From Argument to Argumentative Dialogue

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Abstract

To explain the complex social process of argumentation, the paper begins by distinguishing two, often confused, aspects of the argument. I take what I call a demonstrative argument as a genuine format for a dialogical argumentative process. Since the exchange of arguments, or more precisely, the production and assessment of arguments, is the most distinguished feature of the argumentative process, I proceed with the discussion of its structure and function. The central question appears to be: is the argumentative process simply a conflict between individuals, solitary agents, which is entirely explicable in terms of their individual reasoning abilities and deductive skills, or is its nature basically socially determined by the characteristic pattern of communication governed by social rules and conventions? By arguing for the advantage of the social view, the paper scrutinizes its different theoretical positions, focusing on Sperber's, Dutilh Novaes's and Ule's views. In discussing these possibilities, I put forward a sort of "eclectic" proposal according to which a plausible theory should include the role of the reflective acceptance of the changed reasoning rules.

Keywords: argumentative process, dialogical structure, formal argument, demonstrative argument, individual vs. social practice

Od argumenta do argumentativnega dialoga – povzetek

Da bi razložil kompleksne družbene procese argumentacije, članek začenja z razlikovanjem dveh pogosto nejasnih aspektov argumenta. To, kar imenujem demonstrativni argument, razumem kot pravo obliko za dialoški argumentativni proces. Ker je izmenjava argumentov, oziroma bolj natančno oblikovanje in ovrednotenje argumentov, najpomembnejša značilnost argumentativnega procesa, nadaljujem z obravnavo njegove strukture in funkcije. Pri tem je osrednje vprašanje, ali je argumentativni proces preprosto spor med posamezniki, ki je povsem razložljiv z njihovimi lastnimi sposobnostmi logičnega sklepanja in veščinami dedukcije, ali pa je njegova narava predvsem družbeno določena z značilnimi vzorci komunikacije, ki jih vodijo družbena pravila in dogovori. S tem, ko zagovarja prednost družbenega pogleda, članek proučuje različna teoretična stališča, pri čemer se osredotoča na poglede Sperberja, Dutilh Novaes in Uleta. Na podlagi diskusije teh možnosti predlagam neke vrste »eklektičen« predlog, pri katerem mora prepričljiva teorija vključevati vlogo razmišljujočega sprejetja spremenjenih sklepalnih pravil.

Ključne besede: argumentativni proces, dialoška struktura, formalni argument, demonstrativni argument, individualna vs. družbena praksa

> Argumentation is one of the activities characteristic of rational life, in the humblest and in the most exalted senses of "rational." The use of reason is inseparable from argumentation. Argumentations are often involved in assenting, in dissenting and in doubting. Whether we are making up our minds or changing our minds, argumentation is often present. Argumentation is so constantly our companion that conscious effort is required even to notice it – unless there is a dysfunction.
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> Corcoran, "Argumentations and Logic" (1989: 17)

Introduction

The primary aim of the paper is to scrutinize the argumentative process with regard to its nature, structure and the variety of forms or types it may assume. However, the question that in a way precedes other aspects of argumentation concerns the essential nature of argumentation. The issue may be expressed in the form of a dilemma: is the argumentative process simply a conflict between individuals, solitary agents, which is entirely explainable in terms of their individual reasoning abilities and deductive skills, or is its nature basically socially determined by the characteristic pattern of communication governed by social rules and conventions? Consequently, the issue extends to the question concerning the source of *justification* of the basic (proto) logical rules that are constitutive for the participant's reasoning. This dilemma marking two opposite poles arises again in the following form: should justification of the (deductive) performances be based on individual, psychological abilities, or is it primarily socially determined?

In addressing this question, I will take as a point of departure the view advocated by Andrej Ule, undoubtedly the most distinguished Wittgenstein scholar in this area of Europe. I am using the opportunity here to express my warm gratitude to Andrej for his wise advice and patience during the many discussions we have had over the years. Although the idea in his paper "Mental Models in Scientific Work" (Ule, 2017) which I am following up deals with the justification of intuitions and understanding, it becomes relevant for my discussion by the simple replacement of the notion of intuition with that of basic rules underlining the reasoning process involved in making and assessing arguments.

