Argument, justification and inquiry: a pragmatist approach

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This paper aims to contribute to the understanding of argumentation in inquiry by means of the discussion of two theses inspired by the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, namely: 1. In order to properly understand the logic of inquiry, it is necessary to overcome the prevailing justificationist and retrospectivist bias in current studies of reasoning and argumentation; 2. The concept of epistemic practice, and the idea that logic in a broad sense is a reconstructive study of epistemic practices, can serve as a promising axis in the organization of the field.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, epistemic practices, inquiry, John Dewey, justification, problem-solving

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last years, important and valuable attempts have been made to understand the relationships between argumentation and inquiry and to expand informal logic and argumentation theory to include argumentation in inquiry as one of its objects of analysis. (Bailin & Battersby, 2016; Blair, 201; Battersby & Bailin, 2018; Pratt Scott, 2010; Wohlrapp 2014) Such latter attempts respond, by and large, to the need to overcome a practical or pedagogical problem, a problem to which current studies of argumentation seem not to offer a completely satisfactory answer. When teaching informal logic, argumentation theory or critical thinking at different educational levels, one can have the feeling that what it is taught is more useful for defending any given point of view, or convincing others, than to generate in students the disposition of forming a point of view, of reaching a conclusion on the basis of reflective thinking, which would involve gathering information or evidence and thus construct a judgement, a well-founded opinion. Besides, this need for a critical process of opinion formation—not

committed in advance to an already formed point of view, nor structured by it—is also considerably valuable in a context in which the democratic election of authorities is strongly influenced by communication strategies linked to some political and economic interests, which are now more than ever effective by virtue of the development of information technologies and the dissemination of fake news through social networks and mass media.

This paper aims to contribute to such developments by means of the discussion of two theses. These theses—inspired by the aforementioned work—constitute a hopefully clearer and more precise reformulation of some ideas of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. Thinking with and beyond Dewey, I propose to consider the following two ideas: 1) In order to properly understand the logic of inquiry, it is necessary to overcome the prevailing justificationist and retrospectivist bias in current studies of reasoning and argumentation; 2) The concept of epistemic practice, and the idea that logic in a broad sense, in a sense that includes informal logic and argumentation theory, is a reconstructive study of epistemic practices, can serve as a promising axis in the organization of the field. These are broad and ambitious theses whose establishment would indeed require more extensive work than the one I can present on this occasion, a work that is in its early stages. Thus, I will present these ideas as hypotheses and I will try, in this paper, to briefly explain their meaning and their scope.

2. GOING BEYOND RETROSPECTIVISM

One of the aims of this first section is to contribute to a recovery of the philosophy of logic of John Dewey. He is one of the most prominent representatives of the tradition of classical pragmatism, a tradition in which a broad and deep study of logical issues was developed. Indeed, the contributions of Ch. S. Peirce and C. I. Lewis, both belonging to this tradition, have been incorporated into the logic and their names already have a prominent place in the history of the discipline. This is not what happened with Dewey, whose thinking has been fundamentally shaped by his own work on logic, a work that has been developed for more than 40 years. As early as 1916, he published a book entitled *Essays in Experimental Logic*, a title that seems now more plausible than then, and, in 1938, he published another book, entitled *Logic: the theory of inquiry*, in which he criticizes the philosophical foundations of the formal approach to logic. Despite that, Dewey is not usually considered as a logician and his work is not even considered by historical studies of logic and argumentation theory. While it is true that what led Dewey to deal with logic was a much broader philosophical and even political motivation, he did develop an interesting philosophy of logic that had a

remarkable influence, for example, in the "critical thinking" tradition, and even in an relevant author as Stephen Toulmin. As I have pointed out elsewhere, (López, 2012) it can be argued that the thinking of the latter has incorporated some important ideas of pragmatism in general and of Dewey in particular. Considering the seeming rejection of Dewey by Toulmin in *The Uses of Argument*, it is worth remembering the following late recognition:

> Let me begin with a word of gratitude to John Dewey. His book, *Essays in Experimental Logic*, was regarded with some contempt by my colleagues in Britain. But its great merit is to show, long before the rest of us, how reasoning enters not only into technical life, but also into everyday life; so that how we express ourselves and -more important- the activities within which we speak and act set the stage within which judgments of soundness and acceptability can alone be made (Toulmin, 2004, p. 111).

