



Wittgenstein’s Ignorance of Argumentation Theory and Toulmin’s Rehabilitation of Wittgenstein

Ribeiro HJ*

Department of Philosophy, Communication and Information, University of Coimbra, Portugal

*Corresponding author: Henrique Jales Ribeiro, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, Communication and Information, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, University of Coimbra, Portugal; Email: jalesribeiro@gmail.com

Research Article

Volume 7 Issue 2

Received Date: April 12, 2024

Published Date: April 30, 2024

DOI: 10.23880/phij-16000326

Abstract

The author- following his own research on the subject- argues that Wittgenstein ignores argumentation theory and in general, the problems of rhetoric and argumentation. From this point of view, he frames Stephen Toulmin’s reading of Wittgenstein, arguing that the British philosopher- who was a student of the Austrian- advocates precisely the same thesis. He explains that this happens in a very peculiar (rhetorical) context on Toulmin’s part; a context in which, in essence, Wittgenstein’s philosophy is being rehabilitated.

Keywords: Argumentation Theory; Analytic Philosophy; Toulmin; Rhetoric; Wittgenstein; Toulmin

Introduction

Toulmin’s Reading in Context: The Beginning begins with the end

It is well known that Stephen Toulmin felt a great philosophical affinity for Ludwig Wittgenstein, from the moment he was his student in Cambridge (at the end of the 1940s) until his last book, about 10 years ago [1]. Toulmin was co-author of one of the leading works about Wittgenstein in the second half of the 20th century, Wittgenstein’s Vienna, which today is still an essential reference work [2]. The extent to which Wittgenstein had influenced the development of Toulmin’s own philosophy is a question that, to judge from the specialist literature on the subject, is largely awaiting an answer. The general idea, on the part of the defenders of so-called “analytic philosophy”, was that Toulmin was a “minor philosopher”, who had said nothing new in relation to Wittgenstein’s theses [3,4]. In any case, on the part of argumentation theorists, the connection between the two philosophers is sometimes explored, but once again from the

(mistaken) perspective of the dependence and subservience of the first philosopher in relation to the second. Toulmin, therefore, was merely a follower of what Wittgenstein had already said. The question of whether Toulmin was an original philosopher remains to be clarified. (I have made my contribution to this crucial issue, but it had not much impact so far.) In particular, it still is with respect to the theory of argumentation, in general, of the author of The Uses of Argument [5], Knowing and Acting [6] and Return to Reason [1], even though, in the last decades, some argumentation theorists have addressed the issue [7,8]. This last facet of Toulmin is, without doubt, the one best known today, especially in academic terms [9]. Toulmin’s views in The Uses of Argument, in my interpretation, are not only credited with important contributions to the afore-mentioned theory. but, indeed, with the idea that rhetoric and argumentation, when interpreted philosophically, are a new paradigm of rationality for the 21st century [10].

It is this last viewpoint that I shall look at here. What is the importance to Wittgenstein’s philosophy—and especially