However, before I proceed with the development of my ideas, let me present the paper's structure. Since the argumentative process essentially consists of arguments made and assessed by participants, the first task is to elaborate the relation between argument and argumentation. I distinguish between two types of arguments and select the *demonstrative argument* as the one pertaining to the argumentative process, and then discuss the role of what I call a *formal* argument as a putative norm against which the demonstrative argument is to be judged. After that I reveal the structure of the

argumentative process putting forward its three most salient characteristics, namely its dialogical, adversarial and verbal character. The main part deals with the debate on the very nature of the argumentative process. As I mentioned at the beginning, the debate fluctuates (wavers) between two opposite poles. On one side, there is a still dominating, individualist view, that the argumentative process is based on individual reasoning abilities that meet in a conflicting manner. On the other, there is a socially determined view comprising a variety of views, from that perceiving reasoning as evolutionarily designed for argumentation (Sperber and Mercier), through the view that reasoning is culturally dependent (Dutilh Novaes), to the extreme view which, in line with Wittgenstein, claims that basic reasoning, intuitions and understanding are completely a matter of common practice and language games (Ule). I situate myself in the communitarian camp, but with certain reservations. I readily accept the claim that the argumentative process is primarily socially determined, and furthermore, that it reaches its higher form only as a collective agency. To support this claim, I am relying on the theory that reasoning is designed for argumentation and partly on the cultural dependence theory, but I am not inclined to accept the view of the complete social determination of reasoning. Instead, I argue for the "eclectic" view, trying to compromise between a sort of internalism and socially determined externalism.

Argument and argumentative process

I take the argumentative process to be a complex inter-personal *social activity* insofar as it is a sub-species of social communication which attains its highest form in the argumentative process. Unlike other communicative relationships, the inter-activity between participants in the argumentative process includes *making and assessing arguments* as its necessary part. To give an account of the argumentative process requires putting forward an account of the *argument,* since the exchange of arguments is a substantial part of argumentation. There are a number of different, sometimes contradictory, considerations regarding the use of the notion of argument. At least part of the reason for the ambiguity and confusion with regard to the understanding of this notion is what I would call the dual face of this concept. To avoid possible misunderstandings arising from the ambiguity in the very notion of argument, let me highlight its two senses that are often confused. I want to show the difference between the *implication* relation exemplified by the logical structure and the *act of inference* performed by an agent (presumably a human subject). An act of inference is characteristic of human subjects, while the implication relation exists regardless of whether any human subject is aware of it (Corcoran, 1972: 25). The implication relations, on the one hand, and the act of inference, on the other, are underpinnings for two understandings of the argument. These two understandings have been present since the time of Aristotle

who was the first to differentiate between the two faces of the argument.[1] The two forms of argument can be named "the formal argument" and "the demonstrative argument."

In elementary logic we are dealing with the implication relation. We can say that the set of sentences *P* implies a sentence *c*, or, in other words, that *c* is a logical consequence from *P*. The term *argument* denotes a form consisting of a set of propositions *P*, together with a proposition *c*. An argument is said to be correct when it is valid. Its validity is determined as a conditional: if all propositions in the set *P* (premises) are true, then the proposition *c* (conclusion) cannot be false (or, is true by necessity). In this way, the argument unavoidably has a feature of truth preservation. It is also considered as indefeasible, in the sense that no additional premise can turn a valid argument into an invalid one and vice versa. If an argument is valid, it is indefeasible. It can be defeated only if it is invalid, if there is a situation in which premises are true and the conclusion is false.[2]

There is also another way of understanding the argument. This way is considered as more tightly connected to the argumentative process. According to this, an argument arises in a situation when a rational individual offers a justification for their belief or claim. As Corcoran, relying on Aristotle, argues, such a written or spoken discourse, offered as justification for a belief is often called the argument. Since Aristotle, the justification of a belief is called a demonstration or a proof, hence the name *demonstrative argument*.

These two understandings of the argument, a "formal" one, based on the implication relation, and a "demonstrative" one, based on inference, are obviously connected and mutually dependent. The demonstrative argument seems to be the natural way people build their opinions and ground their claims on reasons. However, the two building blocks in performing the demonstrative argument, namely the justification of the claim and the assessment of the justification, are normative activities. The question is when it can be said that a demonstrative argument is correct.

