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Pure and Applied Theories of Argument: Where Does Philosophy Belong Within Argumentation Theory?

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Title: Pure and Applied Theories of Argument: Where Does Philosophy Belong Within Argumentation Theory?

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One of the most important contributions to argumentation theory in recent years is Ralph Johnson's *Manifest Rationality* (Johnson 2000). The present paper is a response to the critique of deductivism it contains. In a forthcoming paper I have argued that this critique does not stand up to scrutiny. The present paper might also be construed as a defense of deductivism, but this is not my principal concern. Rather, I want to use Johnson's account of deductivism to raise some broader and more fundamental questions about the relationship between philosophy, philosophical analysis, and theories of argument.

My discussion will focus on one of the issues that Johnson forwards as a problem for deductivism. My central thesis is the claim that the 'regress problem' he poses does not cast doubt on deductivism so much as the role that philosophy and philosophical analysis play within argumentation theory. As a philosopher, I am committed to the philosophical study of argument, but I shall argue that it is a mistake to think that philosophy and philosophical analysis should play a central role in the development of a practical account of argument. To this extent, philosophy's role in the theory of argument has been sometimes overstated.

The questions I will raise are in some ways a historical consequence of the role that philosophy and philosophers have played within argumentation theory as a discipline. This role is particularly evident in the development of informal logic, which remains a field of argumentation theory which is primarily taught and studied in philosophy departments. It is a field which has been developed by philosophers who want a logic which is, in comparison with formal logic, more readily applied to natural language arguments, and more relevant to the practical use of argument in political debate, advertising, and the give and take of daily life (for the history of informal logic, see Johnson & Blair 1980 and 1994; for an account of its place in argumentation theory, see Groarke 1997). The extent to which the development of informal logic has been closely tied to the development of "argumentation theory" is evident in the list of philosophers who have used informal logic as a basis for important contributions to it, for this list includes many of today's leading argumentation theorists—among them, Tony Blair, Michael Gilbert, Trudy Govier, Hans Hansen, David Hitchcock, Ralph Johnson, Doug Walton, John Woods and Chris Tindale.

The role that philosophers have played within argumentation theory raises the natural question of how we should understand the relationship between the discipline of philosophy and the theory of argument. Is philosophy an integral—perhaps the central core—of argumentation theory? Or is it a discipline with overlapping interests? Or one that deals with the issues of argumentation in some different way or at a different level? And are philosophers who work in argumentation theory are engaged in philosophical research, or in research in a different, albeit related, field?

Looked at from the point of view of philosophy's relationship to other disciplines, it can be said that philosophy's place within argumentation theory is somewhat peculiar. For, the practical pursuit of a discipline is something that is usually distinct from the philosophy of that discipline.

The fields of physics, psychology and art are, for example, disciplines that tend to be distinct from the philosophy of physics, the philosophy of psychology and the philosophy of art. This is not to deny that the practice of such disciplines is sometimes influenced by philosophy, and sometimes in important ways. But as important as this influence is, it does not make philosophy a central aspect of the practice of such disciplines, which commonly address practical issues independently of philosophical concerns.

We can shed some light on the issues this raises for argumentation theory by distinguishing between “applied” and “pure” theories of argument. By “applied argumentation theory” I mean the attempt to construct a theory of natural language argument that has a practical application. Such a theory encompasses ways of determining when argument does and does not occur; the conditions under which it can be classed as good and bad argument; and the ways of determining how one can and should respond to particular incidents of argument. The practical application of the theory this implies is made manifest in attempts to design theories that can be used to teach reasoning skills, and in more formal attempts to design computational models of argument that can approximate, assess and engage in argumentative discourse.

“Pure theories of argument” can be understood as attempts to answer theoretical questions about argument that do not have a direct practical application, or are not studied in a way that has this as their goal. Such theories may ask abstract questions about the nature and limits of argument and of theories of argument; they may study paradoxes that arise in the context of particular kinds of reasoning; and they may attempt to understand the presuppositions assumed by particular accounts of argument. In the present context, the important point is that the philosophy of argument is most easily understood as a part of a field within a pure theory of argument. It is, for example, the natural arena in which one might ask questions about the kind of epistemology or metaphysics assumed by a theory of argument.

