Giving Reasons, A Contribution to Argumentation Theory

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ABSTRACT: In *Giving Reasons: A Linguistic-pragmatic-approach to Argumentation Theory* (Springer, 2011), I provide a new model for the semantic and pragmatic appraisal of argumentation. This model is based on a characterization of argumentation as a second order speech-act complex. I explain the advantages of this model respecting other proposals within Argumentation Theory, such as Pragma-dialectics, Informal Logic, the New Rhetoric or the Epistemic Approach.

Keywords: argumentation theory; argumentation studies; linguistic-pragmatic approach; argumentation studies in Spain and Latin-America.

RESUMEN: *En Giving Reasons: A Linguistic-pragmatic-approach to Argumentation Theory* (Springer, 2011)*, propongo un nuevo modelo para la evaluación semántica y pragmática de la argumentación. Este modelo se basa en una caracterización de la argumentación como un acto de habla compuesto de segundo orden. Explico las ventajas de este modelo respecto de otras propuestas dentro de la Teoría de la Argumentación, tales como la Pragma-dialéctica, la Lógica Informal, la Nueva Retórica o el Enfoque Epistémico.*

Palabras clave: *teoría de la argumentación; estudios sobre argumentación; enfoque lingüístico-pragmático; estudios sobre argumentación en España y Latinoamérica.*

On the occasion of the publication of my book *Giving Reasons: A Linguistic-pragmatic-Approach to Argumentation Theory* (Springer, 2011), the journal *THEORIA* has invited some of the most outstanding scholars in the field to discuss the proposals advanced in the book. I wish to thank John Biro, James Freeman, David Hitchcock, Robert Pinto, Harvey Siegel and Luis Vega for their willingness to participate in this volume of *THEORIA*. Indeed, because I have followed or discussed many of their ideas all throughout this book, there is no better way to assess its strength and weaknesses than having their reactions and being offered the opportunity to respond. I can hardly express my gratitude for their generosity and for their insightful comments and criticisms.

Within the realm of Argumentation Studies, Argumentation Theory is devoted to the normative study of natural language argumentation. The philosophical interest of such discipline can hardly be exaggerated. By arguing, we do not only coordinate beliefs and actions with others, but also acquire and transmit knowledge: after all, argumentation is a means to justify our claims and beliefs and to persuade others of them. For this reason, this discipline can be seen as a certain form of methodological inquiry particularly related to those areas of philosophy concerned with the conditions that turn mere beliefs into knowledge and with the conditions of legitimacy that sanction certain communicative interactions among individuals. Besides, philosophical practice itself is conducted, mostly, by arguments and, because of this, suitable normative mod-

els for argumentation would also seem to be necessary if philosophy is to achieve self-understanding and self-regulation. Indeed, these three factors ground the considerable interest that Plato and, specially, Aristotle had in the study of the relationships between Dialectics, Rhetoric and Logic.

As with many other philosophical concerns, the remote origins of Argumentation Theory go back to that fruitful period of ancient Greek philosophy. Paradoxically, though, since then, philosophers had paid scant attention to the study of natural language argumentation as a subject matter, neglecting its characterization as a theoretical object and the provision of specific normative models for it. Somehow, there was the assumption that Logic, understood as a formal theory of valid inference, would suffice to do the work. The idea was that good argumentation is just argumentation which is "good" in its premises and inferences. And other types of argumentative flaws, like incorrectly changing the burden of proof, begging the question, using biased language, etc., which are rather answerable to the pragmatic dimension of argumentation as a communicative activity, did not receive a systematic treatment for centuries.

This is why the development of Argumentation Theory as a discipline is, surprisingly, quite recent. It is only since the second half of last century that authors like Perelman and Toulmin pointed to the need of developing normative models for natural language argumentation. From two very different perspectives – namely, logical and rhetorical, respectively – Toulmin and Perelman tried to provide a framework for the assessment of real, everyday argumentation, under the assumption that Formal Logic was, at its best, insufficient for it. Toulmin and Perelman shared a philosophical interest in argumentation as an instrument and expression of practical and theoretical rationality. They showed the scantiness of previous accounts and provided guidelines for the development of Argumentation Theory proper. Nowadays, their works still reveal themselves as fruitful and alive approaches in many ways.

However, since these seminar works, the field has experienced an enormous growth. From the late 70's, the study of argumentation has attracted the attention of scholars from Philosophy, Linguistics, Communication Studies, Law, Psychology, etc. Several journals (like *Argumentation*, *Informal Logic*, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, *Argumentation & Advocacy*, etc.), associations (like the International Society for the Study of Argumentation (ISSA), the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA), the Association for Informal Logic and Critical Thinking (AILACT), etc.) and conferences (like the fourth-annual ISSA Conference, the biennial OSSA Conference, AFA/SCA Alta Conference, etc.) have been established in order to join efforts to understand natural language argumentation and to develop models to interpret, analyze and evaluate it. The realm of Argumentation Studies has become a multi-disciplinary field, and this circumstance has mutually enhanced the variety of perspectives, also within Argumentation Theory itself.