Let us note that the argument understood as the implication relation concerns the "formal" or logical structure of the argument in which the conclusion is a logical consequence of the premises. The argument understood as a process of inference concerns the "psychological" reasoning capacity of a subject. It is clear that here we are dealing with the relation between the "logic" and "rationality." In this way, the former appears as a standard or norm against which an argument as a justification of a discourse has to be judged as good or correct. The simple answer to the question of the correctness of a demonstrative argument is that it is correct when the reasoning used in it has the form of a *valid* argument, or when it shows that its conclusion follows from the premises.

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1 John Corcoran explained this difference by relying on Aristotle's distinction between syllogisms and perfect syllogisms (*Prior Analytics, 25a 22*).

2 Certainly, this account of validity holds for classical logic. Different types of non-standard logic – intuitionistic logic, dialetheism and others – use the notion of validity differently.

However, as it is well known, the traditional thesis that logic is a norm for a rational performance became highly contentious[3] in more recent discussions. More precisely, the view that the valid "formal" argument is a normative standard for the demonstrative argument (or that *logic* is normative for *rationality*) dominated the philosophical scene until the late 1960s. But around this time, doubt and hesitancy started to emerge from the philosophical camp as well as from cognitive science. The latter showed that the traditional stance idealized and overestimated the deductive abilities of humans. On the philosophical side, Gil Harman's (1986) highly influential attack undermined the traditional view by arguing for the idea that formal logical rules come apart from inference rules. The debate influenced by this idea, containing pros and cons, is ongoing.[4]

Nevertheless, it is far beyond the scope and the intention of this paper to take a stance in the debate. I am going to limit myself to the supposition that logic has a *certain* normative role in demonstrative reasoning. Accordingly, I suppose that the demonstrative reasoning has a deductive form constrained by the conditions of truth preservation and indefeasibility. The truth preservation condition is met when the correctness of the reasoning process is determined by the fact that the conclusion has to follow from premises by necessity. To satisfy the indefeasibility condition, no additional premise can change the truth or falsity of the conclusion.

The argumentative process and its structure

Let me return to the argumentative practice and start by emphasizing its three salient characteristics: dialogical, adversarial and verbal. As mentioned, the argumentative process is a piece of social practice that consists of producing and assessing demonstrative arguments. In this way it is a *dialogical* relation typically consisting of at least two parties, or roles, usually named proponent and opponent, or sometimes protagonist and antagonist, or, as Mercier and Sperber (2011) call them, addresser and addressee. The argumentative process need not necessarily have the bi-polar structure. It can have a poly-logical rather than just bi-polar structure, or even mono-logical in cases when the role of the opponent is implicitly present in the very structure of the deductive procedure. In this situation a solitary reasoner makes an argument by providing justification or (deductive) proof for their claim as if there was an opponent. In fact, in this situation, the reasoner plays both roles. In any case, the dialogical structure of the argumentative process manifests itself in the existence of two roles taken by proponent and opponent. The proponent typically puts forward a claim providing more or less valid or justified reasons for it, while the opponent challenges it. (S)he tries

3 For a deeper insight into the state of the art of recent discussions, see MacFarlane (2004) and Dutilh Novaes (2015).

4 For theories that want to find the bridge between logic and rationality, see MacFarlane (2004), Field (2009) and Milne (2009).

to show that one of the reasons does not hold (that the proposition is false) or tries to block the justifying relation by insisting that the claim is not properly or correctly grounded in the reasons (premises). I take that the exchange of arguments, which has a two-role structure, hence a dialogical character, is a necessary condition for a verbal intercourse to be an argumentative process. In this way, the simple conflict of claims, which is not justified by reasons, does not count as an argumentative process. Or put as a slogan: only dialogue is argumentation.

The different roles that participants play, namely those of argument-maker and argument-challenger, place them in an adversarial position. The *adversarial* character is thus built in the dialogical argumentative process given that participants play two opposite roles. Therefore, the fact that participants might have hostile attitudes towards each other is quite contingent. The adversarial character is present in the dialogical argumentation even if participants cooperate, guided by the common goal of expanding their knowledge. In parallel, although participants play adversarial roles, it is in their best interest to cooperate in forming and interpreting utterances.

