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# Feminist Alternatives to Traditional Argumentation

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**ABSTRACT:** In this paper, I will look at the critiques that feminists have proposed to existing styles of argumentation. There are two prominent lines of feminist criticism of argumentation: the epistemic critique which argues that women were socialized to argue differently and the equity critique which asserts that argumentation is a patriarchal attempt to dominate one another, as such it is adversarial in nature. I will then discuss the alternatives feminists have proposed to traditional argumentation.

**KEYWORDS:** adversary method, cognitive and epistemic critique, collaborative arguments, equity critique, feminist argumentation, narrative arguments

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will look at the critiques that feminists have posed to existing styles of argumentation, in particular the traditional mode of argumentation which is often rooted in adversariality and hostility. However it must be made clear from the onset that there are two prominent lines of feminist criticism of argumentation. The cognitive and epistemic critique argues that females are socialized to think and interact differently and it is concerned with whether one sex is socialized to be more comfortable arguing. The other critique is the equity critique which argues that argumentation is an unjust, patriarchal attempt to dominate one another and as such it deals with the morality of arguing itself (Fulkerson 1996, p. 3). I will then discuss the alternatives that feminists have proposed to traditional argumentation. I would like to argue that the notion of narrative argument and argument as a cooperation will help ease the tension and adversariality found in traditional argument, precisely in the notion that argument is war.

## 2. FEMINIST CRITICISM OF ARGUMENTATION

Phyllis Rooney (2003) addresses the two main feminist critiques, (namely the cognitive and the equity critique) in her article entitled “Feminism and Argumentation: A response to Govier.” Rooney explains that feminists’ concern with argument has involved two main issues. The first issue is related to the question of whether there exist gender differences in reasoning and arguing. However, many have argued that even if such a difference does exist, it is due to gender stereotyping and social regulation, i.e.

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socialization. Further, this first feminist concern is also related to the question of whether the traditional conception of argument has favoured a masculine mode and style of arguing. Rooney disagrees with Trudy Govier who argues that there is nothing in the practice of argument that excludes the feminine style of arguing, of paying attention to contextual details. Rooney on the other hand thinks that the kind of identification and analysis of argument encouraged within informal logic does indeed require formalism and rigidity, thus ignoring feminine styles of arguments.

This concern of whether women argue or reason differently has led Michael A. Gilbert to look at the dominant mode of reasoning that people commonly use. In his book *Coalescent Argumentation*, Gilbert (1997) argues that there is a dominant and an official way to reason which abides according to the traditional “critical logical” reasoning process, also known as: C-L mode of reasoning (p. 50). According to the C-L mode of reasoning, emotional reactions are excluded from business decisions. Facts are what matter, while feelings and intuitions are discredited. And as such, the C-L model of reasoning is dominant while others are subordinate to it (p. 51). Gilbert’s point is that there is nothing morally wrong with limiting the applicability of certain modes of reasoning. In the United States, religious visions are excluded from a court of law while in Iran religious insights, as evidence, play an important role in the courts (p. 51). At the end, the acceptance of one mode of reasoning or proof as being better is a cultural, political, and a moral choice, and every society will have a dominant form. But the point is to recognize that there exists a dominant mode of reasoning which may advantage one group at the expense of excluding another. For example, excluding emotion from the arena of argumentation puts women at a disadvantage because women tend to appeal to emotion in their arguments. Gilbert disagrees with the major premise and goal of contemporary reasoning skills which states that one should argue, defend and justify their claim without any recourse to situational, contextual or personal information (p. 40). Gilbert writes that arguments are connected to their surrounding in a very complex way, for there are aspects of language, usage and style that make it hard for anyone to comprehend an argument based on its mere structure of premise and conclusion, if they are not familiar with the particular history of the arguers involved. This means that to fully understand an argument, one needs to look more in depth into context and the situation from which an argument springs forth, which may very well include emotion. Gilbert argues that the categories of evaluating arguments must extend to include “errors, forms, and categories that go beyond the logico-rational and include, systematically, all the modalities of human communication” (p. 41). Hence, Gilbert contends that philosophers should not exclude emotive reasoning, physical actions and intuitional communication from argumentation.

