Argumentation Theory and the Threat from Postmodernism and Relativism: A Provocative Approach

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Abstract

In this article the author shows ─ against the current literature on argumentation theory and following his own research in the past ─ why we must accept relativism, that is, the theory that two contradictory theses in a given argumentative context are both defensible. Apparently, this implies the collapse of argumentation theories in general and, particularly, the collapse of argument theories – the theories that aim to study how arguments themselves can be relevant. The author argues that such disastrous consequences should not be drawn and explains why the challenges presented by relativism are not insurmountable.

Keywords: Argumentation theory; Dialectic arguments; Foundationalism; Relativism

Introduction: An Overview of the Problem of Relativism

Some years ago, one of the most remarkable contemporary British theorists of argumentation, Alec Fisher, showed why a teacher of argumentation in postmodernity should actively impress upon his students the importance of defending any of the theses put forward in cases of opposing views. And he concludes: "It looks like as though whatever principles one uses in order to resolve these conflicts, the relativist will say there is no firm ground in which to stand ─ no rational basis on which to do this [1]."

The relativism that Fisher has in mind here can be called "ontological", and it takes us back to what, regarding scientific theories in particular, Karl Popper (1994) [2] called the "myth of the framework". Briefly: if what explains or justifies a given theory (argument) is only its context,

then two or more ─ opposite and conflicting ─ theories (or argumentations) on the same subject can be equally acceptable. This is what follows from the conceptions of the French philosopher Pierre Duhem, in the beginning of the 20th century [3], and the American philosopher Willard van O. Quine, in the 1960s (chap. 3) [4]. If Fisher and these two authors are right, it is impossible for the argumentation theorist to decide between opposite argumentations concerning crucial issues for contemporary societies, such as euthanasia, abortion, or the refugee crises, choosing one in detriment of the other, or others, that is, evaluating them as being "good" or "bad". Argumentation theory and its objectives in general would be ─ or, at least, would seem to be ─ irremediably condemned. Ontological relativism must be distinguished from another kind of relativism ─ epistemic relativism ─ according to which relativism is not only based on contexts as such ─ which I have mentioned above ─ but also on the way we interpret them, that is, on

our theory of rhetoric and argumentation itself. Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca's (2008/1958) [5], or even Toulmin (1958) [6], for instance, are sometimes charged with the fault of being relativistic (p. 17, 131) [7]. I say "fault" because the theory of argumentation, in the final analysis, is supposed to pursue the same "modern" ideals of universality and necessity on which scientific theories are based. However, if ontological relativism is a fact, as it indeed seems to be, then there should be no problem in endorsing the thesis of epistemic relativism. Nevertheless — again — subscribing to both theses seems to be an unacceptable challenge for the theory of argumentation. In this article I will analyze the role of ontological relativism and epistemic relativism within this theory, showing how and why, generally speaking, it will not necessarily be mortally wounded if it acknowledges or accepts either of them — provided it does it in new terms and from a new perspective.

Developments

Alec Fisher is one of the most brilliant contemporary argumentation theorists. A remarkable specificity about this author is the fact that his books are inspired by and based on his experience in teaching argumentation to his students, young apprentices of argumentation; not, as sometimes happens, through the presentation and discussion of metatheoretical questions, including the one I use as a title for this article. However, this does not mean that Fisher does not address these issues; only that they are approached and discussed essentially from the perspective of his teaching practice [8-10]. The problem he raises about the abovementioned threat (and the word "threat" is used by Fisher himself) seems quite relevant from that perspective.

Let me quote the author's words:
"Richard Paul [a friend and colleague of Fisher's] complains that most of us who teach reasoning skills of one kind and another (critical thinking, informal logic, argumentation skills) teach something much too limited; we teach students perhaps a little light logic, perhaps some fallacy theory, how to break arguments into their premises and conclusions and some sketchy evaluative skills, etc. — but, in his view, this is not enough; our commitment to the importance of giving reasons and to rationality requires us to enter emphatically into other people's point of view before critiquing them. He points out that most people internalise the basic world view of their peer group without ever rationally deciding on its merits (witness the fact that most people adopt the religion of their family). But, he argues, we should show students how to explore the reasonableness of opposing views by using dialectical reasoning" (p: 32) [1].