To elaborate on this point, let me illustrate a generic situation of argumentation in somewhat more detail. In a typical argumentative process, the proponent (speaker) utters assertions by expressing their attitude towards the content p of a sentence s. Assertions form an argument ($s_1, \ldots s_n \vdash c$) in which $s_1, \ldots s_n$ are reasons supporting the conclusion c, while the sign $\vdash$ indicates the relation between the set of sentences s and c. The opponent assesses s by checking the acceptability of ($s_1, \ldots s_n$) and the relation between reasons and the conclusion. At this point, adversarial roles fully enter the picture. The one playing the proponent's role is required to reveal the reasons for their claim and to relate them to the claim in a way that is very clear and understandable to the addressee. In other words, (s)he will make it as accessible/knowable as possible to the addressee. This is very much in line with Sperber and Mercier's formulation:

> One way to persuade one's addressees is to help them check the consistency of what one is claiming with what *they* believe, or even better if possible, to help them realize that it would be inconsistent with what *they already believe* not to accept one's claim. The communicator is better off making an honest display of the very consistency addressees are anyhow checking. (Sperber and Mercier, 2012: 386)

Only under this condition is it reasonable to say that the opponent's role is to evaluate the acceptability of possessed reasons and their relation to the claim. The opponent will do their best to find counterexamples to the proponent's argument and in this way falsify their claim if possible. Although adversarial, the opposition of roles in the dialogical process makes argumentation a perfect vehicle for advancing the participants' reasoning abilities. Or, as Aristotle explains, "it is not in the power of one participant alone to see that their common work is well accomplished" (*Topics,* VIII.11, 161a 20–22). In section 4, I will argue in more detail that at the meta-level, not at the individual one, the

dialogical, adversarial, and verbal character of the argumentative process can contribute to the enhancement of the participants' reasoning abilities.

As an exchange of arguments, the argumentative process proceeds as a *verbal* communicative social activity. It consists of the verbal *production* of the argument as well as the mental activity of the *assessment* of the produced argument, resulting in a verbally expressed assent to the conclusion or a dissent from the conclusion. In cognitive terms, the argumentation starts as the formation of a mental state, a propositional attitude of the (hopefully justified) belief. The inference of a belief is a psychological, individual, act. The correctness of such an act is subject to norms that correspond to (at least some) basic logical rules. Let us call them rationality norms. However, being verbally expressed or asserted, one's belief is transformed into a speech act that is also susceptible to social rules or to a convention-governed practice. In this way, speech-convention rules and practices become part of the argumentative process. Now, it becomes clear that the norms which regulate an *assertion* expressed as a speech act are intrinsically social, thus connected to the norms of *reasoning*, namely rationality norms psychologically and biologically determined after all. Both social and psychological constraints play a crucial role in explaining the argumentative process.

The argumentative process includes deductive skills (presumably based on the ability to follow basic logical rules) of participants as well as a particular set of rules concerning the (dialogical) intercourse in the argumentative process, rules of the game, which are mostly social. These rules include language games, a characteristic framework for their intercourse. In this way, the argumentative process becomes a field on which phylogenetic individual deductive skills meet (social) conventions that include mostly culturally-dependent norms of assertion and patterns of language games. Individual norms and social conventions certainly influence one another.

The theoretical issue of which side predominates in explaining the argumentation arises. Traditional philosophy takes the individual side. Some philosophers, partly influenced by Wittgenstein, argue that the social side is what matters. My position is very close to the social camp, but I hold that psychological reasoning abilities should be included in the picture.

The argumentation: social or individual practice?

My own view heavily relies on two general ideas. One is Sperber and Mercier's *argumentative theory of reasoning* and the other is Dutilh Novaes's idea that reasoning skills are shaped by cultural influences. Let me start with Sperber and Mercier's theory which is a great contribution to cognitive science. It provides an account of the inner tension between individual and group reasoning explained in naturalistic and evolutionary terms. In particular, their great result contributing to cognitive science is the explanation of the relationship between inference and argumentation (Mercier

and Sperber, 2011 and 2012). They convincingly show that reasoning is evolutionarily designed for argumentation, more precisely, "that reasoning is best adapted for its role in argumentation, which should therefore be seen as its main function." When a reasoning mechanism, they argue, "is employed to do what it is designed to do – finding an evaluation of reasons through argumentation – it works well and produces good performance" (Mercier and Sperber, 2011: 59).