The second concern that Rooney addresses in her article is the equity critique which deals with how adversariality is embedded in argumentation. This critique focuses on the surrounding context and the practice of argument, which is often infused with aggression and hostility that puts women at a disadvantage, since many women use politer forms of argumentation. A critique of argument as war is addressed by Janice Moulton (1983) in her article “A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method,” where she argues that traditional argumentative styles are rooted in the “adversary method” which accepts aggressive behaviour as a model of philosophical reasoning. Moulton critiques this adversary method because according to this philosophical

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methodology, aggression takes on positive connotations when it is connected to males or professional workers. Aggression is then connected to more positive concepts such as power, authority, competence and etc. The conflation of aggression with positive concepts has made it hard to see that polite and non-abrupt speech can be just as effective and persuasive (p. 150). Moulton finds a problem with this adversarial method asserting that argumentation and arguing take on a coercive disposition, in which to persuade and to argue is to find counterexamples. Under this paradigm, arguers find themselves disagreeing with everything, rather than agreeing on common assumptions and working from there (p. 154). This paradigm allows for the development of rude and hostile styles of argumentation where the focus of an argument is on winning rather than encouraging the development of good ideas. This adversarial method has led philosophers to ignore ways in which one may argue without being hostile. As such, arguments that are passive and indirect are not considered arguments due to the dominance of the adversarial method.

Rooney again cites Govier who also responds to the critique launched against the adversariality of argument, by arguing that arguments are not necessarily confrontational and that either way, adversariality can be kept to a polite minimum (Rooney 2003, p. 4). Govier claims that minimal adversariality is an inevitable part of argument, but it is not entirely negative. Rooney however, disagrees that minimal adversariality is harmless because she thinks that even minimal adversariality is quite problematic. Whereas, Govier thinks that it is fine to have minimum adversariality because as long as difference of belief exists then so will adversariality. For instance, when I have a belief for X, someone else may have a belief for not-X, and so when we argue, we normally perceive difference of belief in terms of an argument against something as opposed to with something or someone. And this is precisely what Rooney finds very problematic because we are using hostile wording to describe, what are in fact, calm and neutral situations of arguing. Rooney points out that such minimal adversariality is still misdescribing the argument situation. Yet such adversariality is so much part of our descriptions that we hardly recognize it. As such, Rooney proposes that despite differences in belief, the argument situation should not be looked at this way (as arguing against), and arguers should be viewed as conversing with one another. As an alternative to saying I am arguing against not-x, Rooney puts forward:

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?" (2003, p. 4)

The idea here that Rooney is proposing is argument as cooperative which would help to take the adversariality out of argument practices and also aid in including a more feminine style of arguing. Rooney thinks that argumentation tends to be conceived as arguing against instead of a notion of arguers as debating with one another, which she thinks is a more neutral and inclusive account of argumentation. This notion of "arguing with," as advocated by Rooney, leaves room for an account of arguments as a collaborative attempt between arguers, as will be shown later in the paper. Following this line of thought, I would like to develop the notion of argumentation as cooperative and see how narrative argument figures into this account.

### 3. ALTERNATIVES TO TRADITIONAL ARGUMENTATION

The essential difference between traditional argument and narrative argument is that narrative arguments are not adversarial in nature because they tend to be a cooperative attempt between arguers to understand each others' positions. Many feminists conceive of traditional arguments as arguments that are rooted in the adversary method. As such, one way that feminist insights can contribute to argumentation and ridding it from adversariality is by looking at how women use different forms of argumentation and how they are silenced by traditional modes of argumentation. Further, Rooney is correct to point out

that a feminist work (work that keeps gender issues right there as an important focus in the discussion) can provide understanding of argument and context that are not available without such a focus (2003, p. 3).

Feminists, then, are more suited to talk about narrative arguments because women tend to use narrative as a form of argument. And that is precisely why feminists have reacted against the traditional mode by proposing other alternatives. Feminists see argument as a tool to advance knowledge and to resolve an issue. And because they see argument this way, the mode which has been traditionally put forth has been counterproductive to this aim. The traditional mode of argumentation of course claims that argumentation does serve as a tool for resolving issues but their means (arguments as war) is counterproductive to the goal they propose; whereas the approach taken by feminists actually achieves what the traditional school of argumentation seeks to achieve through argumentation, i.e. the advancement of knowledge.