In this context, and specifically as far as postmodernism and relativism are concerned, Fisher points out that

"If we really want to show students how to take opposing points of view just as seriously as their own, how then do they adjudicate between conflicting standards, perspectives and reasonings? It looks as though whatever principles one uses in order to resolve these conflicts the relativist will say there is no firm ground in which to stand — no rational basis on which to do this. Maybe that's true" (p: 33) [1].

What Fisher has in mind when he speaks about relativism seems to me to be the following:
1. When it comes to analysing and discussing controversial dialectical arguments, as is the case of those that divide contemporary western societies (abortion and euthanasia being two examples of such arguments), that is, arguments between conflicting theses, it is virtually impossible for the argumentation teacher/theorist to make a decision between those arguments based on his skills, which he teaches to his argumentation apprentices; that is, it is virtually impossible to decide which is the best, or the most adequate or appropriate.
2. Consequently, it is perfectly possible for young argumentation apprentices, as well as for any educated citizen, in general, to subscribe to both a given thesis on each of those two topics and its contradictory, i.e., to be pro and against abortion, pro and against euthanasia. That is what relativism means from the perspective of an approach like Fisher's.
3. I must add a clarification here: this is not just about the possibility of people in society adopting those contradictory theses (some defend euthanasia and some do not), but rather that the same person may legitimately adopt both of them.
4. However, that being true, the interest of studying arguments and argumentation is at first sight not clear. If conclusion (2) is accepted, then you don't understand what might differentiate rhetoric and argumentation from that which, back in his day, Plato acrimoniously called "sophistic".
5. Thesis (2) takes us back to what I shall henceforth refer to as "ontological relativism" in this article. This type of relativism, as said above, is well-known after Quine's book *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*; it has to do with what Fisher himself calls "postmodernity", following Lyotard (1979) [11], which is a large-scale social, cultural, and political phenomenon of the utmost importance affecting western societies generally since the end of World War 2, and more particularly from the 1960s to the present. This phenomenon runs throughout the entire western civilization, from the arts, literature, and philosophy to social and political thought as such. From the second half of the 20th century onwards, philosophy itself has been addressing it recurrently, as shown in such approaches as Lyotard's, Habermas',

Popper's, Quine's, Rorty's, and other great contemporary philosophers. The problematic of postmodernism and relativism can be briefly summarised into the following salient features [12]:

a. There are no foundations whatsoever for knowledge and human action such as those which philosophy was supposed to provide in the past, since Plato and especially since Descartes and Kant, resorting to the ideas of universality, necessity, and timelessness.

b. All the discourse produced from the perspective of those ideas is a "metanarrative" (this is Lyotard's term but it quickly became generalised) which is inadequate and inappropriate to explain the same knowledge and human action in their multiple and varied contexts.

c. All human knowledge, on the contrary, is basically local or contextual, contingent, and temporal.

d. Within each context, two or more opposing, conflicting theses on the same subject are equally legitimate and pertinent.

I shall be discussing some of these characteristics in some more detail, particularly (D). For now, let me just tell you that if we accept them without reformulating them, a good part of contemporary argumentation theory, as is the case of the theory that emerges from dialectical schools of thought (for example, pragma-dialectics), must inevitably be dismissed. The reason is precisely that what relativism claims is that a fundamental principle of logic and argumentation, as is the case of the non-contradiction principle, needs to be completely revised and reformulated.

