Book Review

Arguing with People

by Michael A. Gilbert

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Michael Gilbert directly informs his readers from the outset that *Arguing with People* is not a critical reasoning textbook, in the sense that it will not teach about premises and conclusions. It *presumes* an understanding of that sense of argument, and proceeds to address many of the other things involved in argumentation (p. 15). Most especially that involves people, which makes this book a valuable addition to any critical reasoning or philosophy course: it will show how the philosophical attention to premise-conclusion complexes fits into students' every day and professional lives. It also serves as an excellent introduction for anyone interested in the social dimensions of argumentation.

Gilbert's charming and conversational fashion draws the reader through various dimensions for analyzing arguments. He sets aside the treatment of arguments as premise-conclusion complexes, a view also known as "argument-as-product" or "argument$_1$." He explains that even for understanding argumentation that way various things have to be sorted out: values and goals need to identification before premises and conclusions can be recognized. Sometimes we have to retreat from the examination of reasons to reconsider information and emotions that may emerge during discussion. This switch of focus from sorting out

one thing to sorting out another can make the processes of arguing exhausting, Gilbert notes (p. 16).

The people we encounter in argumentation, he stresses, tend to be "familiars:" "friends, family, work and school associates, … neighbours… [and] a plethora of people you see regularly, such as doctors, storekeepers, mechanics, and other people with whom you interact periodically" (p. 50). Familiars have ongoing relationships with us and so we *care* what they think about us. Gilbert suggests that we want trust, interaction, and argumentation from them, and so the ethotic elements of argumentation concerning people's "honesty, reliability, and personal history" (p. 77) have a certain priority. With familiars, people tend to want to hold a high ethotic standing—to be trusted, but to some degree we cultivate this with strangers, who may well become more familiar in the future (p. 99).

The context of familial argument focuses the account in a way that facilitates Gilbert's introduction of his multi-modal model of argumentation. Beyond the logical, he recognizes emotional, visceral, and kisceral dimensions of argumentation. The logical approach receives attention in the dozens of standard argumentation textbooks designed for philosophy courses. The emotional will be quite familiar to students from their own experience, even if they are not used to thinking of emotions as a constructive part of arguments. The visceral aspects engage the external or relational elements of discourse, including social roles and position. Beyond those material realms, spiritual considerations can also affect argumentation, which Gilbert identifies as the kisceral mode. Kisceral considerations include people's secular but fundamental beliefs that may stand independently from the evidence and that may underlie deep disagreements. Integrating such a broad conception of argumentation with more traditional philosophical tools for analyzing argumentation might prove confusing for an introductory text by a less deft author, but Gilbert guides the reader step by step with relatable examples.

He borrows from pragma-dialectics the view that argumentation has stages, beginning with the "confrontation" that establishes a disagreement. Gilbert stresses that with familiars the next stage at which people establish the rules of engagement, the "opening" stage, tends to be brief or non-existent. With familiars, people have already established practices of communication. If the process breaks down, say someone starts crying or shouting (pp. 52-53), only then are we likely to need to reconsider our orientations to each other and engage in the opening stage.

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However, the option of returning to the opening stage has a critical role in the practices prescribed by *Arguing with People*. Setting out good rules in this stage can keep an argument from becoming chaotic, and bouncing around between stages. Arguments lie on a continuum between chaotic and orderly, Gilbert observes, concerning the manner in which people argue. He distinguishes that range from the continuum between emotional and clinical argumentation that reflects both degrees of emotion and personal investment in the topic.

Arguing with People has a simple structure: three chapters. The first, "All about Arguments," introduces the distinctions I've mentioned so far, and provides appropriate nods to the argumentation theorists the book draws on. For this reason, it provides an excellent primer in argumentation theory. I gave a copy of this book to my dad, a psychology professor, who found it delivered exactly what he wanted to understand about argumentation theory, its scope, presumptions, and power. I recommend it to others looking for a crash course.

The actual "argumentation" stage occupies the bulk of the book, starting in the second chapter, "All about Arguers." To illuminate these processes, Gilbert introduces readers to how arguers operate in a few types of dialogue, drawing on Douglas Walton's (1998) analysis. Like most argumentation texts, *Arguing with People* focuses on "persuasion dialogue" in which people try to change each other's beliefs, but Gilbert notes that most actual discussion rarely fits neatly into one category of dialogue. He also covers the "inquiry" that aims at truth, and the "negotiation" in which people aim to arrive at mutually advantageous agreement. This range makes the book suitable for educational contexts beyond the standard critical reasoning course, including those that address specific disciplinary contexts and professional practices.

