Book Reviews

Many Sides: A Protagorean Approach to the Theory, Practice, and Pedagogy of Argument.

by Michael Mendelson

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Reviewed by Christopher Tindale

In this recent addition to the Kluwer Argumentation Library, Michael Mendelson recovers and develops the ancient practice of antilogic (known to the Romans as *controversia*) and argues that it is "an instructive precedent for a dialogical approach to contemporary argumentation" (45), and a fitting addition to the contemporary classroom. The source for antilogic is found in the practices of the Sophists, particularly Protagoras. According to Diogenes Laertius, Protagoras "was the first to say that on every issue there are two arguments opposed to each other" (DK 80 A1), and this Mendelson takes to be the root of the tradition of antilogic. Of course, there is a paucity of fragments from which to recover anything of this tradition, and so much of the early part of the book demonstrates Mendelson's skills as an historian of argument, teasing clues and strains of theory from the remnants and implications of what we do have. Much of Protagoras' practice, for example, is understood in relation to his most famous fragment on the human measure doctrine.

While Mendelson expresses a reluctance to place too much weight on the meaning of this fragment, in the end much of what he has to say about Protagoras follows from how he understands this basic position. The human measure doctrine states that it is the human being who is the measure of all things, those which are, that they are, and those which are not, that they are not. While the latter part of this doctrine invites an intriguing debate with the Platonists and the question of how we can know what is and what is not, it is the opening clause that holds most interest for argumentation. Protagoras would seem in these few words to place meaning and interpretation in the domain of human agency and raise interesting questions of how we are to arrive at any agreements about the world and our place in it. For Mendelson, this shifts the focus directly onto the argumentative practice that is implicated by such a view. If humans are the final arbiters of what is the case, and things are as they seem to each individual, then it makes perfect sense to argue strongly for each side of an issue, and to consider carefully those arguments, before deciding which view to adopt. And how we make such a decision also becomes important, insofar as we are not choosing the one that is 'true', but necessarily adopting other criteria. Mendelson envisages a crucible of discourse within which various representations of the world mix and change. The resulting model of argumentation, insofar as it places the dialogical mixing of voices at its

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core, anticipates much that is contemporary, including Bakhtin's dialogism and American pragmatism (75).

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which deals with the Greek origins and organizing principles behind the main idea. Chapters in this part explore the source and nature of antilogic; its pragmatic and ethical dimensions; and its rhetorical form. Part two shifts the focus to controversia and the work of Cicero and Quintilian, with chapters devoted to the former's *De Oratore* and the latter's *Instituio Oratoria*. The book then closes with a lengthy epilogue devoted to an appropriate pedagogy for antilogical argument.

Crucial to this whole enterprise, then, is the understanding given to "antilogic." Michael Billig (1987), from whom Mendelson takes many of his cues when interpreting antilogic, defines it as a "method of argumentation by which contrary positions are examined in relation to one another" (45). This accurately reflects the understanding Mendelson gives to the comment from Diogenes, whereby argumentation always involves a relationship between opposing claims. What distinguishes antilogic from similar "confrontational" models is a constructive commitment to dialogic exchange, different "in almost every way from the unilateral emphasis of traditional debate" (49). Instead, opposing dialogues are characterized by a mutuality captured in Bakhtin's notion of "answerability" (Bakhtin, 1981: 280), where every utterance accommodates in its very structure the response that it anticipates. While this reciprocity isn't always borne out through the examples drawn from Antiphon's opposing arguments in his Tetralogies, or Thucydides' paired or parallel speeches (103), it is this understanding which is carried aloft through the discussions of the book and promoted in the pedagogy of the epilogue. The commitment to interaction and exchange between opposing positions is the most enduring feature of the model of argumentation. Other notable features of antilogic are that it is situational (rather than abstract); perpetually open; and developed out of the cultural practices of an emergent democracy (62-67).

Of course, given its Sophistic origins, antilogical argumentation cannot be fully appreciated outside of the context in which it opposes the orthodoxies of Platonism and Aristotelianism. While they disagreed over much, Plato and Aristotle stood united in their rejection of Sophistic argumentative practices. While the dominant models of argument emerging from these monoliths of ancient philosophy sought an objective truth to resolve disagreements and understand the way things were, Sophistic argument pursued completely different ends. We see this vividly in the debate over making the weak argument strong (although, I think Mendelson misses the real nature of what is in dispute here). The Sophists looked more to the public use of argumentation to manage disagreement and win cases where no side has a prima facie strength in its favour. One might disagree with the selective emphasis Mendelson gives to antilogic as the prominent Sophistic mode of argument, although he does give some acknowledgement to the peritrope (reversal of positions) and probabilistic arguments, but there is no doubt he draws attention to a very important alternative argumentation that is easily lost in the shadows of a champion like Aristotle. Consider something of the contrast between the latter and what Mendelson promotes: antilogic is committed to right reason, rather than intuitive insight into first principles; antilogic seeks practical rather than theoretical knowledge; antilogic is free of the rules that constrain art and science; antilogic, like Aristotelian deliberation, culminates in reasoned choice, but it arrives at that choice through inquiry into opposing positions, rather than beginning with an argument based on a choice already made (78).