Two Examples of Dialectical Argumentation and the Relativist Solution

Let me now illustrate what I have just said by presenting two opposing and conflicting argumentations: one about abortion and the other about euthanasia. The premises and the conclusions of each of the two arguments are schematically represented in their presentation order (P1, P2, P3, → C), leaving aside their respective connections, which would be essential if this were a diagrammatic representation of the same arguments. In other words, I am not interested in the problem of knowing what direct and indirect premises are in each argument. On the other hand, the arguments are constructed by myself, although inspired by real argumentations; they are not completely fictitious.

Abortion
Argument "A"
P1: "Life" is a supreme value that must be defended at all costs.
P2: This value has to do with the long history of western, Judeo-Christian civilization as a whole.

P3: Human life begins as soon as an embryo is fertilised.
P4: Except for very serious medical reasons, such as those that manifestly endanger the mother's, or the embryo's, or the foetus's health, abortion is, ethically speaking, a crime, a homicide.
C: Therefore, abortion should not be legally permitted, unless when the above-mentioned reasons are invoked and medically proven.

Argument "B"
P1: Recent economic, cultural, and political changes in western societies as a whole have led to the relegation of religious considerations to secondary importance in discussions on how these societies should be organised.
P2: What defines "life" is not just biological or genetic considerations.
P3: Human life is inextricably linked to consciousness and/or the apperception of pain and suffering.
P4: Which is not the case with embryos or gestational foetuses.
P5: Economic and social reasons fully justify abortion.
P6: No one asks to be born; therefore, from the outset due account must be taken of all possible future suffering and pain.
C: When the mother and/or the parents definitely conclude that they have no conditions to raise and educate a yet unborn child, then abortion should be legally permitted and regulated.

Euthanasia
Argument "A"
P1: "Life" is a supreme value that must be defended at all costs.
P2: This value has to do with the long history of western, Judeo-Christian civilization as a whole.
P3: Human life begins as soon as an embryo is fertilised.
P4: Life does not depend on each one of us, who did not ask to be born and should not ask to die either.
P5: Nothing justifies euthanasia, even in the presence of very serious medical reasons, as is the case of terminal diseases.
P6: In such cases, palliative care is the ethically and medically advisable solution.
C: Therefore, euthanasia should not be legally permitted.

Argument "B"
P1: Defending "life" is to defend a value that only makes sense when it is enjoyed with dignity.
P2: Recent economic, cultural, and political changes in western societies as a whole have led to the relegation of religious considerations to secondary importance in discussions on how these societies should be organised.
P3: The suffering caused by some terminal diseases is absolutely humiliating and intolerable both for the person who suffers from these diseases and for their loved ones.

P4: Serious medical reasons fully justify euthanasia.
P5: Palliative care is not the solution for the situations just described.
C: Therefore, euthanasia should be legally permitted and regulated.

Now, as I said at the beginning, what the relativistic thesis implies is that any one of us may simultaneously subscribe to any of these conflicting theses concerning the argumentations at issue; I can be simultaneously pro and against abortion; I can be simultaneously pro and against euthanasia. And that is indeed what generally happens at present. The argument is "Ok., I am theoretically against abortion; I agree with the premises that were invoked with regard to this topic; but still, on the other hand, I must also accept the argument pro legalisation of abortion, which seems to me to be entirely reasonable". As for the argumentation concerning euthanasia, similar arguments could be put forward, with much the same consequences. Note that all the premises of the arguments under discussion are cultural, ideological, and philosophical *lato sensu*; they are not "valid" or "correct", or, on the contrary, "invalid" and "incorrect" when considered in isolation. Discussing them separately would involve a whole extensive course on argumentation which would include also the history of western ideas and cultures virtually from its very beginning. (One thing which Toulmin himself tried to do from the 1970s on, as I shall mention later). What can the argumentation teacher/theorist tell his/her students, his young argumentation apprentices, after teaching them what is intellectually relevant about this subject? Considering the argumentations very broadly outlined above, a very modest answer could be: "Ok. You should be fully aware of the fact that each of these argumentations is based on strong social, cultural, and political presuppositions; that those presuppositions are not harmless, that they can and should be discussed, and that they seem to lead to opposing and conflicting conceptions of society. However, unlike one tended to believe in the past, this conflict entails nothing tragic; we have to live with it; we have to seek a new conception of reason and rationality which, when there is some dialectical contradiction being discussed, does not simply involve telling our opponents: 'I am right and you are completely wrong!'"