The distinctions between pure and applied theories of argument, and the philosophy of argument can be illustrated with the case of formal logic, for one can develop formal systems with or without the emphasis on their practical application that characterizes a discipline like AI. And even in the case of pure formal theory, one can pursue research without regard for the kind of reflection that might be described as the “philosophy of logic” —a discipline that might discuss issues like the ontological status of possible worlds in possible world semantics.

In the case of argumentation theory more broadly understood, one might similarly distinguish between pure and applied theories of argument, and a discipline we might call the “philosophy of argument.” The latter is naturally designated as a field that belongs in pure theories of argument. It is somewhat strange that it has not emerged as a subdiscipline of both philosophy and the theory of argument, in the process establishing a research and teaching agenda that incorporates its own questions and approaches.

One might put the thesis of the present paper as the claim that it is time to distinguish between the philosophy of argument—or, more generally, pure theories of argument—and applied argumentation theory. I don’t propose this thesis because I believe that these disciplines are completely separate, or that the boundary between them should never be crossed (the present paper repeatedly crosses it). My claim is the more modest thesis that a failure to recognize and respect the difference between the philosophy of argument and applied argumentation theory can at times impede the development of argumentation theory. This is the point I want to make by turning to Johnson’s discussion of deductivism and the aspects of it I mentioned at the outset.

For the most part, I will leave Johnson's criticisms of deductivism for discussion elsewhere. The only criticism I want to discuss here is a regress argument he develops in response to deductivism's treatment of premises and conclusions. As he points out, the success of deductivism depends on its ability to interpret all arguments as deductive arguments. In cases where an argument is not, *prima facie*, deductive, this can be accomplished by assigning it an implicit premise which claims that the premises of the argument imply its conclusion. The argument:

P1, P2, therefore C

can in such a case be understood as the deductive argument:

P1, P2, IP, therefore C,

where IP is the implicit premise:

If P1 and P2, then C.

The effectiveness of this move depends on an apparent equivalence between the argument one begins with and the deductive reconstruction. For anyone who forwards the argument "P1, P2, therefore C" must be committed to IP, for it encapsulates the relationship between premises and conclusion that the argument proposes. In view of this, the deductivist version of the argument is a good argument if and only if the same can be said of the initial argument. As Johnson puts it:

The so-called inference from the premises to the conclusion can itself always be embodied in the argument as a missing premise. Thus the argument

(A1) P1, P2 – inf_a → C

can be represented as

(A2) P1, P2 MP, – inf_b → C

where the MP is a premise version of the inference (inf_a) in (A1), or what we have now come to call the associated conditional [i.e. the proposition "If P1, P2 then C"]. And it would seem that (A1) is a good argument if and only if (A2) is a good argument... (Johnson 2000, 73).

In practice, deductivist attempts to reconstruct natural language arguments tend to favour implicit premises that are more complex than the associated conditionals Johnson highlights, though such details are not important in the present paper (for an account of them, see Groarke 1999). In the present context, it is enough to say that Johnson does a good job presenting the basic strategy that makes deductivism possible, and that he argues against it, claiming that it invites a regress problem which can be compared to the famous regress Lewis Carroll constructs in "What the tortoise said to Achilles" (Carroll 1967).

To see how Johnson's regress arises, consider the deductivist proposal that we reconstruct the argument:

(A1) P1, P2 – inf_a → C

as:

(A2) $P1, P2, MP, - \text{inf}_b \rightarrow C$

where MP is the associated conditional “If P1 and P2, then C.”

Once one accepts this kind of reconstruction, Johnson notes that it can just as easily be applied to (A2), rendering it as the new argument:

(A3) $P1, P2, MP, MP1 - \text{inf}_c \rightarrow C$

where MP1 is the associated conditional that affirms the inference in (A2), i.e., the conditional “If P1, P2, and MP, then C.”

But (A3) can itself be reconstructed as the new argument:

(A4) $P1, P2, MP, MP1, MP2 - \text{inf}_d \rightarrow C$

where MP2 is the associated conditional for the argument (A3), i.e., the conditional, “If P1, P2, MP, and MP1, then C.”