that of the later Wittgenstein—of argumentation and its problems, that is, the very problems that Toulmin was concerned with in the books mentioned above? I must hasten to answer: NONE, apparently at least—not without some surprise from those who study and teach argumentation theory and, at the same time, study and teach the work of Wittgenstein (as I do). In fact, even the terms of “argument” or “argumentation” rarely occur in Wittgenstein’s texts, and when they do, it is in an intellectually harmless sense, that is, not relevant to argumentation theory. I am not ignoring, of course, that the “language games” and other fundamental concepts of Wittgenstein’s philosophy can be interpreted and placed at the service of argumentation theory, as Hintikka and others sought to do [11-14]. This was the very angle from which it was argued that Wittgenstein, with the *Philosophical Investigations* [15], had influenced the idea of “argument field” in Toulmin, and that he, in some way, had prepared the ground for the conceptions on argumentation presented in *The Uses of Argument*, in particular, for the actual argument theory upheld in that book [5,16]. But, surprisingly enough for us in the second decade of the 21st century, the idea that meaning in everyday language involves, directly or indirectly, argumentation is completely absent in Wittgenstein’s philosophy. (It was from this point of view that Chaïm Perelman, in my view, criticized Wittgenstein and analytic philosophers in general [17]. If we re-read the *Philosophical Investigations*, for example, from this perspective, we may conclude that such idea—that is, that a term, statement, etc., from everyday language is part of a wider discursive context, in the framework of which it has certain formal relationships of inference with other terms or statements, which can be disputed or criticized and, above all, studied for themselves—is nowhere to be seen. It is the question of meaning, not of argumentation or meaning through argumentation, that occupies Wittgenstein. However, it is precisely this idea that to some extent is at the core of Toulmin’s work [10]. This relationship, by contrast or opposition, between Wittgenstein and Toulmin, has been omitted (not to say ignored) in the past by the specialist literature on these philosophers, and it is absolutely essential, if we are to understand where the philosophy of the first ends and that of the second begins, that is, to appraise their respective originalities. Indeed, the research which I just mentioned (such as that developed in some reputable contemporary argumentation theories) is based on the assumption that Wittgenstein’s influence on Toulmin basically concerned the argumentation model that is presented in *The Uses of Argument*, disregarding its wider philosophical context—not only that of that book but, more generally, that which led Toulmin to write (with A. Janik) *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*, almost twenty years later [2]. Therefore, the question I began by asking could perhaps be reformulated as follows: it is a matter of knowing not only what Toulmin saw but, above all, what he did not find in Wittgenstein’s philosophy that led him, directly or indirectly,

to an argumentation theory like that which he brings to us in *The Uses of Argument* and developed in later books.

Wittgenstein’s ignorance of Argumentation Theory

Before going on to talk about Toulmin’s reception of Wittgenstein’s philosophy, let me clarify the opposition between meaning theory and argumentation theory that I have just alluded to. The revolutionary starting point of Toulmin is that the problems of meaning theory that occupied a considerable part of analytic philosophy in the mid-1950s (not merely those authors from the so-called “English ordinary language philosophy”, as Austin, Strawson, Ryle and others, but Wittgenstein himself) are fundamentally problems of rhetoric and/or of argumentation (theory) [5]. This perspective is completely ignored by the histories of analytic philosophy, starting with that of Dummett [18]. A similar perspective, as I have argued elsewhere, was defended by Perelman in his critique of the analytic philosophy of the 1950s and 1960s [10,17]. From this standpoint, the originality of *The Uses of Argument*, in my interpretation, rests on two main theses:

1st thesis: The meaning of whatever is supposed to be part of everyday language can only be understood through its use in argumentation, i.e. through the arguments into which it enters.

It is not enough to say that meaning is given to us (from a behaviorist perspective) through the use of language in context and that, against Russell and others, it is not a metaphysical entity, as these philosophers argued, though Toulmin perhaps would have subscribed to such criticisms [19]. Nor is it enough to describe and characterize in detail in which contexts this use is made, in order to somehow try to build and develop a meaning theory. It was what the English ordinary language philosophers—who are targeted by some Toulmin’s criticisms, whether in *The Uses of Argument* or in *Wittgenstein’s Vienna*—above all did; and it was (as I said) what Wittgenstein himself was doing, to some extent, in the *Philosophical Investigations* [15] and other works, at least, from a negative viewpoint, i.e., that, finally, we cannot build any meaning theory in systematic terms, and, therefore, that philosophy—in the foundational and universalist sense of the concept—is condemned to death [3]. At any rate, this viewpoint—i.e. the idea that meaning relied on the contexts of the use of language—remained pertinent for Toulmin (for example, for his concept of “field-dependent argument” and, more generally, for his critique of the application of formal logic to argumentation). In fact, such idea is obvious in the very title of Toulmin’s book *The Uses of (...) Argument*. However, the essential point is that, if one does not realize that meaning is not only simply a

question of the use of language, but essentially of the use of language in argumentation, we run the risk of emptying or eliminating it (looking for it where, in fact, it does not exist) and being unable to build any theory about it—as it was the case, according to an interpretation like the one suggested by Toulmin, of Wittgenstein’s philosophy itself. On the contrary, for *The Uses of Argument*, a theory of meaning is only possible through (or as) a theory of argumentation. At stake, then, for philosophy (indeed, according to Toulmin for the future of philosophy in general), is the fundamental task of understanding [5]

- How we argue or what are the ways we do it;
- How these uses of argumentation changes from context to context (or is “field-dependent” in Toulmin’s terms);
- Which (new) role can be played by formal logic in analyzing and assessing our arguments, etc.

