Henry Johnstone, Jr.'s Still-Unacknowledged Contributions to Contemporary Argumentation Theory*

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Abstract: Given the pragmatic turn recently taken by argumentation studies, we owe renewed attention to Henry Johnstone's views on the primacy of process over product. In particular, Johnstone's decidedly non-cooperative model is a refreshing alternative to the current dialogic theories of arguing, one which opens the way for specifically rhetorical lines of inquiry.

Résumé: Étant donnée l'approche pragmatique récemment adoptée dans les études de l'argumentation, nous devrions examiner les idées de Henry Johnstone concernant la primauté du processus argumentatif sur son produit. En particulier, son modèle décidément non coopératif est une option refraîchissante sur les récentes théories dialogiques d'argumentation, en plus son modèle nous ouvre la porte à des recherches spécifiquement rhétoriques.

Keywords: Henry W. Johnstone, Jr.; argumentation; argument as product; argument as process; dialogue; disagreement; rhetoric.

I only had the honor of speaking with Henry Johnstone on few occasions, but even in that short time he said the few kind words that have gotten me through more than one black period in my work. This contribution is just a small example of his dearest gift to the general development of the theories of rhetoric and argumentation, a gift widely recognized but perhaps never possible to adequately acknowledge. As a founder and long-time editor of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Johnstone contributed with extraordinary generosity his time and spirit to make room for the self-development of everyone else in the field. His keen but compassionate insistence on clear thinking provided also an immediate goad to all who would send their work to that journal, and remains a continuing inspiration.[1]

In this paper, however, I am concerned with a more everyday contribution to the field: namely, the paid and unpaid debts contemporary argumentation theorists owe to Johnstone's own work. Johnstone's central idea about argumentation can be oversimplified thus. When paying attention to the complex and confusing human behavior that we call "argument," we have an initial and vital choice about what to be on the lookout for. On the one hand, we can focus on the individual argument—the unit of discourse with something like a premise/conclusion struc-

ture; what has been called *argument-1* (O'Keefe 1977) or *argument as product* (Wenzel 1990). On the other hand, we can focus on the activity of arguing—the transaction during which persons are (among other things) exchanging arguments-1; what has been called *argument-2* or *argument as process*. Looking at the unit of argument, we begin to ask logical questions, such as how the premises support the conclusion. Looking at the transaction of arguing, we begin to ask ethical questions, such as how the persons involved ought to treat each other.

Johnstone's central insight, first proposed in the series of papers leading up to the 1959 publication of *Philosophy and Argument*, was simply this: the primacy of the argumentative process over the argumentative product. Argument should initially be approached not as a logical but as a transactional phenomenon. The conclusion of a unit of argument, for example, cannot even be understood without knowledge of the disagreement between persons that the arguer was trying to overcome, as well as all the arguments pro and con that have gone before. Johnstone's famous assertion that all valid arguments are *ad hominem*, grounded not in the neutral facts but in the personal commitments of the opponent, similarly shifts attention from the product to the process of argument. In this view, the validity of any unit of argument is dependent on its force within the immediate situation, a force it draws from "the very energy" of the person to whom it is addressed (67). And finally, throughout his long career Johnstone remained most interested in the human and humane aspects of arguing. The primary outcome of arguing—its main conclusion, we might say—is not to secure the truth of propositions, but to secure the selfhood of those participating in it. "A person who chooses argument does in fact choose himself" (1963, 35).

Johnstone's focus on the transaction of arguing had an immediate impact within the U.S. argumentation and debate community, directing attention to the normative aspects of controversy. By the late 60s, Ehninger had drawn from Johnstone's work in his essays on "argument as method" (e.g., 1970) establishing what remains (I believe) the foundational ideology supporting the teaching of argument in communication departments. By the early 80s, Johnstone's influence was joining the wider stream of thinking on the nature and importance of arguing in the public sphere, especially as inspired by the reception of Habermas within the U.S. (Cox and Willard 1982, *xxix-xxxiii*)—a scholarly trajectory well displayed by the works of Gerard Hauser (e.g., 1998).

My topic, however, is not Johnstone's past impact but his present influence on contemporary argumentation theory. Within the past generation, there has begun flourishing a bit of an interdisciplinary and international renaissance in the study of argument. One of the most vital streams in this movement is a group of renegade philosophers, mostly Canadian, who founded what they often call "Informal Logic" in an effort to provide a better theoretical grounding for the everyday practice of argument (Johnson and Blair 1980, 1994). This developing tradition, however, has paid almost no attention to Johnstone's works. Johnstone's name does get dropped

in most of the obligatory historical surveys. But he is not given even his own subsection in the movement's current handbook, *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory* (van Eemeren et al. 1996). Instead, he is referenced primarily as an early critic of the more renowned Perelman. And when the traditional fallacy of *ad hominem* attack is discussed, Johnstone's minority views get footnoted.