Because this process of reconstruction can be carried on indefinitely, producing an infinite chain of arguments: (A1), (A2), (A3), (A4)... (where any (An) contains the premises of the argument (An-1) plus its associated conditional), deductivist reconstruction seems inherently problematic, implying an unending series of reconstructions which can never be completed.

In response to Johnson, I think it must be conceded that the regress problem raises deep epistemological questions. But it is wrong to think that they are questions only for deductivism. For the regress does not arise because the arguments in question are deductively valid, but because they all depend upon the implicit claim that their premises imply their conclusion. It is this dependence that allows one to claim that such an argument assumes a broader inference that acknowledges an associated conditional. Once one accepts that this is so, the same issues can be raised in the context of this broader inference, and so on ad infinitum. We seem powerless to stop the regress because it does seem implausible to suppose that an argument or inference does not assume the claim that its premises imply its conclusion.

Johnson suggests that we can elude his regress by rejecting the “premise plus inference” (the “P + I”) conception of argument it depends on. But the regress arises even if we accept his suggestion that it is a mistake to treat all arguments as inferences (Johnson 2000, 178), and that we can distinguish a structure in which “reasons are given for a conclusion.” According to this account, “The question then becomes whether these reasons are good reasons to accept the conclusion. This question is not to be treated as a two part request: (a) Are the premises true? And (b) is the inference from the premises to the conclusion warranted? There is just one question: Are the reasons given good reasons?” (Johnson 2000, 74)

This may seem to provide a way around the regress problem because it refuses to countenance an unending chain of implicit inferences assumed by an argument. At some point it is instead said that inferences are no longer implied, and are replaced by an argumentative structure that is not an inference. But one does not need the notion of an inference to construct Johnson’s regress. It requires only that one recognize that there are two implicit elements in notion that the premises of an argument provide “good reasons” for its conclusion. The first is

the claim that the premises are true or probable or plausible. The second is the claim that they are good reasons in the sense that they provide support for the conclusion.

The latter claim is acknowledged in Johnson's proposal that an argument occurs when an arguer "seeks to persuade the Other(s) of the truth of a thesis by producing the reasons *that support it*" (Johnson 2000, 168). This suggests that every argument depends on the implicit claim that its premises support its conclusion. Even if one does not call this an "inference," the implied relationship of support is naturally expressed as the argument's associated conditional. This suggests that all arguments assume associated conditionals, and this is all one needs to construct a variant of the infinite regress Johnson constructs in the context of deductivism. It seems to follow that the regress does not depend on a "Premise plus Inference" model of argument, but simply on the thesis that an argument depends on the assumption that its premises provide support for its conclusion.

More generally, both the deductivist and the non-deductivist version of the regress problem are versions of fundamental issues that fuel philosophical doubts about belief and inference already in ancient times. The classic expression of the regress problem is not found in Lewis Carroll (1967), but in ancient Pyrrhonism, in Sextus Empiricus' discussion of "the problem of the criterion" and the "mode of infinite regress" he uses to cast all opinions into doubt. These problems arise whenever one attempts to establish a criterion that can distinguish between truth and falsity, for sceptics like Sextus demand that any criterion which is offered be justified, forcing an infinite regress which results when the first criterion must be justified by an appeal to a second; which is then doubted and must be justified by an appeal to a third; which is then doubted and must be justified by an appeal to a fourth, and so on *ad infinitum*. As Sextus puts it in his discussion in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (Sextus Empiricus 1933, 2.20), "the discovery of the criterion becomes impracticable, since we do not allow them [those who propose the criterion] to adopt a criterion by assumption [for the existence of the criterion is in question], while if they offer to judge the criterion by a criterion we force them to a regress *ad infinitum*." As the writings of Sextus show, the Pyrrhoneans were well aware that this strategy could be used to raise doubts about any belief, principle of reason or strategy of argument (for a detailed account of these aspects of ancient scepticism, see Groarke 1990).

