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# Reasoning in Theory and Practice

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## Discussion of “Reasoning in Theory and Practice”

Stephen Toulmin

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May 19, 2005

Just very briefly, some more acknowledgements.

One of them will come as no surprise to anybody, and that is my debt to R. G. Collingwood. Collingwood made me see the importance of viewing ideas from an historical point of view, something that Wittgenstein never understood. Wittgenstein has a comment in his First World War diary, “What is history to me? Mine is the first and only world.” – a reflection of the fact that he was at that stage a solipsist, a position which (thank God) he finally broke with after his conversations with Friedrich Waismann around 1930.

Secondly, another debt which will come as more surprise is to Lenin. Lenin, in his *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* argues – and I think Michael and I will probably agree with him – that this preoccupation with formalism at all costs is a way of distracting the intelligent young from social problems, and that to that extent higher education is a way of reinforcing the prejudices of the existing order and so, as Allan Bloom misguidedly called it, achieving “the closing of the American mind.” Margaret Mead understood this very

much better when she was working in the State Department during the Second World War. She was insistent that our diplomatic service should be thoroughly trained not only in the languages of the countries they were going to work in, but also in the cultural, social and historical backgrounds of the peoples that they were dealing with – a lesson that has clearly evaded our present administration, most specifically in the cases of Iraq and Iran – Iraq which I have not visited, Iran which I have, and which is grossly misrepresented by being included in the “axis of evil,” along with the North Koreans, for whom I have much less respect.

*Question:* You mentioned in your speech different proof standards. So, to go further, my question is: Do you agree that there is also a distinction between logically valid arguments and legally valid arguments?

*Answer:* Of course. This should go without saying. For instance, when a few years ago the Nobel Prize for economics was awarded to two formalists, Robert Merton, the son of Robert Merton the historian of science at Columbia, and Myron Scholes, my colleagues in the economics department at USC insisted that the one person who would never get the Nobel Prize for economics was Amartya Sen. Of course, Amartya Sen got it the next year, because at that stage it had finally permeated the minds of those in the Royal Bank of Sweden who are responsible for this recommendation that (as my father understood very well) the history of economics is itself an indispensable part of economics.

*Question:* I was wondering if you could talk about the concept of objectivity as it applies to argument generally, and how we should understand it if we stress the value-laden aspect of those activities.

*Answer:* Michael has rightly criticized the concept of value-neutral social science. It is a great mistake to think of the idea of value-neutral biology either. If the distinction between somebody having a well-functioning heart and somebody having heart problems is not a value problem, I don't know what is. A malfunctioning heart needs correcting. If it isn't corrected, that may be disastrous, and something which cannot be allowed to go on as it is. And this is true in ethics as well. As the great tragedians understood very well, a woman who kills her own children is inescapably regarded as pathological. The only question we can possibly ask – William Gass is very good on this subject – is: How could anybody think that for a moment? How could anybody be led like Medea to act in this monstrous way? I remember Martha Nussbaum coming to Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles and giving a paper on the nature of the disgusting. As she showed with very vivid examples, there are some things – like eating shit – which are intrinsically disgusting, and which nobody could avoid being disgusted by. My late brother-in-law John Austin used to insist it is not so much the positive things, the positive generalizations, that should concern us. As he argues in *A Plea for Excuses*, it is the 57 different varieties of ways in which our thinking can go wrong that are really interesting. Only if we examine the differences between doing something by accident, doing something inadvertently, doing something under a misapprehension, doing something – you can go on indefinitely – all the things that Aristotle classifies in Book

III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as *hamartia*, only if we understand the difference between (e.g.) shooting a human being thinking one is shooting a deer, and murdering a fellow human being with foresight and premeditation, do we arrive at a clear idea about what makes an action “voluntary” or “involuntary”. There is a whole spectrum ranging from the totally admirable to the hopelessly inadmissible, and an unlimited variety of gradations as we go across the scale from those which we most sincerely applaud to those which we most deeply deplore. And it’s the elucidation of the considerations that are involved in mapping this kind of spectrum that deserve exploration and elucidation. We need to reflect more on these things. And I hope this is the kind of thing that many of us will continue exploring.

*Question:* This is kind of a general question. Do you have any suggestions to the scholars and students of argument taking part in the actual practice of argument in the public sphere? Do you make some distinction between the theory and practice of argument?

*Answer:* I think it’s worth doing, but I have one prefatory comment, which is that *theorizing* is itself a form of practice. The idea that theory exists in some kind of stratosphere is one of the myths that Michael rightly denounced as having corrupted the thought of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we are seeking to emancipate ourselves from. Plato was far more influenced by what we now call the Wisdom of the East than people understand. He was in touch with the ideas that were coming from what was then, and still in my mind is, called Persia – I mean Zoroastrianism and the like. And his view that the human spirit is a kind of flame which ascends into the heavens

is itself very much indebted to Zoroastrianism and the doctrines of Ahura Mazda.

My former colleague Marshall Hodgson in the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago makes it clear that, as we are now seeing, the focus of international trade before the Industrial Revolution was in the hands of the Indians and the Chinese, that they weren't waiting to be "discovered" by the European explorers. They never had a "dark ages": both Indian and Chinese history are continuous from antiquity through to the present day, and the European ascendancy will a hundred years hence be regarded, I won't say as an aberration, but at any rate as an interesting historical phase. My younger daughter Camilla, who works in West Africa, says that, even now, the inhabitants of Mali regard the French occupation as itself an historical incursion into their own continuous history, which goes back to the times of Timbuktu (which of course really exists, and which I want to visit one of these days – Timbuktu, which was the seat of one of the great universities of the world in the twelfth century, was inevitably visited by Ibn Jubayr and other early Muslim explorers).

Islam itself has been corrupted by western influences. As many Americans don't understand, Mohammed was originally a social reformer rather than a religious innovator, and he saw the rulers of Mecca as being as corrupt as we regard many contemporary politicians. Islam, as much as the other Abrahamic religions, as much as Buddhism, as much as the doctrines of Confucius (K'ung Fu-Tse) and Lao-Tse – these are all appeals to human beings to be reasonable, to live in harmony with one another, not to allow

any disputes to get to the level at which blood may be shed, because the shedding of blood always involves what in that nauseating phrase our contemporary rulers call “collateral damage,” which means killing innocent civilians who are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and get caught in the crossfire between those who are needlessly shooting at one another.

I hate to acknowledge anything as being to the merit of Henry Kissinger, the original of Dr. Strangelove, but the fact is that we not only should but – as Kissinger has shown – can make a very good living out of being *interlocuteurs valables*: of being people who seek to find ways of persuading political opponents to resolve their differences, to use the phrase of Winston Churchill, by jaw-jaw rather than war-war. Democracy, as Churchill also remarks, is a clumsy ship, a kind of raft which wanders across the oceans, but, as he says, “Dammit, your feet are always wet.” On the other hand, of the different political systems which we have developed – and here Machiavelli was also right – it’s the least bad, and will probably, despite all its variations between China and India and the different countries of Europe and Africa and the Americas and Oceania – despite all these differences, and despite all its inherent variety – remain the least bad, which is all that as human beings living a temporal and spatial life we are entitled to expect.