What cause can be assigned for this inattention? It must be at least in part because the contemporary renaissance in argumentation theory began off track. The Informal Logic movement, driven as its name suggests by a break with formal logic, started by pursuing not the process but the product of argument. The early influential work by Hamblin (1970) induced a reawakening of fallacy theory—the theory, that is, of units of argument apparently *bad*. Thomas' (1977) textbook re-introduced the idea of diagramming the structure of units of argument, a proposal that set off a debate about how such structures work in detail. And encompassing these particular inquiries was a overarching interest in establishing how ordinary units of argument can be assessed as cogent. With this sort of primary attention to argument as a product, it is not surprising that argumentation theorists adopted as ancestors from the 1950s those authors with a similar product orientation—Stephen Toulmin and Chaim Perelman, most notably; not Henry Johnstone.

By the late 1980s, however, the Informal Logicians themselves had begun to encounter the limits of their orientation towards argumentative products. They found, as Johnstone would have predicted, that it is difficult to say much about such units of argument without paying careful attention to the transactions during which one person is giving them to another. With the work of Douglas Walton (1995) and the pragma-dialecticians (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1992), for example, theorists began to notice that at least some fallacies are violations of the rules or principles of argumentative exchanges: they are not logically invalid, but transactionally inappropriate. James Freeman (1991) similarly developed an account of argument structure that showed it to be the outcome of a transaction involving asserting and questioning. Trudy Govier (1987), finally, recognized that we can not even identify some stretch of prose as an argument (as opposed, say, to an explanation) unless we understand the purpose for which the arguer designed it. These scattered insights are just now being organized into larger theories of the activity of arguing, as indicated by the book titles of the last few years: Walton's *Argument Structure: A Pragmatic Theory* (1996); Tindale's *Acts of Arguing: A Rhetorical Model of Argument* (1999), and Johnson's *Manifest Rationality: A Pragmatic Theory of Argument* (2000).

Contemporary argumentation theory, in short, is just now catching up to where Johnstone began forty and more years ago. At this point, then, we are perhaps better equipped to recognize and deal with his true contribution to argumentation theory: not just his insistence on the priority of process over product, but the specific model of the transaction of arguing he proposed. Let me begin to suggest this by way of a digression into the current main strategy adopted for modelling argumentative activity.

Any model is a simplification; that is its purpose. It is aimed to give us cues about what to look for and what to ignore as we try to find our way through the intricacies of actual practice. Theorists therefore have always been enticed to use this simplification to their advantage, solving their theoretical problems by putting forward models in which those problems simply do not arise. Political theorists have faced this sort of temptation for centuries. Trying to locate ways in which we can live together peacefully, prosperously or justly, they imagine an original "state of nature" or an "original position" in which people do just that as a matter of course. Habermas is the most spectacular contemporary example of this tendency. His "ideal speech situation" paints in miniature a picture of a way any of us would want to live. If it is indeed the case that, whenever they open their mouths, people have to speak truly, sincerely, based on reasons that anyone would accept, and with an obligation to be persuaded by further reasons—if this is indeed the case, then of course from that small acorn of admirable social interaction an entire oak of just and legitimate polity could grow.

The lure of building the desired outcome into the original model has been especially strong for contemporary argumentation theorists. Arguing, after all, has a bad reputation. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have shown, arguing is metaphorically associated in English with fighting. Interpersonal arguments are often avoided as a stressful disruption of ordinary social relations (Benoit and Benoit 1990). Even noted sociolinguist Deborah Tannen in her book *The Argument Culture* (1998) identifies argument with contentiousness, and searches for forms of verbal interaction that might avoid its problems.

Now, as argument theorists we all have to struggle against this bad rap, if for no other reason than to persuade our students to take our courses seriously. We believe (and rightly) that arguing is a noble activity, and we are therefore tempted to build that nobility into our models. Indeed, most contemporary models of the transaction of arguing do just this. Arguing is taken in these models to be an activity performing some respectable social function, such as the rational resolution of disagreement or the securing of truth (Johnson 2000; Govier 1987; van Eemeren et al. 1993; Walton 1998). Participants in the arguing are supposed to be cooperating in order to achieve this goal. They share, or must confess to sharing, a commitment to the common goal; they must also share a set of reasonable argument schemes, argument procedures, and argument premises. In sum, argument is modelled as a form of dialogue. If in this world arguers don't seem particularly dialogic or cooperative—well, that is just the ordinary gap between an empirical description of practice and an ideal model of practice. It's not impossible to be an uncooperative arguer; it's simply wrong—according to the dialogic models.

