

A wanting analysis.
Commentary on S. Jackson, S. Jacobs, Y. Zhang:
“Standpoints and Commitments as Products of
Argumentative Work: Micro/Macro-Analysis of an
Infamous Press Conference”

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1. INTRODUCTION

In their paper the authors want to “illuminate what happened” in that spectacular press conference and at the same time “augment our theoretical account on argument as disagreement management”. With regard to the first aim I consider success, whereas to the second, I find myself rather skeptical. I will speak about two points: First, the general concept of “argument” that is exposed in the paper; and second, two pairs of terms: Standpoint - Position and Extension - Constellation. I think they indicate distinctions that deserve to be sharpened.

2. CONCEPT OF ARGUMENT

Concerning the paper’s concept of argument, I consider three points somehow weak.

(1) argument is not only concerned with disagreement, but is also, and even more fundamentally, concerned with deliberation.

(2) argument can be performed on different levels of intensity and elaboration. “Natural argument” (argument as it occurs in natural conversation) is the lowest level. But to identify it as a specific activity we rely on the background of a more stylized form of argument (like in science and philosophy).

(3) for an analysis of a communicative process as an argumentation we have to apply at least a minimal argumentation-theoretical kernel. Even this seems to be absent in the paper.

About these three points the presented analysis remains unclear. Consequently, the actual result is extremely unspecific: namely that this

clash between the President and the reporters during the press conference shows the “deep difference of views on race in North America” (Conclusion of the paper).

2.1 Disagreement management

Argument is circumscribed as “disagreement management”. It “includes challenging and defending positions” and it is exposed in the “expansion space” around conversational acts that are undertaken to manage disagreement.

This is a very wide notion of argument. Any frowning, blink or smile can be seen as serving for disagreement management. On the other hand, it is highly unspecific, because it does not refer to the particular virtues and potentials of argument. It stresses the adversarial, leaving out the epistemological side.

However: Argument is not only a medium for managing disagreement. It is also a medium for deliberating about maintenance, correction and improvement of our understanding the world and ourselves.

In the authors’ “Theoretical Overview” (Top 3.) a more specific conception of disagreement lights up, a kind of metaphysical condition: Human beings have different preferences and are inclined to put them through. Thus, anything in the world that can get some attention by anybody is a source or a possible subject of disagreement. In consequence, we may find ourselves in a global “polylogue” of contradicting opinions on most given matters.

I will not deny this, but I like to stress, that this is just one side of what we experience. Agreement and cooperation is the other side and, once again, it is the basis of the game (nobody could grow up in fundamental disagreement).

2.2 Natural argument

We are used to identify argumentative features in naturally occurring conversation.

This is so because we have some pre-concept of argument. That pre-concept is, however, the remnant of millenniums of intellectual work on argument (logic, dialectic, rhetoric). With this pre-concept in mind we can certainly participate in natural argumentative activities. We can ask ‘why’, answer ‘because’, reply with ‘but’, etc. etc.

If, however, we want to engage for an analysis we need a theoretical apparatus, in order to safely identify which parts of the (verbal and nonverbal) communication belong to the argument – and which ones do not. This apparatus is by no means available in our

everyday talk about argument. It needs a reflective endeavor, enriched with critically adapted knowledge of the theory that has been accomplished so far.

2.3 Theoretical kernel of argumentation theory

My research group in Hamburg was for some 20 years preoccupied with argument analysis. Gradually we developed something like a theoretical kernel which we considered indispensable for analyzing a given material. It consists of three basic operation forms:

- *Asserting* is claiming something which is proposed to be accepted (as valid, viable, true, good).
- *Justifying* is basing a claimed thesis as far as possible on established theories (expanding them, if necessary, with assumptions, that are, *prima facie*, again assertions).
- *Criticizing* is advancing something that contradicts (parts of) the asserted material.

Besides these basic operations we developed a simple criterion for a “*valid*” conclusion: that it is justified and any criticism has been settled (“Absence of Open Objections”, see: Wohlrapp (2014, Chap. 7.)). This theoretical kernel can be specified and differentiated according to specific circumstances in the material. For those specifications a wealth of theoretical tools and proposals are available in argumentation theory.