One of the most tenuous links in the book is the actual path he must trace between the opposing arguments of Protagoras and the lessons of Quintilian, passing through Cicero on the way. The second part of the book, devoted to the Roman interest in argument by contraries or *controversia*, makes the best of the many parallels in the argumentative practices advocated, although in the cases of Cicero and Quintilian we have a much better grasp of what those practices actually entailed. Thus, Mendelson devotes less space to these Roman figures than when he argued at length for the shadowy figure of Protagoras. He does also offer several points to support a real influence between Protagorean thinking and the ideas of Cicero. While he concedes that the works of Protagoras were unavailable by the first century BCE, he finds a number of what we might call "Protagorean moves" in the practices of some of Cicero's antecedents. For example, he cites Cicero's own references to Arcesilaus's belief that "neither the sense nor the mind can perceive anything certain," as well as adding that "[t]he operational method that Arcesilaus invokes in support of his basic skepticism is to insist that everything must be argued and that no conclusion is free from contradiction" (141). In Cicero's *De Oratore*, Mendelson finds the full panoply of ideas associated with antilogic, from the invocation of divided or opposing claims, to dialogical patterns of give and take, and the framework of probable knowledge and prudential judgment. He illustrates this through extensive examples from the work, all chosen to show the centrality of oppositionality.

Mendelson gains support for his history from Jacqueline de Romilly (1992), who suggests a chain of influence leading from Protagoras to Isocrates, from Isocrates to Cicero, and from the latter straight to us. Mendelson adds one intervening step with Quintilian, but this is an important step given the emphasis placed on education. It is the argument of Chapter 6 that "the rhetorical curriculum of the *Institutio Oratoria* is informed at every turn by controversial reasoning, a form of argument distinguished most obviously by the effort to prepare claims *in utramque partem*, on both sides of a question" (206). The details of Mendelson's study of Quintilian cannot be rehearsed here, but many of them carry over into the discussion of pedagogy and will be recognized among the proposals of the epilogue.

Among the pedagogic implications of his argument, Mendelson offers the following: "The search for knowledge is inseparable from the practice of argument since the adjudication of differences depends upon procedures for inter subjective exchange. The Protagorean theory of knowledge therefore assumes a rhetorical component–antilogical argument–as the pragmatic extension of its philosophical tenets" (222). The significance of this should not be downplayed. If there is no clearly objective truth that reason can uncover, as the Protagorean tradition would suggest, then the need to adjudicate differences in perception and perspective becomes paramount. This is the role of argumentation, but an argumentation that embraces conflicting opinions and moderates the shifting allegiances of human relations. Not insisting on a truth from among opposing views, but working to gain common insights from among them is a strength of this approach. In this light, Mendelson offers detailed descriptions of a triad of classroom practices where students study, imitate and reproduce cases: critical interpretation, rhetorical reinvention, and case simulation (244). The first of these, for example, encourages teachers to "introduce their classes to the ethos of respectful opposition, to the willing suspension of judgment, and to the exercise of practical reason, all of which are intended to guide group discussion and allow dialogical exchange to prepare the way for the students' own compositions" (247). All this culminates in "the simulation of a complete dialogical argument", where students work with the dynamic conditions that surround an argument. These had parallel stages in Quintilian's curriculum, but under Mendelson's reinvention they are configured to engage all the elements of his tradition of antilogical argument, developed in ways to encourage students to reach out to each other and make contact with opposing positions.

As I hope to have indicated, there is much to praise and welcome in this fine and timely study. For too long Sophistic argument has been dismissed as offering little more than eristics and a stimulus for Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*. No serious investigation of the materials will support that view, and studies like Mendelson's will go a long way to correcting the picture. It is important to do so, because as he shows in his closing sections, there are fruitful affinities between Sophistic argumentative practice and contemporary thought, and serious ways in which these ideas can be applied in the classroom. If there is criticism due here, it may be for placing too great an emphasis on the figure of Protagoras as the father of what develops, as if we need such a focal point before such ideas become credible. There is much to contest in Mendelson's reconstruction of Protagoras, beyond the restriction to antilogic. If Diogenes tells us that Protagoras was the first to say that on every issue there are two opposing arguments, he also tells that "he was the first to adopt in discussion the argument of Antisthenes which attempts to prove that contradiction is impossible" (DK 80 A1). On this Mendelson is strangely silent, but it adds an interesting nuance to the promotion of opposing arguments, both of which can be plausible. This makes the moderation of opposition in dialogue a more complex matter than Mendelson has allowed. It was also on this point that Aristotle became most vexed with Protagoras in the *Metaphysics* (IV, 4). Something could be both a man and a wall, because it would be possible to affirm and deny anything of everything. Or, as Aristotle also concludes from this, it no longer becomes necessary either to affirm or deny. Such an outcome, while intolerable for Aristotle, may have reassured Protagoras. The implication is that not only are there two opposing arguments on every issue, but that we cannot expect to resolve such oppositions, and argumentation must somehow help us to manage that reality. This is a strong claim, and more difficult task, than that proposed in *Many Sides*.

References

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