Ontological Relativism as a Philosophical Problem

Ontological relativism concerning argumentation is a "fact", if this term/concept is admissible. This follows from theses (C) and (D) outlined above on the subject of postmodernity. Philosophically speaking, thesis (D) was born out of, and fed by, the discussions on the role of holism in the theory of meaning, in the context of analytical philosophy,

from the 1960s on. It seems to follow (and I emphasise "seems") from Quine's conceptions of "ontological relativity". However, either directly or indirectly (and again I emphasize "directly or indirectly") it was then subscribed to by other important contemporary philosophers, as is the case of Kuhn in the second edition of his famous work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Rorty (1979), Feyerabend (1975, 1989) [13-16], and others, as happened, according to some interpretations [17], with Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations* [18]. Please note that relativism, as I mentioned before, is not just a philosophical problem, or a problem of argumentation, but rather a social, cultural, and, in the broad sense of the term, a political problem. In the light of thesis (C), traditional, "modern" metanarratives, which were used to justify our conceptions of society and political power, of nature and climate, of gender identity and sexuality, for example, no longer make sense and must therefore be totally reformulated. In contrast with values like universality, necessity and timelessness, the emphasis is laid on opposing values: context and/or contextualisation, which is essentially local or circumstantial, contingency and temporality, which imply, as Perelman and Toulmin began by arguing, not "reason" or the "rational", but rather "reasonableness" or the "reasonable" [19,20]. Now, if that is the case, it is obvious that the aims of rhetoric and argumentation theory seem to be irremediably compromised: this theory only makes sense, at least according to an interpretation like my own, if somehow (and, I would add, "in a new way") it continues to uphold the values first mentioned. Most of the problems of postmodernity seems to require an answer that includes their own defence. From the standpoint of rhetoric and argumentation, this is all about discussions such as the following: if masculinity no longer serves as a paradigm to conceive our relationships within society, what new values, or what new cultures, should be associated with the "feminine"? If, accordingly, heterosexuality is no longer a model or a paradigm, what will the consequences of homosexuality and transsexuality be for the issue of gender identity as well as for cultures in general? If the western democratic-parliamentary regime is no longer a paradigm, or an exemplary model, for the regimes of other non-western societies and cultures, how then should the relations between Europe, or the West as a whole, and other civilizations be conceived, philosophically and politically speaking? If, given the growing importance of international organisations (EU, UN, etc), the "modern" Nation-State has stopped making sense, how to conceive its role in the future? This type of problems requires answers that must, to a large extent, be universal; they require new metanarratives; nevertheless, such answers should not fail to address, as well as correspond to, what is basically local, temporal, and contingent. They require an active compromise between, on the one hand, universalism and foundationalism, and, on the other, relativism.