Toulmin sees rhetoric, or argumentation theory (he tends to use the first term: “rhetoric”) as having precisely these fundamental objectives. All this is enough to say that Toulmin, along with Perelman, is one of the most important philosophers of the second half of the 20th century (if not the most important) from the perspective of argumentation theory.

2nd thesis: It is in rhetoric and argumentation that we are given the foundations of philosophy and, thereby, of knowledge and human action in general (as *The Uses of Argument*, *Knowing and Acting*, and Toulmin’s later books show).

Toulmin strives to demonstrate this thesis in the first book by showing how the traditional issues of metaphysics and epistemology can (and should) be reduced to/and interpreted as questions of rhetoric or argumentation theory [5]. While it is certain that—as especially the analytic philosophers had concluded from the standpoint of meaning theory—it is not possible to know the world’s essence, for Toulmin it is always possible to study the way we talk and argue in relation to it. From this point of view, where rhetoric seems to be a new paradigm of rationality [20], he surely would not have subscribed to the holistic thesis of those who, taking the theory of meaning as the matrix of their research, anticipated or proclaimed—expressly or implicitly—the end of philosophy. This was true of Quine, in the same era [21]; but, once again, it was also in this direction that some Wittgenstein’s texts, from the *Tractatus* [22] seemed to point. Philosophy, as Toulmin saw it (in some sense, once again against Wittgenstein), continued to be not only possible but also necessary as rhetoric or argumentation theory [23]. This is a fundamental thesis to which Toulmin will remain faithful throughout his philosophical investigations [9]. It covers issues as diverse as the refusal of Quine’s and Rorty’s conceptions of the problem of relativism [24-26], which

explains his criticism, as early as the 1970s, of the second philosopher, in the “Introduction” to *Human Understanding* [27]; in particular, the refusal—given the apparent end of philosophy—to accept solutions to Quine’s problem of ontological relativity, such as “naturalized epistemology” [24,28]; or the idea that formal logic must be at the service of argumentation theory [6]. I dealt with this issue, from my own point of view, Ribeiro [10] and, more recently, in Ribeiro [29,30]. We do not find any of these concepts, either explicitly or implicitly, from the perspective of argumentation, in Wittgenstein. We can always, of course, reconstruct this author’s philosophy, in order to (whatever it takes) make him say things that he never said or thought. This seems to be the case with some analytic philosophers who want to associate Wittgenstein’s philosophy with argumentation theory. They have not yet realized that if it is true that we can go from analytical philosophy to argumentation theory (as is my case) it is because that philosophy died to make way for something completely different [31]. Douglas Walton, one of the most prestigious argumentation theorists of the 20th century, suggested—despite an inevitable contradiction in adjecto—precisely what has just been said [32].

Wittgenstein’s rehabilitation by Toulmin

Now, the natural question arising from what has just been said is obviously this: given the opposition and contrast that has been established between meaning theory and argumentation theory, between Wittgenstein and Toulmin, how, in spite of everything, could the philosophy of the first have crucially influenced the second? I have already mentioned some aspects of such influence, which involve the intersection of the two theories, when the first is looked in light of the second. Nevertheless, that is not enough. As Wittgenstein’s *Vienna* shows to perfection, Toulmin saw in the work of Wittgenstein not only the death certificate (issued by Wittgenstein himself) of a theory of meaning in general—i.e. of a theory like that which, in his reading and interpretation, the philosopher had developed from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*—but of philosophy itself in systematic terms [2]. Such death certificate was, in a sense, the death certificate of Wittgenstein’s *Vienna*—not only that of *Tractatus* era. but mainly that of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Indeed, it was not simply a death certificate of the Viennese society, but of the European societies in the mid-1950s [2,33]. This is precisely what Toulmin’s later books, such as *Cosmopolis* and *Return to Reason*, show [1,34]. As a result, he basically viewed that work as an invitation to conceive new ways of building a philosophy—as that Toulmin offers us in *The Uses of Argument* and in *Acting and Knowing*, which places rhetoric and argumentation at the heart of philosophy—that may match the same ethical imperatives that Wittgenstein had philosophically claimed, from the outset, considering the steep moral, cultural and political