In "Positioning Oneself: A Feminist Approach to Argument," Pamela J. Annas (1996) points to the complexity and difficulty of speaking about one feminist approach to argument, for she explains that there is no agreement among feminists on how to go about making changes in the teaching of argument. At one end, liberal feminists emphasize the similarity between men and women, and argue that women should write like men. Annas cites Margaret Pigott's article "Sexist Roadblocks in Inventing, Focusing and Writing," which identifies perceived inadequacies in women's writing and argues that since there is more strengths in men's writing, women should learn to master the traditional argument embodied by men as the masculine mode of arguing. Annas concedes, echoing the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* that many women are not at ease with the traditional style of argumentation which is impersonal and combative, even those women that are confident in their own voice (1996, p. 129). Feminist critiques of argument points to the need for changing the way we perceive and teach argument, and also to making room in the academy for an approach to argumentation that takes account of women's ways of knowing (1996, p. 130).

Kathleen M. Hunzer (1999) in her article, "Increasing the Visibility of the Disinclined and the Silenced: Enabling Alternatives to Traditional Argument," discusses the alternatives that feminists propose to the traditional argument. Hunzer further elaborates that in the traditional conception of argument, to argue is essentially to attack and destroy your opponent. Feminists have reacted to the silencing effect of the adversary method on women, by proposing an alternative style that is different than the patriarchal and combative style of traditional arguments. Feminists reacted against the traditional

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modes of argumentation by introducing other forms of argumentation such as narrative, which is not commonly recognized or perceived as an argument by the traditional mode of argumentation. The first alternative is discussed by Elizabeth Flynn and Judith Summerfield, which examines using personal narrative as a style of argument. Flynn and Summerfield argue that this narrative argument gives voice and confidence to the silenced students in class (Hunzer, p. 3). This technique of using personal narrative gives the power of voice to women who previously lacked it. Hunzer, elaborates on Judith Summerfield's article entitled, "Principles for Propagation: On Narrative and Argument," who argues that "storytellers across cultures have woven their 'point of view, biases, and convictions [... and] causes' into their stories, thus showing how the 'tales, inescapably, carry principles that they can be threaded imperceptibly into character, plot, [or] setting'" (1999, p. 4). Summerfield shows that traditionally we conceive of narrative and argument as two separate poles, but she argues against such a separation; she claims that this is not how we carry ourselves in argumentation. On the contrary, Summerfield argues that there is no simple mode or utterance, because every move, gesture or utterance is set in a complicated "mess of motive, argument, persuasion, hope, commentary, desire, need, and invitation to be negotiated with" (Hunzer 1999, p. 4).

Further, L.B Cebik (1971) has argued in his article "Narratives and Arguments," that narratives structurally do not argue. The idea that narrative lacks organization in structure by its very nature shows that it will be difficult to make narratives fit into the strict structure of traditional argumentation as consisting of a premise and conclusion (p. 13). Therefore, narrative arguments are not as direct as traditional arguments, but nevertheless narratives defend a position, which may not be articulated or written in a direct manner of premise and conclusion. Cebik states, "In stories, the narrative flows; no assertion stands out as an isolated fact" (p. 9). Cebik contends that narratives defend positions through artistic means. He further points out that narrative can function as an argument due to the ability of the one who has read the narrative to draw a position or argument out of it. Because in narratives, arguments are not direct so they do not jump out at you in the way traditional arguments do. As Cebik points

argumentation may arise wholly from the constructive abilities of one who reads the narrative. In order for one to claim that a narrative contains, holds, or yields the argument, it is a necessary condition that there be a series of statements asserted or presupposed by both the narrative and argument which are narratively consistent with the narrative and argumentatively consistent with the argument. (1971, p. 21)

Recognizing narrative arguments requires flexibility and open-mindedness as well as the ability to contextualize. Summerfield, as noted by Hunzer, argues that acknowledging narratives as arguments requires further recognition that narrative arguments are pervasive, complex and are various in kind. Summerfield thinks that using narration allows more room for contextualizing in arguments.