It is especially those who hold such a cooperative view of arguing who need to pay attention to Johnstone's works. In a sense, Johnstone plays a realistic Hobbes to these optimistic Rousseaus of contemporary theory. Instead of solving the prob-

lem of argument's poor reputation by modelling the activity of argument as, from the beginning, cooperative, he takes as his starting point a much more ruthless view of the arguer's basic condition. We know that on its surface arguing involves disagreement; what Johnstone says is that it is *disagreement all the way down.*

The key text for Johnstone's view is chapter 2 of *Philosophy and Argument*, a revision of an article from 1954. In tracing as he does with extraordinary elegance the (conceptual) evolution of the activity of arguing, Johnstone nowhere asserts any legitimizing social function for arguing (though of course he admits that arguing could perform such functions, as byproducts of the activity; e.g., 1959, 133). Instead, Johnstone resolutely and uniformly adopts the perspective of the individual arguer: the arguer as a nascent self. The activity of arguing starts when the individual becomes aware of another individual, one with different views. She finds herself confronted not with a set of shared goals or methods, but with what Johnstone terms the "abyss" separating each from the other (3). Johnstone thus begins not with an ideal of cooperation, but with the fact of opposition (2); the "radical" (3, 132) conflict between views. This opposition is experienced, Johnstone goes on, not as an aid, much less as an opportunity, but as a "threat"—it presents a "problem" that must be resolved by the arguer (8, 9). In struggling to find a solution, the individual tries out a variety of methods for eliminating the threat; each one Johnstone shows to be partially, but only partially, adequate. In particular, Johnstone objects to what he calls the "hopeful" theories of argumentative dialogue (132-3; see also 15), which assume, inadequately, that people disagree about views but share a commitment to a single process for resolving these disagreements. Indeed, Johnstone was later to conclude that arguers may not share a conception of consistency, thus blocking even their attempts to prove each other wrong on their own terms (1970). And his famous theory of the "bilaterality" of argumentative engagement arises (in this account) not from any idea of sharing or mutuality, but instead from the game-like nature of the activity of arguing, in which each side must allow the other to make the winning moves it also claims for itself (1959, 11).

Johnstone's theory of radical disagreement is conspicuously more realistic than cooperative theories of argument, in that it embraces without scolding those angry and apparently intractable controversies that cause us so much pain. We need to realize, however, that what Johnstone is proposing is not just a more realistic view, but a deeply ethical one as well. He has a vision not of imposed social cooperation, but of a person struggling to meet her obligations. "The individual who attempts to speak and act in such a way as to remain true to [herself]," Johnstone affirms, "must come into radical conflict with others no less true to themselves but according to different beliefs" (1959, 19). If this vision is not "hopeful"—if radical conflicts may never be resolved by argument—if in trying to bridge the abyss of difference, arguers only discover new gulfs—well, this only acknowledges the tragic aspect of our lives as arguers, as Johnstone's closing invocation of the myth of Oedipus suggests.

Once the non-"hopeful" perspective on arguing is adopted, we may begin dealing with some of Johnstone's proposals in detail. As Johnstone himself recognized, this may open inquiries into argument that take a specifically rhetorical approach.

An insistence on the "abyss" between arguers, for example, raises the serious problem of accounting for how arguments can ever begin. Locked in their own worlds, individuals may not even notice their disagreement, or if they notice may react with some sort of pre-programmed dismissal. As Johnstone remarks, "people have a strong tendency not to listen to such [radically antithetical] propositions—they can't believe that anyone could really have given voice to such nonsense" (1987, 130-1). In addition to the philosophical blindnesses Johnstone was considering, one might think here of the conspiracy theorists who diagnose opposition as yet another sign of attempted coverup, or the devout of various persuasions, including the liberal, who take dissenters as damned. These people will not argue. It is specifically the function of rhetoric, Johnstone proposed, to insert a wedge between an individual and his otherwise closed-off world, creating the conditions in which arguing can proceed:

> Rhetoric occurs when a space has been created between the rhetor and his audience even if the rhetor is no more than the brandisher of a pistol or stick. This space separates the audience from what it might otherwise have responded to as a stimulus. . . .
>
> Why does the holdup man or the slave driver *want* to use his pistol or stick in the service of rhetoric? In some cases perhaps he does *not* want to. If his wish is simple enough to be satisfied by a reflex action on the part of the victim, perhaps he would rather avoid asking the victim to decide. But not many wishes are so simple. If I want you to do something you are not conditioned to do, I must begin by driving a wedge between you and your stimuli. I must create a space between you and them.
>
> All rhetorical transactions require this wedge. In order to address *any* audience from a stickup victim to a joint session of Congress, the rhetor must first get his audience to attend to what he is saying or doing. Rhetoric is an evocation or raising of consciousness (1980, 67-8).