decline of the Viennese society at the end of the 19th and in the early 20th centuries [35,36]. In an interpretation such as this, Wittgenstein's meaning theory would be an essential part (for the best and most decisive reasons) of that "suicide of the modern movement" to which the last chapter of Wittgenstein's Vienna refers [2]. It would be, as Toulmin tells us in that book, not just a "terminus ad quem" of modern and contemporary philosophical tradition, but, fundamentally, a "terminus a quo" of it, that is to say, once again, an opening of new horizons and paths to the "historic development" of other "fields of research" in philosophy—as (supposedly) was the case of his own in *The Uses of Argument and Acting and Knowing*. It is from this fundamental point of view that Toulmin's theory of rhetoric and argumentation is playing, in completely new and original terms, the role of Wittgenstein's old meaning theory. Once again, Perelman reached the same fundamental conclusion in other ways, as I showed in "What argumentation (theory) can do for philosophy in the 21st century" [10].

Final Remarks: The End begins with the Beginning

To sum up, Toulmin's philosophy is not limited to developing certain viewpoints that Wittgenstein had presented previously and reformulating them in the framework of his conception of rhetoric and argumentation. This is a wrong approach to the connections between the two philosophers. Toulmin was convinced that, with that conception, he had introduced not only a new philosophical paradigm but also, as I noted above, a new paradigm for understanding rationality as a whole. Wittgenstein belonged to the past, although he had crucially pointed the way to his own research. In the only citation apropos of Wittgenstein that is in *The Uses of Argument*, Toulmin (rhetorically) alludes to the revolutionary nature of that research and, in particular, to the status that rhetoric and argumentation will have in the future, in comparison with the research in Western philosophy tradition in general (which includes, in my interpretation, the philosophy of Wittgenstein himself). He uses an interesting and memorable analogy for this purpose in the beginning of the "Conclusion" [5]:

The late Ludwig Wittgenstein used to compare the re-ordering of our ideas accomplished in philosophy with the re-ordering of the books on the shelves of a library. The first thing one must do is to separate books which, though at present adjacent, have no real connection, and put them on the floor in different places; so, to begin with, the appearance of chaos in and around the bookcase inevitably increases, and only after a time does the new and improved order of things begin to be manifest (...). Initially, therefore, the librarian's and the philosopher's activities alike are bound to appear negative, confusing, destructive (...).

But then he adds, precisely in the sense that his rehabilitation of Wittgenstein points to:

In the present inquiries, for instance, we may seem to have been preoccupied entirely with negative questions (...). But, if this has been so, it is not from any love of distinctions and objections for their own sakes. (...) Our excuse lies in the conviction that a radical re-ordering of logical theory is needed, in order to bring it more nearly into line with critical practice (...).

References

1. Toulmin S (2001) *Return to Reason*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London.
2. Toulmin S, Janik A (1973) *Wittgenstein's Vienna*. Simon and Schuster, New York.
3. Hacker PMS (1996) *Wittgenstein's Place in Twentieth-Century Analytic Philosophy*. John Wiley & Sons, New York.
4. Ribeiro HJ (2010) Russell's vs Wittgenstein: In defense of Russell (a reply to some old theses of Peter Hacher's interpretation of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*). In: Nemeth E, et al. (Eds.), *Image and Imagining in Philosophy, Society, and the Arts: Papers of the 33rd International Wittgenstein Symposium*. Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society: Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austria, pp: 268-270.
5. Toulmin S (1958) *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, England.
6. Toulmin S (1976) *Knowing and Acting: An Invitation to Philosophy*. Macmillan Publishing Co, Collier Macmillan Publishers, New York.
7. Eemeren FHV, Grootendorst R, Johnson RH, Plantin C, Willard CA (1996) *Fundamentals of Argumentation Theory. A Handbook of Historical Backgrounds and Contemporary Developments*. 1st (Ed.), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, Mahwah, pp: 440.
8. Eemeren FHV, Garssen B, Krabbe ECW, Henkemans AFS, Verheij B, et al. (2014) *Handbook of Argumentation Theory*. Springer, Dordrecht, Netherland.
9. Hitchcock D, Verheij B (2006) *Arguing on the Toulmin Model*. *New Essays in Argument Analysis and Evaluation*. Springer, Dordrecht.
10. Ribeiro HJ (2009) Perelman and Toulmin as philosophers: On the inalienable connection between philosophy, rhetoric and argumentation. *Rhetoric and*