However, there is one aspect of Dewey's thinking that has not been incorporated, even by Toulmin, and which is crucial in his understanding of logic. According to Dewey, logic as a science or discipline is the study of the process in which we solve some problems by using reflective thinking. More precisely, reflective thinking or inquiry—Dewey uses both expressions—is the process by which we solve problems using intelligence and, as a consequence of which. we reach warranted assertions. One implication of this is that knowledge or conclusions and arguments cannot be understood unless the process of constructing them is considered, because in his opinion the only logical reason we can have to hold a belief is that it is the result of some well conducted inquiry. Of course, we usually maintain beliefs for other reasons as bare impulse, imposition or tradition, but logic, as a normative-descriptive or reconstructive study of argumentation or reasoning should not be developed as a modelling of those situations.

We face here an attempt to analyse conclusions or knowledge as products by considering the process by which they are stated. This attempt was contrary to the prevailing idea that when speaking of knowledge and conclusions, process and product must be kept apart. In order to fully understand this, it is convenient to bear in mind something that Larry Laudan has pointed out. In his opinion:

> An event of major significance occurred in the course of 19th-century philosophy of science. The task of articulating a logic of scientific discovery and concept formation -a task which had been at the core of epistemology since Aristotle's Posterior Analytics- was abandoned. In its place was put the

> very different job of formulating a logic of post hoc theory evaluation, a logic which did not concern itself with how concepts were generated or how theories were first formulated. This transformation marks one of the central watersheds in the history of philosophical thought, a fundamental cleavage between two very different perspectives on how knowledge is to be legitimated." (1981, p. 183)

This shift was and remains so important that when a contemporary reader faces Dewey's logic, epistemology or ethics, especially if trained in the tradition of analytic philosophy, has the impression that, even if Dewey had some good ideas, he defended them in a logically flawed way. Indeed, once the first project has been abandoned, based on a dichotomous distinction between context of discovery and context of justification, embracing the idea that the very object of logic (and philosophy of science) is *justification*, Dewey's position seems completely outdated.

Now, although the distinction between contexts mentioned above has been strongly questioned in the field of philosophy of science, I believe that the idea that logic is focused on the question of justification, and its counterpart criticism, of beliefs or points of view and that it has, therefore, a certain retrospective character is still the dominant position. In this sense, the following quote from *The Uses of Argument* can be taken as indicating a program that argumentation studies would largely adopt:

> [L]ogic is concerned not with the manner of our inferring, or with questions of technique: its primary business is a retrospective, justificatory one—[it is concerned] with the arguments we can put forward afterwards to make good our claim that the conclusions arrived at are acceptable, because justifiable, conclusions (Toulmin, 2003, p. 6).

Moreover, even when attempting to account for the use of arguments in research contexts, this retrospective and/or justificatory nature is also present. For example, in a paper in which he discusses the possibility of using the pragmadialectical model of critical discussion to model argumentation in investigations, Anthony Blair states that "An epistemic investigation (i.e. the phenomenon he is trying to model) begins with a question about whether some judgment is justified." (2012. p. 293). Although Blair's purpose is to model a process in which agents are not committed in advance to the belief or judgment being investigated, nor try to persuade anyone of it, he models the process as starting with the question about whether a judgement that the agent

already has is justified or not. It is noteworthy that in this context, inquiry is not so much about problems, things or phenomena in the world, but only or mainly about concepts, hypotheses or theories that somehow have been already formulated. Indeed, in his presentation of the elements of epistemic investigations, Blair not only rejects any temporal connotation of a research process that could have *moments* or *stages*, he does not consider any element of "hypothesis formulation", but only of revision, assuming simply that the hypothesis has been formulated before, so that its formulation would not be properly an internal element within the investigation, but an external point of departure, almost an excuse or motive.