Recent work by Fred Kauffeld and Scott Jacobs has tended to parallel Johnstone's ideas by examining how arguers themselves design the preconditions for their argumentative transactions. These preconditions cannot simply be imposed from the outside by the ideal model for the argumentative transaction, as the "hopeful" view suggests. Instead, according to Jacobs' recent programmatic statement "Argumentation as Normative Pragmatics," ordinary argumentative practice is entirely "self-regulating and self-sustaining." Theorists must therefore begin to examine "the way in which argumentative messages enhance or diminish the conditions of their own reception . . . [how they] open up or close down the free and fair exchange of information . . . encourage or discourage critical scrutiny of the justification for alternative positions" (1999, 400). Kauffeld, in turn, has given just

such accounts of how and why arguers undertake and impose obligations to argue, thus earning access to each other's time and attention (e.g., 1998). If we follow Johnstone in taking rhetoric as the "art of getting another person's attention" (1978, 64), these scholars are beginning to build a rhetorical theory of argumentation.

Another Johnstonian conception that will prove equally worthy of re-examination is his notion of what arguments can do. The theorists who have recently turned from assessing the logical validity of arguments to assessing their transactional force have fallen confidently into asserting that arguments *persuade*. For example: "the fundamental purpose of argumentation," Ralph Johnson recently announced, is "rational persuasion" (2000, 159; see also Walton 1998). Johnstone's tragic view suggests more caution. Our use of arguments certainly expresses our confidence in the power of reason somehow to change minds. But as a transaction, arguing is bound also by other values, including especially the need for each arguer to respect the autonomy of the other. And this respect will tend to constrain the power of persuasion; it must leave the auditor *"free"* (1980, 67). As Johnstone says:

> When we wish to control the action or belief of another person, but either lack an effective means of control or have an effective means that we nevertheless do not wish to use, we argue with the person. Argument is therefore not effective control. To argue with another is to regard him as beyond the scope of effective control, and hence is precisely to *place* him beyond the scope of effective control, provided he is capable of listening to argument and knows how it is that we are regarding him. We give him the option of resisting us, and as soon as we withdraw that option we are no longer arguing. To argue is inherently to risk failure, just as to play a game is inherently to risk defeat. . . . An adept arguer can feel certain that he is going to win an argument against someone, but if the certainty is an objective consequence of the very procedure he is using, then this procedure is not an argument (1963, 30).

Even a threat, Johnstone notes, "always can be *considered*. Its victim can *decide* what to do. Even though in ninety-nine percent of holdup cases, the victim decides to comply with the wishes of the armed man, he could decide otherwise" (1980, 67). So if argument changes a mind, it does so by the auditor's own *self*-persuasion. It helps him imagine an alternative possibility, aids him in recognizing what sort of person his commitments make him, and provides him some inducement to think these matters through on his own (1983). In listening to the arguer, the auditor thus "must *listen to himself*" (1987, 133).

Within contemporary argumentation theory, Christopher Tindale's recent *Acts of Argument: A Rhetorical Model of Argument* (1999) comes closest to echoing Johnstone's view. Although he does not develop the idea in detail, Tindale hints that the primary function of argument is to "create an environment in which the

'self-persuasion' of the audience, as it were, can take place" (17). A specifically rhetorical model of argumentation, he concludes,

> does not relate effectiveness with manipulation, and does not countenance manipulative treatments of audiences. Adherence is sought through understanding, and this is pursued through the creation of an argumentative environment in which the arguer and audience complete the argument as equal partners. On this model, an audience is not aggressively persuaded by the arguer, but is persuaded by its own understanding of the reasoning (206).

Tindale's work thus makes a promising start on a revised conception of the force of argument, one again identified as a specifically rhetorical approach to the subject.

I could go on to catalog Johnstone's other contributions, waiting to be rediscovered by contemporary argumentation theory: his ideas about the relationship of arguing to selfhood, or his notion that the meaning of a proposition is constituted in part by the arguments that support it. I'll leave the reader free, however, to consider these matters on her own. Instead, I will close by saying that preparing this paper has forced me to confront the deep and previously unremarked debts my own thinking owes to Henry Johnstone. I find in my mind the open places, and the scars, left by the man's wedges and goads. And so let me also express my resolve not to let these debts remain any longer unacknowledged.

Notes

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[1] The reader born too late can get a taste of what I mean from Johnstone's occasional editorial confessions (1990, 1998).
[2] The original article, perhaps a little too dramatically, termed the first encounter with philosophical disagreement, " one of life's darkest moments" (1954, 245).
[3] A suggestion later confirmed and extended in Johnstone (1983).

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