Typically, arguers have opposing or contrasting goals in argumentation, the exception being the inquiry, for which the goal is ascertaining truth. Different beliefs are the goal in persuasion dialogue, and different benefits are the goal in negotiation dialogue. Recognizing this complication, Gilbert enlarges upon the pragma-dialectical account by demanding the declaration of goals and interests in the opening stage—to which arguers must return when the discussion gets chaotic.

The goals of argumentation may be hidden, they may be unclear, and they may be mistaken for claims, he warns. An argument may indeed have multiple goals with different levels of perspicacity and clarity, and these include relationship goals, maintaining status, and saving face (pp. 55-58).

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Information about goals and interests helps maximize the possibility for *heuristic* inquiry in which people work together to ascertain the truth. For instance, negotiation especially tends to fall into an *eristic* mode, in which each person aims to win (p. 47) and this contrasts with the heuristic mode: “The partners involved want the resulting agreement to be acceptable and pleasing to all but are not at the same time working toward solving a shared issue” (p. 42). Focusing on goals and interests of the people involved may help arguers avoid any unwanted eristic tendencies. In heuristic persuasion, the arguer allows for the possibility of error and change, and a key indication of that disposition lies in listening carefully. Persuasion dialogue also lies on the continuum between heuristic and eristic discourse.

Gilbert’s advice (from his theory of coalescent argumentation) to *listen*—in all types of argument—provides more useful direction than the usual vague critical thinking recommendation of “charitable interpretation” that encourages students to simply put their own words in arguers’ mouths. Listening in the model of Gilbert’s “coalescent argumentation” demands that arguers attend to their points of agreement and minimize disagreement (p. 63), identifying their common ground or shared cognitive environment. Students will learn the value of reading and listening to others, keeping in mind those contexts and the interpersonal relationships of the people arguing. Gilbert asks students especially to consider the influence of people’s specific characteristics and their situations, including their aggression and their gender, on what they say and how they can be understood.

Of course, attending to context would prove impossible with the decontextualized examples common in many critical thinking textbooks, and *Arguing with People* bills itself as a supplement to ordinary critical thinking books. I suggest that is because its content is not tangential, and instead fundamental. The considerations that Gilbert addresses play a substantial role in real argumentation. By drawing attention to how values and goals affect the recognition of premises and conclusions, Gilbert provides a rich resource for instruction: direction in how to *interpret* arguments as they actually occur in rich contexts. That is a basic skill, but a tricky thing to learn. Guiding students as they develop this ability may be one of the most important things we can teach them in a critical thinking class, and one of the most difficult. It could transform the impact of argument instruction, improving the transference of skills into students’ lives outside the classroom. I’ll be giving it that chance in my own class this Fall.

The third chapter, “Arguing with People” delivers the advice that will help in students’ in ordinary contexts, returning to examples introduced in the first chapter to show how the different dimensions of argumentation come together. Gilbert works shows how each illustrates the difficulties of maximizing the heuristic or epistemological benefits of argumentation. With that in mind, he advises students in their roles as actual arguers: “REMEMBER: No matter what—you may be wrong!” (p. 85).

The ultimate lesson of the chapter and the book are that the rules of argument are generally unclear, even to the arguers. However, he does put forward an ideal of the arguer:

1. Be reasonable
2. Do not be dogmatic
3. Listen well
4. Be empathetic

These he draws together in “The Golden Rule of Argumentation: Argue with someone as you would want to be argued with” (p. 95).

This little book, just 133 pages including bibliography, fills a big gap in the textbook offerings by addressing the sorts of argumentation that students will be most familiar with. It is common in many contexts to use the word ‘argument’ to describe verbal fights or at least adversarial disagreements; and truly most of our even peaceful disagreements are with familiars. Of course, students need to learn to argue in intellectual, academic, and research contexts, but the book can aid with that too because of its grounding in general theories about argumentation.

One of the places people argue most with others who are not familiars is the Internet: our encounters there can easily be outside of ongoing relationships. There is a reason that we use quotation marks when referring to Facebook “friends.” This partly explains why internet discourse can so often be argumentative and yet rarely get close to the heuristic standards of *Arguing with People.* An important lesson may lie there for our students, to think about where and how they direct their argumentative energies.

Gilbert helpfully encourages readers to give up arguments when we cannot move beyond the confrontation stage at which we agree on facts. “Think before you argue. Do you have a good reason to continue?” (p. 31). That is not a lesson I have seen in any other textbook, and it’s one many people in many contexts can usefully learn.

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References

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