A Theory of Argumentation

Harald R. Wohlrapp, *The Concept of Argument: A Philosophical Foundation*, translated by Tim Personn in cooperation with Michael Weh, Dordrecht: Springer, 2014, lxii+443pp, $179.00.

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This monumental work is an English translation (by Tim Personn in cooperation with Michael Weh) of the German edition that was first published in 2008. The need for this book, as the author recounts, arose as a result of work undertaken with the Hamburg Group on Argumentation Theory (p. vi). The book is intended to be a contribution to contemporary argumentation theory. Wohlrapp's main goal in this book is to provide a philosophical foundation for a theory of argumentation, since he thinks that contemporary conceptions of argumentation fail to do justice to the importance of the practice of argumentation, and since he finds extant theories of argumentation, including pragmadialectics, neither sufficiently pragmatic nor sufficiently dialectical (p. lvii).

The book begins with an Introduction that provides a useful survey of argumentation theory, from its Aristotelian foundations to contemporary approaches, such as the Informal Logic approach, which is dominant mostly in North America, and the pragmadialectical approach of the Amsterdam School, thereby setting the stage for Wohlrapp's own approach to argumentation. In Chapters 1 and 2, Wohlrapp articulates his pragmatic notions of knowledge and research, which comprise the factual dimension of the practice of argumentation. There is another dimension to the practice of argumentation, according to Wohlrapp, which is personal. This personal or subjective dimension is dealt with in Chapter 3. This subjective dimension, however, does not mean that the goal of argumentation is persuasion or gaining consent. Wohlrapp is careful to distinguish between argumentative quality and persuasive force.

In Chapter 4, Wohlrapp describes what he takes to be the basic operations of the practice of argumentation, namely, asserting, justifying, and criticizing. In Chapter 5, Wohlrapp introduces another basic structure of argumentation, namely, "frame," which refers to "the boundary of the area that has been drawn around the state of affairs in the process of grasping it" (p. 177). In other words, it is the context in which whatever is grasped is grasped as something (cf. Wittgenstein on "seeing-as"). As far as the practice of argumentation is concerned, this means that a thesis may be valid in one frame (or context) but invalid in another frame (or context). A major part of Chapter 5 is devoted to a discussion of the trial of King Louis XVI, which is an example that is supposed to illustrate the concepts of frame and frame structures. Throughout the book, Wohlrapp draws on a variety of examples from various fields to illustrate his theory of argumentation, including Christopher Columbus' expedition to the new world, the phlogiston theory of combustion, the French revolution, and stem cell research.

What makes Wohlrapp's approach to argumentation pragmatic is his notion of orientation. For Wohlrapp, the aim of argumentation is not truth, as the end product of a premise-conclusion sequence, or resolution, as it is on the pragmadialectical view, but rather the establishment of an orientation. Orientation is the function of theories, concepts, and propositions. All of these enable their users to orient themselves in the world. To argue, then, is to evaluate theories or theses (Wohlrapp appears to be using the terms 'theory' and 'thesis' interchangeably) in terms of their "practical orientation value." This notion of the orientation value of theories or theses is at the core of Wohlrapp's theory of argumentation. For Wohlrapp, a valid thesis is a new orientation.

While chapters 1 through 5 introduce the theoretical concepts underlying Wohlrapp's theory of argumentation, the remaining five chapters provide further details and illustrations of these theoretical concepts. In Chapter 6, Wohlrapp discusses dialogical moves and what he takes to be the four dimensions of the practice of argumentation: the material, subjective, procedural, and structural dimensions. This chapter seems like a natural place for an extensive discussion of argument schemes, which is a key concept of contemporary argumentation theory. Instead, Wohlrapp critically engages with Trudy Govier's treatment of conductive arguments (pros and cons). A peculiar feature of this discussion is that Wohlrapp rejects Govier's approach to weighing pros and cons on the grounds that "the term 'weighing' adds nothing but an objectivist label" to "a purely subjective event" (p. 265), but then claims that "the first pro argument [namely, "Responsible adults should be allowed to choose whether they want to live or die" (p. 254)] is actually the single most *important* argument in this debate [about the legalization of euthanasia]" (p. 255; emphasis added), and proceeds to declare victory after "the most *important* pro argument has been neutralized" (p. 264; emphasis added). This is peculiar because Wohlrapp himself says that the "act of 'deeming important' is a purely subjective event that may have been affected in obscure ways by the fact that argumentation has taken place" (p. 265).