Ontological Relativism and Epistemic Relativism in Argumentation

Accepting ontological relativism should not, in principle, present a problem for the theory of rhetoric and argumentation. All that Toulmin wrote after *The Uses of Argument*, particularly in *Knowing and Acting* [21], *Human Understanding* [22], and *Return to Reason* [23], revolves around it. In *Knowing and Acting*, Toulmin goes as far as arguing that this type of relativism, which he includes in "the anthropological model of argumentation" (141foll.) [21], is the biggest and the most serious challenge for that theory. I will come back to this in a moment. However, the truth is not only that ontological relativism is not generally acknowledged and accepted, but also that its counterpart does not receive the attention it deserves in the ambit of the theory that I mentioned before: epistemic relativism. As concerns this type of relativism and its reception the point is: according to a traditional interpretation, the theory of rhetoric and argumentation itself cannot be put at the service of the defence of opposing and conflicting dialectic conceptions, such as those analysed in the second part of this article. One of them must be "valid" or "correct" while the other is "invalid" or "incorrect". It simply is not possible or admissible for someone to simultaneously subscribe to a given thesis and its contradictory since that would invalidate the traditional rhetorical and dialectical categories that we have inherited from Plato and, mostly, from Aristotle, like those of "proponent" and "opponent" in a dialectic discussion. Therefore, as I already held, all the versions of epistemic relativism tend to be disregarded and devalued, according to some interpretations (like pragma-dialectics). This is the case of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's "new rhetoric" or of Toulmin's theories in *The Uses of Argument.* From this more or less generalised perspective, epistemic relativism is defective, a capital sin to be avoided at all costs in argumentation theory and, particularly, in our study of argument itself. From where I stand, it is obvious that approaching the issue of relativism in these terms means, in the first place, sacrificing the reality or the concrete problems of argumentation to the best speculative interests of a theory that is out of step, or out of sync, with the times.

Toulmin's *Knowing and Acting*, published in the mid-1970s, is still the best philosophical framework for the problematic of relativism in the ambit of the theory of rhetoric and argumentation. Contrary to what is frequently argued (by pragma-dialectics, for example), this problematic was not important for him in *Uses of Argument*, nor was it important for Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca in *La nouvelle rhétorique*. The explanation is that upholding the values of the "reasonable" as opposed to those of the "rational" did not entail, in the former case, understanding them in the light of the relativistic thesis; these authors were interested in stressing the idea that knowledge and human action in general do not have to be conceived simply from the point of view of concepts like universality, necessity, and timelessness; that what is contingent and merely probable, as is the case of the conclusions we reach in argumentation, is equally legitimate and relevant. More: that what is supposed to be universal, necessary, and timeless, as is the case of the knowledge involved in logic, in mathematics, and in physical-natural sciences, when well understood, i.e., when understood through rhetoric and argumentation, is also basically local, contingent, and temporal. There is absolutely no relativism – in my interpretation. Two decades later (1976), as happens with *Knowing and Acting*, the problematic of relativism becomes very present, which forces Toulmin to conceive it from the perspective of a specific and characteristic model (the "anthropological model"), different from the "geometrical", or "logical-formal" model, which was the one fundamentally at issue in *The Uses of Argument* and against which he proposed his own model of argument (51foll.) [21]. There can be no doubt that the problematic of holism as regards the theory of meaning, a problematic like the one Quine had introduced and discussed in *Ontological Relativity*, and which, after this text was published, mobilised the attention of the philosophical community at large (Kuhn, Popper, Rorty, and others), was the reason why Toulmin started to focus on the problematic of relativism as such. This is shown in *Human Understanding*, the book which Toulmin published before *Knowing and Acting*, as well as in *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* [24], and *Return to Reason*, the two books published afterwards. These are typically philosophical books which have failed, as they still do, to arouse the interest of argumentation theorists and philosophical communities. Having said this, the questions are: what solutions does Toulmin offer as concerns this problematic? Are these solutions feasible at present, that is, some decades later?

Conclusions: The Solutions for the Problem of Relativism: Argumentation and Philosophy

Toulmin's *Knowing and Acting* is absolutely key for the study of the problem of relativism, as well as other problems, as is shown in the reception of the book by Van Eemeren and Grootendorst's pragma-dialectics. This problem basically consists in the following opposition between thesis (T) and antithesis (A), which were already mentioned above, and the respective corollaries (Tc; Ac):

T: According to western philosophical tradition, from Plato on, all of our arguments, regardless of their respective contexts, are supposedly legitimate and appropriate only when they are universal, necessary and timeless: this entails being subject to the canons of logic and formal sciences,

or being in some way reducible to these canons — as we saw, this is what Toulmin calls "the geometrical model" of argumentation.