Current proposals within Argumentation Theory have adopted a pragmatic perspective that has been displayed at two levels. The first one has been articulated through a conception of argumentation as a particular form of communication. In this sense, the interest in interpreting and analyzing real argumentative discourses and conversational exchanges would manifest most authors' concern with the pragmatic

intricacies of argumentation as a certain kind of communicative activity. This concern amounted to a shift in perspective from arguments as merely abstract objects with solely logical properties, to argumentation as an activity also having a dialectical and a rhetorical dimension. However, in many cases, this pragmatic approach also gave rise to a new conception of argumentative value, namely, a conception replacing criteria to decide on the justificatory power of arguments for criteria to decide on the value of acts of arguing as means to achieve certain goals, like persuading a universal audience (the New Rhetoric approach by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1958) or resolving a difference of opinion (the Pragma-dialectical Approach by van Eemeren and Grootendorst 1984). As a consequence, most contemporary argumentation theorists have assumed that good argumentation is argumentation able to achieve certain ends that, allegedly, would be characteristic of the practice of arguing.

In previous works, I have called this view "the instrumentalist conception of argumentative value" and I have shown that it faces severe difficulties. Instead, I have argued for a conception of good argumentation as argumentation able to justify its target claim.

In order to shape this intuition, I have followed two insightful ideas: on the one hand, Toulmin's defense of the view that the normativity of inference is a substantial matter rather than a formal one; and on the other, van Eemeren and Grootendorst's characterization of argumentation as a speech-act complex. Following these ideas, my main goal in *Giving Reasons* was to show that argumentative normativity, i.e., the articulation of the distinction between good and bad argumentation, should be cast in terms of argumentation's linguistic-pragmatic nature.

Any theory dealing with the normative conditions of argumentation in terms of its features as a certain type of linguistic practice may be said to belong to a *linguistic-pragmatic* approach to Argumentation Theory. In this respect, the particular theory of argumentation that I offer in *Giving Reasons* is just one of many possible ways of dealing with the normativity of argumentation from a linguistic-pragmatic perspective. Nevertheless, I use the label "linguistic-pragmatic approach" in order to contrast the theory I offer there with theories belonging to other general approaches such as the *logical* approach, the *dialectical* approach, the *rhetorical* approach or the *epistemic* approach to Argumentation Theory.

As I try to show, one of the main rewards of thinking of argumentation, first and foremost, as a particular type of linguistic practice – instead of thinking of argumentation as a logical product, as a dialectical procedure, as a rhetorical process or as an epistemological tool – is to facilitate the integration of argumentation's logical, dialectical, rhetorical and epistemic dimensions. Actually, I think that integration along these lines is a well-established desideratum within the field. As I see it, the fact that most current proposals are answerable to the label "logical," "dialectical", "rhetorical" or "epistemic" may be symptomatic of a certain theoretical uneasiness. This uneasiness becomes especially evident when we consider that, so far, we have lacked unitary treatment of two key aspects of argumentation, namely, its justificatory power and its persuasive power. Current approaches tend to characterize argumentation either as a justificatory device that can eventually be used for persuading – this is the case with

most theories that adopt logical or epistemic approaches – or as a persuasive device whose legitimacy conditions would provide a particular account of justification – as happens with the rhetorical approach and with some theories within the dialectical approach. A conception of argumentation as a speech-act complex is meant to be suitable for providing a unitary treatment of justification and reasoned persuasion, since it enables us to characterize argumentation as a justificatory device at its illocutionary level, whereas its paradigmatic persuasive power, i.e. the power of persuading by reasons, results from its ability to produce certain perlocutionary effects.

The linguistic-pragmatic theory developed in *Giving Reasons* is a proposal about argumentation evaluation comparable to other normative proposals within the field, such as Pragma-dialectics, Informal Logic, the New Rhetoric or some epistemic theories of argumentation. However, I have tried to explain why a linguistic-pragmatic theory along these lines is to be preferred. In particular, I have tried to show that, unlike its rivals – including Biro and Siegel's epistemological approach – this theory avoids instrumentalism in its account of what good argumentation is; and it is only by avoiding instrumentalism that a normative theory of argumentation can overcome the justification problem that normative theories, in general, are bound to face.

As part of the small community of argumentation theorists, I hope *Giving Reasons* turns out to be a well-oriented contribution to the advancement of the field. Besides, as a member of the Hispanic philosophical community, I wish it provided a spur to the growth of Argumentation Theory in Spain and Latin America. In these countries, despite the important work of pioneers such as Luis Vega, Raymundo Morado or Carlos Pereda, Argumentation Theory is just finding its way, and the number of financed research projects is still small. Nevertheless, the field is experiencing an increasing interest from young scholars and a growing presence in the programs of many degrees and masters in Philosophy and related areas. The fact that *THEORIA*, one of the most prestigious Spanish philosophical journals, has decided to devote this issue to Argumentation Theory is, I think, symptomatic and very encouraging indeed. I wish to thank the editors of *THEORIA* for the opportunity they have offered to my book and for their sensitiveness towards this emerging interdisciplinary research field. On the one hand, the possibility of having a public discussion of one's ideas is something very valuable for any author indeed. On the other, due to *THEORIA*'s significant impact in the philosophical Spanish-speaking community, the publication of this volume is good news for all those interested in Argumentation Studies in our Ibero-American world.

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