In Chapter 7, Wohlrapp expands on what he takes to be his original contribution to argumentation theory, namely, his notion of argumentative validity. In the Preface to the English Edition, Wohlrapp anticipates that some theorists would find his use of the term 'valid', as applied to theories or theses rather than arguments or argument schemes, problematic (p. vi). Wohlrapp distinguishes between "epistemic validity," where a thesis has already been shown to provide orientation within a given praxis, and "thetic validity," where a thesis is claimed to be suitable as a new orientation. Argumentative or thetic validity, for Wohlrapp, "is the quality of a conclusion, acknowledged in the forum, of conveying and/or consolidating, as the result of an objection-free justification, insights into a domain in question and thus suitable as a new orientation for action in this domain" (p. 270).

I will briefly point out what I take to be two potential problems with this definition of argumentative validity. First, the notion of *insight* is explained in terms of intuition. Wohlrapp claims that if a thesis is counterintuitive, "not even the most beautiful justification will make me use it as an orientation for my actions" (p. 272). However, the history of thought, particularly scientific thought, suggests that theses that initially appeared to be counterintuitive later proved to have orientation value. For example,

Newton's gravity, which has orientation value in the domain of space exploration, was considered an occult quality by many of his contemporaries (e.g., Leibniz). Second, Wohlrapp says that a thesis is valid only if the justification for it is free from objections, but then he acknowledges that "objections are always possible" (p. 280) and that "the absence of open objections is a temporary state" (p. 281). The problem is that Wohlrapp does not tell the reader what exactly counts as an *open* objection: any possible objection, any conceivable objection, any objection an opponent actually thought of, or any objection the audience would like to see addressed? (For more on this point, see Mizrahi 2014). By "open objection," Wohlrapp probably does not mean "any possible objection," for then no thesis would be valid, given that "objections are always possible" (p. 280). But it is not clear what Wohlrapp means by "open objection," especially when he says, without any qualification, that "If there are objections, [a thesis] is 'invalid'" (p. 284).

In Chapter 9, Wohlrapp considers questions about argumentation theory itself, such as whether argumentation theory is descriptive or prescriptive, as well as the differences he sees between natural argumentation, scientific argumentation, and philosophical argumentation. The final chapter, Chapter 10, is devoted to the role of reason in argumentation. Many readers, especially those with a background in philosophy or logic, will probably recognize what Wohlrapp calls "rational argumentation," i.e., "Whether [theses] follow logically from premises" (p. 394), as *validity*.

Like his use of 'validity', Wohlrapp's use of the terms 'argument' and 'argumentation' in the book is likely to be a source of some confusion for readers. The translators have tried to preempt such confusion by reserving the term 'argumentation' to the practice and the term 'argument' to what Wohlrapp refers to as the "PPC [premise-premise-conclusion] schema" (p. 133). For Wohlrapp, however, an argument is any part of argumentation. In fact, Wohlrapp even says that he uses "'argument' as a short form for 'argumentation'" (p. 134). On the other hand, readers will also find in the book locutions like "arguments or argumentations" (p. 170). Since Wohlrapp's theory is supposed to be a descriptive theory of the practice of argumentation, rather than a prescriptive theory about how to argue correctly (p. 127), it would have been helpful to keep these two terms, namely, 'argument' and 'argumentation', clearly separate, especially in light of the fact that the book is primarily about the latter, not the former.

Despite the aforementioned problems and sources of potential confusion, I think that philosophers and argumentation theorists alike will find plenty to engage with in this voluminous book. For Wohlrapp, "the theorization of argumentation is not just a formal task [...] but an issue addressing the great philosophical questions," since "argumentative justification presupposes freedom" (p. 152). Insofar as the book is an attempt to sketch a theory of argumentation that is informed by philosophy to a great extent—even if it is not the most recent literature on topics of philosophical interest and Wohlrapp's treatment of some philosophical works is rather cursory at times—it is a welcome addition to the literature on argumentation theory.

References

Mizrahi, M. 2014. "The Problem of Unconceived Objections," *Argumentation* 28 (4): 425-436.