The point that I am trying to highlight is that, even when the studies of argumentation focus in inquiry, the starting point is usually the point of view or the judgment whose merits or justification is to be established. Thus, whether it is to persuade someone in a persuasive dialogue, to resolve a difference of opinion or to investigate whether a judgement is justified, the logical task, or the rational task, so to speak, is always retrospective: it begins with what has to be supported, with the conclusion or point of view and then it goes back in search of the foundations. In such a context, the so-called illative core of premises-conclusion is the fundamental, the ultimate core of logical analysis, and even more so the locus where all rationality resides.

In this way, and after the studies on argumentation abandoned the formalist and the deductivist bias, it seems that it continues to construct its object incorporating a justificatory and / or retrospective bias. Of course, I am not denying that many times we do justify, criticize or evaluate points of view already formulated or that this is a necessary and important activity. However, this is not necessarily so, particularly when engaged with inquiries.

In contrast to such a conception, inquiry is understood by Dewey, not as the attempt to determine whether a hypothesis is true or acceptable, or it is not. Inquiry is a kind of response of an agent to a problem. According to Dewey, it would be more accurate to say that it is a response to an indeterminate situation, inasmuch as the definition or characterization of the problem is already a stage within the inquiry, and usually something surrounded by controversy. Indeed, the definition of the problem works as a persuasive definition (Zarefsky, 2006) which favors one response over others. Consequently, something similar could be said of inquiries which start by discussing already at hand points of view or hypothesis: they assume some characterization of the problem, overlooking other possibilities and aspects of the problem.

Another interesting point to mention is that, according to Dewey, inquiry is a process that has a *temporal dimension*: nothing that

can properly be called a solution can be found as a solution from the beginning, since in that case no investigation would be necessary. The process that logic must model, according to Dewey, is the process by which a solution to a problem is obtained or produced through an investigation. Of course, not every solution of a problem properly involves investigation, because a problem can also be solved by appealing to a pre-established or standardized response mode. An even if in such a process, the evaluation of hypotheses and judgments, as well as the resolution of differences of opinion and even persuasion in the proper sense can find their place—since inquiry might be collectively carried out—they cannot be identified with it. In other words, according to this point of view, the investigation, and consequently logic itself—if it is concerned with inquiries—cannot be thought as modelling only a retrospective and justificatory process.

To conclude this section, it is interesting to point out that, at the moment of the rise of the formalist conception of logic, but without denying the value of the formal developments that he understands as a part of logic, Dewey saw the necessity of reflecting on reasoning and inference in a fully contextualized way. In his opinion, it is only in its own context that the nature, function and norms of inference and reasoning can and should be studied. And that context was, in his opinion, inquiry, not only scientific but also common-sense inquiries. Thus, logic was in his opinion an "empirical" science, in the sense that it studies an observable process, and has a normative dimension insofar as it reconstructs and reformulates the norms that permit constructing and establishing warranted solutions. In other words, logic in Dewey's view is the study of the practice of reflective thinking understood as a problem-solving process.

3. A LOGIC OF EPISTEMIC PRACTICES

In this section, I would like to suggest the hypothesis, inspired by Dewey but certainly going beyond him, that the concept *of epistemic practice* can be a fruitful one to understand the relationships between different studies on argumentation. To fathom what I am suggesting, it is appropriate to point out that the theory of argumentation often has a unifying impulse: as many authors have pointed out (Blair, 2007, Bermejo Luque, 2009), most approaches propose a way to understand argumentation that claims to have a broad enough scope as to cover the entire phenomenon of argumentation. Thus, for example, logical, rhetorical or dialectical approaches, which are usually linked with argumentation as product, process or procedure, are intended to be a total approach to argumentation, an approach that would explain the essential aspects that the other approaches highlight. Indeed, as

Bermejo Luque points out, while, on the one hand, the tripartite distinction product-process-procedure or logical-dialectic-rhetorical, suggests the idea that there are three complementary approaches on the phenomenon of argumentation, the truth is that each theory tends to have, as mentioned, an allegedly *total scope*.