- Argumentation in the Beginning of the 21st Century, Coimbra University Press, Coimbra, pp: 33-51.
11. Hintikka M, Hintikka J (1989) Investigating Wittgenstein. Blackwell Publishers.
 12. Kienpointner M (1996) Whorf and Wittgenstein. Language, world view and argumentation. *Argumentation* 10: 475-494.
 13. Schwed M (2009) A Wittgensteinian approach to rationality in argumentation. In: Proceedings of the 8th International Conference of the Ontario Society of Argumentation (OSSA 8), Windsor, Ontario, Canada, pp: 1-12.
 14. Gomulka J (2021) Wittgenstein's On Certainty and rational argumentation. *Argument Biannual Philosophical Journal* 11(1): 241-257.
 15. Wittgenstein L (1953) Philosophical Investigations. In: Anscombe GE (Ed.), *Philosophy* 30(113): 173-179.
 16. Godden D (2003) On Toulmin's fields and Wittgenstein's latter views on logic. In: Van Eemeren FH, et al. (Eds.), Proceedings of the Fifth Conference of the International Society for the Study of Argumentation. Amsterdam: Sic Sat, pp: 368-375.
 17. Ribeiro HJ (2012b) Rhétorique et philosophie: Perelman et la philosophie analytique. In: Frydman B, et al. (Eds.), Chaim Perelman: 1912-2012. Da la nouvelle rhétorique à la logique juridique. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, pp: 161-185.
 18. Dummett M (1991) Frege and Other Philosophers. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
 19. Russell B (1959) My Philosophical Development. George Allen & Unwin, London.
 20. Ribeiro HJ (2022a) A retórica como paradigma filosófico. *Revista Filosófica de Coimbra* 31(61): 9-40.
 21. Quine W, Van O (1953) From a Logical Point of View. Logico-Philosophical Essays. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, London.
 22. Wittgenstein L (1921) Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus with an Introduction by Bertrand Russell. Kegan Paul, London.
 23. Ribeiro HJ (2012c) On the divorce between philosophy and argumentation theory. *Revista Filosófica de Coimbra* 21(42): 479-498.
 24. Quine W, Van O (1969) Ontological Relativity and Other Essays. Columbia University Press, New York.
 25. Rorty R (1979) Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, USA.
 26. Rorty R (1991) Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth. Philosophical Papers. Vol. 1. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
 27. Toulmin S (1972a) Human Understanding. The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts. Vol. 1: Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.
 28. Toulmin S (1972b) Conceptual change and the problem of relativity. In: Krausz M (Ed.), Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood. Clarendon Press, Oxford, pp: 201-221.
 29. Ribeiro HJ (2015) In the face of relativism: Stephen Toulmin's latest views on rhetoric and argumentation. *Revista Filosófica de Coimbra* 24(47): 95-109.
 30. Ribeiro HJ (2022b) Argumentation theory and the threat from postmodernism and relativism. *Philosophy International Journal* 5(2): 1-7.
 31. Ribeiro HJ (2013) What argumentation (theory) can do for philosophy in the 21st century. In: Mohammed D, et al. (Eds.), Proceedings of the 10th International Conference of the Ontario Society of Argumentation (OSSA 10). Windsor, Ontario, Canada, pp: 1-8.
 32. Walton D (1992) After Analytic Philosophy, What's Next? An Analytic Philosopher Perspective. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* NS, 6(2): 123-142.
 33. Janik A (2001) Wittgenstein's Vienna Revisited. Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey.
 34. Toulmin S (1992) Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, pp: 235.
 35. Ribeiro HJ (2005) A new reading of Russell's 'Introduction' to Wittgenstein's Tractatus. In: Stadler F, et al. (Eds.), Time and History: Papers of the 28th International Symposium. Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, Austria, pp: 256-257.
 36. Ribeiro HJ (2012a) Editor's Introduction. In: Ribeiro HJ (Ed.), Inside Arguments: Logic and the Study of Argumentation. Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. United Kingdom, pp: 1-19.