguistic category that has functioned within philosophy as the foil, "the other" upon which/whom is projected disparaged modes of

embodiment, locatedness, disunity, disorder, subjectivity and irrationality (Lloyd 1993, Le Doeuff 1991; Rooney 1991, 2002). In effect, ideal or fully rational "humanity" was often theorized and conceptualized as a distancing from, or battle against, modes of irrationality, chaos, and disorder (or, on occasion, disruptive charm) that were regularly cast as "feminine" in the philosophical imaginary (Le Doeuff 1989). It is important to note that this projection thereby casts philosophical ideals of human nature, reason, clarity, and so on, as "masculine" in the sense of "other than feminine." The "battle of the sexes" is a deeply embedded notion in traditional Western philosophy, and it is fundamentally bound up with the sexism embellished in many traditional accounts of human nature, value, and reason. The point is not simply that various concepts and locations are marked as "masculine" or "feminine," but that these gender associations carry with them a host of cultural assumptions and divisions that are carried over into the concepts and structures of "abstract" philosophical theorizing, and these concepts, in turn, reinforce those cultural associations and assumptions. The examination of the role of gender metaphors and symbols in philosophy thus affords a helpful example of what many metaphor theorists like Lakoff and Johnson take as a given: metaphors do cognitive work in theorizing (in delineating concepts, in structuring our thinking and understanding of things...) that would not get done without them.

In a previous paper on the metaphorical gendering of reason, I have addressed the recurring portrayal of reason in terms of images and metaphors that involve the exclusion or denigration of something--body, passion, emotion, instinct, nature...--that is cast as "feminine" (Rooney 1991; also see Lloyd 1993, 2002). A lapse in reason, or the surfacing of unreason, is often characterized by the intrusions of bodily passions, feminine emotions, or the distraction of unruly feminine charms. Despite more direct constructive definitions of reason and rationality in terms of specific methods of reasoning and what they can achieve, we thus get a strong sense of a persistent strain of embattlement. Reason, in its broader conceptions, is thus often circumscribed in negative or contrastive terms: it is often *valued* through a *simultaneous devaluation* of other qualities or faculties ("feminine" emotion or imagination, for instance) or other creatures (non-human animals trapped by nature and instinct, or women, just about trapped by body and nature).

My main concern in this paper is not primarily with the masculinization of reason and the simultaneous feminization of unreason, but with the accompanying or resultant *embattlement* and defensive vigilance of reason and, in turn, argumentation. Reason is textually constructed as "masculine" in a specific *defensive* or *warding off* mode. Here are some examples where these images of battle are quite prominent. In the *Republic*, Plato discusses the type of philosophical reasoning needed to abstract and analyze the Form of the Good, a rationality that is able to distinguish appearance from reality and knowledge from opinion. He describes this rationality as a "fortress that must be defended by a tactical arsenal of well-armed arguments." (*Republic*, 534bc; other translations of this passage render it thus: "the man...by reason...[must] as in a battle, survive all refutations..."; "the man [who is to] really know the good itself [must] as it were in battle, running the gauntlet of all tests... hold on his way through all this without tripping in his reasoning.") Over two millennia and many similar metaphors later, when Wittgenstein in his later work describes the vigilance with language that is required in doing philosophy he states that "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language" (*Philosophical Investigations*, §109, Rooney 2002). In some of these metaphorical constructions the *battling off of the 'feminine'* is quite prominent; in others we get the clear sense it is there in the background, or underground yet still threatening, like the Furies were for Plato. Within this

philosophical imaginary in the background, success in reasoning, and thus also in arguing, is then fundamentally bound up with success in battling. Argument as war or battle between two discussants is then rendered, *not* as a battle between "masculine" and "feminine" positions, but between two "battling off the feminine," that is, "masculine" positions. Perceived failures in argumentation can, however, be feminized, as when one is said to "chicken out" or "wimp out" of the argument.

This link between work on gender metaphors and symbolism undertaken more directly under the rubric of feminist philosophy and work on war metaphors and symbolism undertaken more directly under the rubric of not-specifically-feminist work in argumentation theory has so far not been significantly explored, but clearly needs to be. This work need not be confined to the adversariality question. There is every reason to think that exploring such links might have a significant impact on the way we understand the role of, among other things, context, individual involvement, particularity, and narrative in argument. Abstraction and reason (and consequently argument) were often conceptualized in terms of transcendence of embodied contexts or emotion-imbued persons and narratives, that is, transcendence of the particulars and vagaries of the "feminine" world. I agree with Govier that there may be good "independent reasons" for paying special attention to these aspects of argumentation. But also, there is no reason to think that specifically-feminist insights into these traditionally "feminine," and, thus, regularly neglected or disparaged aspects of argumentation, might add other good reasons for such special attention, or render the independent reasons even more compelling.



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