Tc: Having in mind the threats from relativism, contemporary argumentation theory, as is the case, for example, of pragma-dialectics, despite claims to the contrary, finally subscribes to the same ideal that, in order to be relevant, the conclusion of an argument must be somehow universal and necessary, because, according to the Principle of Non-Contradiction, one of the two contradictory theses in a given argumentative context (proponent vs opponent) must be accept and the other discarded (even if, in that context, the proponent and the opponent should make concessions to each other, as pragma-dialectics holds).

A: Recent transformations in western societies in general (which is Toulmin's subject in *Human Understanding*, 1972, four years before *Knowing and Acting*) suggest, by contrast, that generally the value of our arguments depends fundamentally on their respective contexts, and that this value is essentially local, contingent, and temporal; it depends on the choices and the decisions made by groups or communities of people within an institutional framework; and since these choices vary according to no pattern or unifying framework, the value of our arguments also varies — this is what Toulmin calls, as we have seen, "the anthropological model" of argumentation.

Ac (1): We must accept what I called "ontological relativism". There are, of course, "good" and "bad" arguments; but, in general, there is no way of deciding between contradictory claims or theses, not only in the same context but also in different ones, particularly when social, cultural and political matters are at issue. (This is precisely Toulmin's point in *Knowing and Acting* about the "anthropological model".)

Ac (2): "Epistemic relativism", leaving aside cynicism and bad faith, is harmless.

Now, it is clear to Toulmin that a theory of argumentation can only be feasible if a compromise between the two theses which were briefly outlined is reached: the "anthropological", or relativistic thesis, makes all the sense, although it basically destroys the very possibility of that theory; the "geometrical", or foundationalist, thesis, on the other hand, corresponds to our traditional ideals of universality, but it basically sacrifices the value of the contexts in which argumentation is generally used. Toulmin's solution in *Knowing and Acting* involves what he calls the "critical model of argumentation" (207foll.) [21], which, as I have elsewhere shown (chap. 5) [25,26], consists in an approach of the philosophical and/or metaphysical presuppositions of argumentation, following a similar approach to the one which, according to Toulmin (vi, 243, Wittgenstein and Heidegger had been developing

in their more recent works and which Toulmin himself had initiated (notably, in *Human Understanding*) [21], but which can in no way be reduced to a theory of argument. This critical model must not be taken as an anticipation of the pragma-dialectical model of argumentation, contrary to what Van Eemeren and Grootendorst suggest several times in *A Systematic Theory of Argumentation*. The question is basically as follows: a theory of argument like Toulmin's in *The Uses of Argument* is essentially incomplete and flawed; considering the complexity of the contexts in which argumentation takes place, coupled with the reasons underlying this argumentation, it is virtually impossible (as the "anthropological model" claims) to define and/or conceptualise in formal terms what an argument or what argumentation is; the solution involves exactly a study of how these presuppositions have presented themselves socially, culturally, and politically throughout the history of western civilization. As I was suggesting above, that was exactly what Toulmin believed he was already doing, and what he clearly did in such books as *Cosmopolis* and *Return to Reason*.

Epilogue: The Limits of a Theory of Argument

What then can we say about the challenge laid down by Alec Fisher as regards relativism and the status of argumentation theory? Precisely what I have just said, which is rather disturbing for most of those who teach argumentation: a theory of argument, i.e., theories such as those based on which we begin to teach argumentation to our students, are, as I have argued, "essentially incomplete and defective"; it is impossible, on the basis of just these theories, to decide on the merits of any argument; and therefore, two or more opposing and conflicting arguments may be considered equally relevant. (As I have suggested regarding abortion and euthanasia). The solution for this problem must include the study, which I mentioned apropos of Toulmin, of the philosophical and/or metaphysical presuppositions of argumentation in general — a complex study, which clearly transcends not only a theory of argument but argumentation theory itself as it is generally conceived, and which, with each context, brings us back to the history of ideas and of social and political thought within the history of western civilization as a whole.

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