The second alternative that has been developed by those dissatisfied with the traditional argumentative strategies involves seeing argument as coalescence and cooperation. This alternative, I would argue, fits well with the narrative argument approach. Because narrative arguments by nature require a notion of arguing as cooperation, i.e. we cooperate to tell stories and understand others' stories. As noted above, this approach has been argued by Michael A. Gilbert, in his book *Coalescent*

*Argumentation.* In his book, Gilbert argues that coalescent argumentation is a normative ideal, which involves the joining together of two distinct claims via recognition and exploration of opposing positions. As Gilbert states, “The coalescent approach can be expressed in the very simplest of terms. First, by exposing the positions of the dispute partners, second, by finding the points of commonality, and finally by beginning from those points, attempt to explore means of maximizing the satisfaction of goals that are apparently in conflict” (p. 119). This coalescent approach tries to find commonality so that agreement in beliefs can be reached more easily and disagreement and hostility is reduced to a minimum. However, a detailed analysis of this approach is beyond the scope of this paper.

Further, Hunzer cites Catherine E. Lamb who also proposes a cooperative process to argumentation which increases the visibility of the silenced by promoting discussion rather than adversariality (p. 5). As Hunzer notes, Lamb refers to this process as mediation and negotiation, because it creates an atmosphere in which arguers can negotiate their ideas and search for the truth together. Hunzer explains this approach while drawing on Lamb that

The students are assigned the roles of either ‘disputant’ or ‘mediator.’ ‘If they are one of the disputants, they write a memo to the mediator in which they explain the problem as they see it, including an attempt to separate the immediate ways in which the problem has exhibited itself from the underlying issues or interests.’ ‘If a student is the mediator, he or she writes a memo to a supervisor, summarizing the issues for both parties as they appear at that point’ (20) These memos, in turn, are ‘part of what will give the mediator a sense of the dimensions of the conflict.’ The second writing is the ‘mediation agreement’ that is prepared by all of the students in the group, which enables the mediator and the disputant to ‘move beyond the conflict that divides them’ (20-21). (p. 8)

Both arguers can think honestly and critically about their positions. Lamb used this method in her college writing class, and she discovered that this method allowed students to adopt both positions in any given issue. The students are given a fuller understanding of the process of mediation, and it is an alternative to the hostile battle of the “for” vs. the “against” camps (Hunzer 1999, p. 9). I argue that this approach is less antagonistic than traditional method of argumentation because through this approach arguers rise above the antagonism of “my belief is better than yours,” to a different level where arguers come to an agreement. It is still argumentation, but at a higher level because there is a better understanding of the issue by all the participants involved. In traditional argument, when someone wins an argument, you assume that the other person will see the rationale behind why a certain belief won, but this is not the case. Many participants of the traditional argument do not agree on why a given argument should be the winning one and are left with a position as either a winner or a loser; no knowledge is gained. But with the mediation and negotiation approach, you start with acknowledgement and move to understanding and agreement. Competition embedded in traditional argument impedes any advancement on the issue because there is still animosity between the participants. The purpose of this approach is that participants in dialogue adopt some kind of negotiatory stance on knowledge. As a result this approach serves the aim of argumentation better than the traditional mode of arguing.

The final alternative to traditional argument, as explained by Hunzer, is dialogic or deliberative argumentation which allows for many voices to coexist at once in a

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dialogue. Participants are encouraged to explore multiple perspectives all at once and to voice their ideas without denying any conflict that can arise (Hunzer 1999, p. 7). The point of this approach is to view an issue from many perspectives.

### 4. CONCLUSION

What all these approaches have in common is that they show that arguments may work differently and become a mutual undertaking for shared knowledge, rather than an adversarial activity of winning and losing. These three above mentioned approaches allow individuals to find their voices, to adopt non-adversarial stances and to foster a cooperative rather than a competitive atmosphere. And because women and those of ethnic and minority backgrounds tend to be silenced by the traditional form of argumentation, these approaches will be helpful in allowing women to better express themselves and argue their point. Further, these approaches also show that there is an alternative way of arguing other than the strict traditional structure of argumentation. What these approaches share in common is that they all work together towards making argument a cooperative effort of gaining knowledge and searching for truth. An argument may be a narrative, a dialogue, and a conversation between others who are willing to listen. This does not mean ignoring difference or disagreement that exists among our varied beliefs, but that we should view difference in opinion as something that helps to propel the dialogue forward productively and encourage us to explore others' views. As such, I disagree with Govier that difference in belief needs to be understood as minimal adversariality, it need not be viewed as adversariality at all. While recognizing that arguments may take place in different forms and ways indeed enriches our understanding of argument, it is also inclusive in that it allows for more types of argumentation, and ultimately gives voice to those who are silenced by the traditional conceptions of arguments.

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[Link to commentary](#)

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