Not surprisingly given the very general nature of the regress problem, there is a version of it that arises in the context of the general account of argument Johnson has proposed in *Manifest Rationality*. As Hitchcock (2001) has noted, Johnson's claim that "A participant [in an argumentative discussion] who makes a claim must support it with reasons" (Johnson 2000, 158, 160, 162) "threatens an infinite regress. [For] How can the process of supporting claims with reasons get off the ground, assuming that each reason is itself a claim, needing to be supported by reasons? ...It strikes me as too restrictive to demand physical evidence as the only way of stopping an infinite regress. Thus there needs to be some qualification of the theorem, a qualification which acknowledges a flaw in the above proof: not every failure to support a claim with reasons means that conclusions drawn from that claim lack rational support."

Hitchcock plausibly concludes that we should replace Johnson's thesis that all claims must be supported by reasons with the weaker claim that "A participant who makes a claim *which requires rational support* must support it with reasons." While this is an amendment to Johnson's theory that has great practical utility, it does not solve deeper epistemological issues, for it raises the question how we should distinguish between claims that do and do not require

rational support. Especially in the context of philosophy, this invites a protracted discussion which must contend with the fact that philosophical sceptics will not accept even physical evidence as conclusive, forwarding many ingenious arguments that can be used to cast even our perceptions into doubt. The latter include historically famous arguments like the radical attempt to doubt everything that begins Descartes' *Meditations* and the contemporary 'brain in the vat' analogue found in Putnam (1981). This is not the place for a detailed discussion of this aspect of the history of philosophy but it can be said that this is a history which is regularly punctuated by doubts about the apparently obvious – doubts that must be taken seriously in a philosophical discussion of the regress problem.

It goes without saying that philosophy also contains many attempts to answer the epistemological issues associated with the regress problem. Following Quine (1970) one might argue for an epistemology that in principle allows us to question any belief, but makes it more difficult to question the fundamental beliefs that ordinary beliefs depend on. Like Wittgenstein (1969), one might argue for an account of language that makes it impossible to ask questions about the fundamental principles that form the foundation of our thinking. Like James (1959) and other pragmatists, one might appeal to a pragmatic conception of truth that adopts utility as a foundation for belief. Of course, one might also follow the sceptics and conclude that there can be no foundation for belief, and that the regress problem entails a fundamental rejection of truth and our ability to comprehend it.

These and other responses to the regress problem are all significant from a philosophical point of view. But do they matter when we are constructing an applied theory of argument? When we are engaged with a theory that has as its goal a practical account of argument? I think not. In this context, I think we will do better to rest content with the claim that natural language arguers in ordinary contexts do not take regresses to the extreme suggested by the regress problem. In view of this, the question how we should deal with such regresses need not arise in such a context. Intellectual curiosity naturally prompts the question whether a regress might nonetheless be justified; how it might or might not be stopped; and what it tells us about our ability to know the world. But these are questions for philosophers and the philosophy of argument, and not of great relevance when we are discussing applied theory of argument.

Indeed, the attempt to include such issues within the scope of such a theory is likely to make it more, rather than less, difficult to establish a practical account of argument. For the epistemological issues that surround the regress argument have fuelled philosophical debate for more than two millennia and there is little reason to think they will be resolved in the course of discussions of an applied theory of argument. Making the construction of such a theory dependent on the resolution of such issues is, in view of this, an impediment to its progress. We will do better to assign problems like the regress problem to a philosophy of argument which studies foundational questions irrespective of their consequences for a more practically oriented theory of applied logic. The distinction between pure and applied questions that this implies does not deny that we should strive for a healthy connection between these two parts of argumentation theory, but it does suggest that one should not depend upon the other.

A famous Sufi tale tells the story of someone who has dropped a key one night and is searching for it underneath a torch at the front door. When the Sufi discovers that the key was lost at the back of the house he asks the man why he is looking at the front. "Because," the man answers, "this is where the light is." I would compare the man searching for the key to

philosophers who locate the crux of argumentation theory in philosophical considerations. It is not surprising they should look here for insights, for this is “where the light is” when one has spent one’s life studying philosophy. But there is something wrong with this approach. Not intending disrespect to my own discipline, I would instead propose that the crux of an applied theory of argument will not be found in the bright light of philosophical illumination – as attractive as it may be – but in the obscure and dimly understood examples of day to day argument which can be found in the murky shadows of day to day argumentative practice.

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