In close relation to the only vaguely exposed argumentative side of the analysis, I stumbled, when studying it, over the following question: What about the identified arguments? Why did the authors not care for evaluating the few real argumentative structures that they have exposed? In particular I think about the complex justification of Trump’s claim concerning the excellence of his statements. Furthermore, I mean the slippery slope argument from taking down the Robert E. Lee statue to the taking down of the statues of Washington and Jefferson. I would definitely consider that a worthwhile preoccupation.

3. SHARPENING SOME DISTINCTIONS

3.1 Standpoint and Position

The most frequent terms in the analysis are “position” and “standpoint”. They seem to mean something different but their meanings are not clearly distinguished, overlapping with “claim” and “attitude”. One of the authors’ points is that a “standpoint” is typically not stated at the

beginning but it “emerges” as a result of “argumentative work” (“standpoint not at the start, but at the end”).

On the other side we learn about Trump’s “position” that it is “elaborated” (in turn 58), whereas his “standpoint”, as he claims that Bannon is not a racist (in turn 82), is “transformed”. Standpoints when they are readily “produced” can be “externalized” (Theoretical Overview, Top 1.). An externalized standpoint becomes “apparent”; but, when Trump claims that “he did not have enough facts”, this is not called his “apparent standpoint” but “his apparent position” (cit. in comment before turn 63).

I think this vagueness can be banned if we distinguish between two doxastic units:

One for a single, specific claim, and a second one for a whole cluster or web of claims hanging together, nor necessarily verbalized, in the habit of a person or a group. The single thing could be named “standpoint” and the cluster “position” (or, as before turn 53: “positional space”). An argumentative exchange would then appear as an interactive checking of standpoints which are claimed – maybe at the start, maybe somewhen during the process, or maybe at the end. They can be sharpened and modified with the help of the respective positions that they are externalizing.

In this picture the concern of the authors about the “maieutic function” of argument would also be present: We may more or less clearly know what we mean and believe when we enter a discourse. But we usually do not know what that looks like from the perspective of a new discourse partner. Therefore, a controversial discourse is an opportunity to not only elaborate but to also develop and advance one’s position about a given problem.

If the distinction between standpoint and position is determined in this way we gain a theoretical tool that enables us to conceive the dynamics of argumentation. Changes and transformations can be further cleared up if we apply Lakatos’ distinction between a “hard kernel” and a “protective belt” to positions (as I have shown it in Wohlrapp (2014), Chaps. 2. & 6.).

3.2 Extension and Constellation

The expression “extension” is also used in a merely colloquial way. As it is supposed to designate the (result of the) subliminal process of enlarging and enriching a more or less clearly identified position it should be made transparent how something acquires the quality to be

an “extension” of some other thing. What is the precise relation between the two and how is it produced in the interaction? Speaking of “clamor” and “hammering” is not very instructive for the argumentative process; and in figure 8 of the analysis a merely intuitive picture of “extensions” is given.

The term “constellation” is even wider. It designates something which appears in line with some position or standpoint, where the connection is completely undetermined (Jean Goodwin called it “non-logical”; Goodwin (2109)). The message in using that term seems to be: The discussion extends here into a new area which can be taken as “somehow” related. Yet, we should certainly ask if there are any criteria or limits for the designation of an appearing new idea as being an extension or being constellated to the position in question.

As the paper gives no answer, I propose the following idea: These terms are provisional designations for what I have called “the dynamics of argumentation”. In Wohlrapp (2014), Chap. 4. and 6. a proposal is developed for being more definite here. There is a difference shown between two kinds of “follower theses” – one (called “successor”) is a modified version of the original thesis, whose modification is clearly discernable as a reaction to a foregoing argument. The other one (called “connector”) is a new thesis, which is concerned about a new aspect of the content of the thesis which had come into attention; again: because of a foregoing argument.

4. CONCLUSION

The paper of S. Jackson, S. Jacobs, and Y. Zhang is certainly a vivid illustration of the distorted relationship between the current president of the United States of America and the critical public. However, if this was meant to serve as an argumentation analysis it appears, with regard to its theoretical endowments, as wanting.

REFERENCES

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