As presented in the previous section, Dewey's position seems to be another theory with a totalizing pretension: the logic is theory of inquiry, which is a process subjected to rules that begins with a problem and ends with its solution. However, the development of informal logic and the theory of argumentation in recent decades and the attempts to reconstruct the logic of argument evaluation, audience persuasion and difference of opinion solving could hardly be reduced to the model of inquiry proposed by Dewey. Moreover, although inquiry is for the pragmatist an irreducible social, communicative and collaborative phenomenon, he has not considered the basic characteristics and difficulties involved in trying to resolve differences of opinion or to persuade an audience. or, at least, he did not think that it deserved an independent study. In the same way, attempts to reduce inquiry to a critical discussion tend to ignore central aspects of it, such as the fact that they have a prospective temporal structure.

According to Dewey, logic was the study of a practice. However, I see no reason in reducing the logic to the study of a single type of practice. Indeed, the practice of solving a real problem through research, for example, not knowing who to vote for in the next election, seems to me a different practice than convincing someone to vote for a given candidate or the to resolve a difference of opinion about who is the best candidate. Perhaps other examples could be taken under consideration, but the one mentioned aims at suggesting that these are different practices that do not have to be analyzed with or reduced to a single model.

Thus, it could be suggested that logic, in the broad sense I have used, can be understood as the study of epistemic *practices*, not in the singular. Generally speaking, epistemic practices can be understood as different ways in which knowledge is produced, communicated or legitimated. By "knowledge" I refer both to scientific knowledge, to common sense, and to public opinion in general, regardless of its specific topic, so that we can encompass what is traditionally understood as knowledge about facts and moral knowledge. For example, inquiry, conceptual analysis, the evaluation of arguments, the attempt to convince someone about a point of view or the attempt to resolve a difference of opinion could be considered as different epistemic practices. Of course, these are not completely divergent practices, but rather practices that share common aspects. Probably, inquiry is the broadest, in the sense that it might include other types of

practices. However, it is not clear that all of them can be reduced to one of these models, or to some more general and abstract enough model to cover them all, not at least without significant losses.

4. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that current studies of reasoning and argument have a justificatory and retrospective bias which needs to be overcome in order to properly account for the use of argument within inquiries. Inspired by John Dewey's pragmatist logic, it has been claimed that inquiry is a prospective and constructive process, with a temporal structure in which the definition of the problem and the formation of hypothesis must be considered as essential stages. On the other hand, it has been suggested that the concept of epistemic practices can be a useful tool to understand the relations between several approaches in argumentation theory that, more than describing different dimension of one and the same practice, seem to be describing diverse kinds of epistemic practices.

To conclude, it can be pointed out that, as Toulmin maintained regarding is own logic, a logic of epistemic practices must be a *comparative affair*. However, it can be added according to what has been stated, that the main or first distinction is not between fields, but between kinds of epistemic practices. We can search for the common features but with an eye in avoiding the practice of reducing one model to another. But, paraphrasing Toulmin, it can be said that we must learn to tolerate in comparative logic a state of affairs long-taken-for-granted in comparative anatomy: A man, a monkey, a pig, or a porcupine —not to mention a frog, a herring, a thrush and a coelacanth—each will be found to have their own anatomical structure. If we ask about that structure, about its elements and its criteria of normality, we must ask these questions within the limits of a given practice, and avoid, as it was, putting clothes on an ape to make it look as a human being, or adding quills to a pig to make it look as a porcupine.

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