On the other side, Dutilh Novaes placed her socially based understanding of deductive reasoning on two pillars. The first pillar is the reinforcement of the Aristotelian dialogical understanding of deductive logic in contrast to the Kantian individualistic view that has been predominant until present day. She provides historical evidence for the dialogical origin of deduction. Her claim can be summarized as such: rather than comprising norms for mono-agent mental processes, deductive logic actually comprises norms for specific situations of dialogical interaction, in particular special forms of debates (Dutilh Novaes, 2015: 588). The second pillar is stronger. To the claim that logic arose from the situation of dialogical interaction she adds the thesis that reasoning is culture-relative, dependent on a particular cultural practice. She argues: "I here propose to examine specifically how certain social practices, namely different kinds of *dialogical* and *argumentative* practices, may influence how humans reason; in other words, I will be interested specifically in the connections between argumentation (understood as a cultural practice) and reasoning" (Dutilh Novaes, 2013: 460).

Thus, both Sperber and Dutilh Novaes strongly argue for the social founding of reasoning in the dialogical argumentation, but from two different perspectives. Sperber argues from the biological while Dutilh Novaes from the cultural perspective.

The third, most extreme, position is advocated by Andrej Ule in his paper "Mental Models in Scientific Work" (2017). In it, commenting on Nenad Miščević's stance on intuitions, he provides an intriguing view concerning the justification of intuitions, which is based on Wittgenstein's *Investigations*. Ule writes:

> I agree, but would like to add that our ultimate justification of intuitions is often based on something like *blind rule-following*, as described by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Such intuitions are often only implicitly taken in regard to mental modeling, and not explicitly formulated. Such blind rule-following may be regarded as a further, not-justified, but indubitable foundation of other more explicit rules and "moves" in mental modelling. According to Wittgenstein, blind rule-following is not something purely internal or "minded," but forms a part of *common practice* of rule-following of people in a certain life-form. For Wittgenstein, the seemingly purely mental character of basic intuitions is rather a linguistic or rhetorical illusion, and not a mental fact. (2017: 230)

The relevance of his view for my dilemma concerning the justification of basic logical rules is obvious. All that is needed is to replace the notion of intuitions with that of proto-logical

rules. As a third view on the socially-founded side among the variety of positions, it denies the very possibility of the "mental" justification of the rules. Rather, they have to be regarded as a "not-justified, but indubitable foundation of other more explicit rules."

Let me briefly summarize the views on the hitherto mentioned continuum to explain my own position. On the one extreme there is the individualistic view concerning reasoning as a mono-agent's effort. As regards justification, it is mostly understood as internalism. On the other side, there is a gradation of views that understand argumentation as a social practice governed by conventions. It starts with the view that reasoning is designed for argumentation. A stronger view is that reasoning is socio-culturally relative, and finally, there is a position which denies any role to the mental or "internal" justification of the rules that govern reasoning.

To indicate my own view on the above-outlined map of positions, I would say that it is somewhat eclectic. As I previously mentioned, I embrace the thesis that reasoning is designed for argumentation. I also strongly support the thesis that argumentation is a form of social, communicative practice which influences and shapes individual reasoning. However, I reject the claim that there is nothing mental, psychological, and internal in the understanding and following of deductive rules. I take for granted that individual reasoning is typically prone to errors and biases. Furthermore, the argumentative process as a social practice is a natural vehicle, a perfect medium able to ameliorate the disadvantages and shortcomings of individual reasoning. In this respect, I agree with Mercier's description:

> The argumentative theory predicts that reasoners, when they produce arguments, are biased and lazy. By contrast, when they evaluate others' arguments – particularly arguments that challenge their views – they are demanding but objective. They are demanding – that is, they require that the arguments be of good enough quality – because they do not want to be swayed by poor arguments. But they are also objective enough to recognize strong arguments, even if the arguments challenge their views or come from untrustworthy sources. (Mercier, 2016: 691)

Furthermore, the very structure of the argumentative process with its asymmetrical distribution of roles is perhaps the best remedy for the biases in reasoning, first and foremost for the confirmation bias. However, I would like to emphasize that all this ameliorative and enhancing effect is not entirely due to the social character of the argumentative process. The plausible theory should be able to determine the role of reflection on the individual side, of reflective acceptance of the corrected practice. My suggestion is that individuals affected by the argumentative process should be aware that they are better off changing their pattern of reasoning by revising it to attain higher deductive results.

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