

Book Review

Charles Willard's *A Theory of Argumentation*

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Willard, Charles. (1989). *A Theory of Argumentation*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. Pp. x + 324. ISBN 0-8173-0427-4. US \$38.95

Informal logicians who believe that, by rejecting the strictures of formalism, they study real arguments in situated contexts, are in for a rude shock upon reading this book. Willard believes that formal and informal logic are essentially alike in their reliance on texts—serial predications, as he calls them. In his view, texts are not arguments but only their residue. Argument is not a species of logic at all, but of communication. To recognize that fact is to liberate argumentation studies from the burdens of applied formalism and normative rationality, and to invite research and theory around the question of what people actually do when they argue.

A Theory of Argumentation is the fullest exposition of a point of view Willard has maintained consistently since the late 1970s. His focus has not been on the claims made by arguers but on the kind of interaction in which people maintain what they construe to be incompatible propositions. Process rather than text is his primary interest. This book is particularly a sequel to *Argumentation and the Social Grounds of Knowledge* (1983), which explored the significance of argument fields but which assumed the value of defining argument as interaction and of an empirical rather than normative perspective. Willard's central purpose in the most

recent book is to substantiate these assumptions, redeeming the debt he incurred in the earlier volume. He does that, and more.

The book is divided into three major sections. The first develops the interactional perspective on argument, drawing on symbolic interactionism, constructivism, and message design logics. Arguments are described as emergent—they take place over time, as arguers act "in concert, collaboratively creating, shaping, and changing events by interpreting their options and strategically adapting to the expectations and actions of others" (p. 67). This point of view is related to speech act theory and to concepts of the rhetorical situation, and is contrasted with a view of argument as a complex of claims and reasons. Willard ventures an explanation of how controversies arise and dissipate.

Willard's answer, then, to the question of what people do when they argue is that they create and validate knowledge. He believes that the process of arguing, above and beyond any texts that may be produced, has epistemic consequences. But he is careful to avoid an inflated version of this claim such that the content of any utterance counts as knowledge. Rather, he states: "In ceding one's private prerogatives to the public court, one becomes open to social pressures, the burden of rejoinder and *tu quoque* possibility, which make for critical weighing of one's claims" (p. 130). Finally, in this section, Willard explores the relationships between argument and authority. Taken as a whole, the first

section of the book is a thorough and careful articulation of Willard's interactional perspective. The maturation of fifteen years' research, it both synthesizes and fills gaps in his earlier work.

In the second section of the book Willard takes aim squarely at the normative assumptions that underlie traditional argumentation studies—that argument is an instrument of rationality and freedom. These assumptions, Willard believes, reflect exaggerated pedagogical justifications for teaching argumentation skills and a highly individualistic Enlightenment notion of the nature of rationality and freedom which has little basis in fact. Willard "so redefines their conceptual horizons as to sever both constructs from their historical roots" (p. 143). He regards rationality as a kind of "playing by the rules" which is a sign of arguers' good will. This approach dovetails with the earlier book in which "the rules" are shown to rest in the shared construct systems that define argument fields. This is fundamentally an anthropological rather than a normative or pedagogical standard of rationality. In cases of interfield disputes Willard believes that rationality rests in the nonclosure principle: a field should not close off challenges to its basic premises.

The relationship between argumentation and freedom, Willard believes, is paradoxical. Rather than simply being conjoined with freedom, "it sells discipline packaged in a rhetoric of freedom" (p. 203). Willard explores how a recognition of this paradox avoids placing all the responsibility for critique on the individual and also avoids reliance on such counterfactual constructs as the universal audience or the ideal speech situation.

The final section of the book is devoted to the implications of the interactional view for argumentation as a discipline. Disciplines develop as communities, rather than as rigorous systems of thought; they accommodate discordant theories. Willard explores how the interactional and logical

perspectives on argument can relate. The chapter on fallacies should be of special interest to informal logicians, since Willard maintains that they have stripped the concept of fallacy of any meaning by using it indiscriminately to refer to any kind of failing in argument. Doing so includes under the rubric of "fallacies" argument practices which, in context, do not warrant condemnation. The last chapters explore the sphere of relevance of the argumentation discipline and the concepts of position and situation.

Willard believes that "a theory of argument can be the empirical basis of a philosophy of the public sphere" (p. 10). Behind his larger project is the desire to understand how communities develop knowledge, especially the knowledge that permits adjudication of disputes which cross field boundaries. Both this book and its predecessor rely on a concept of the public sphere which, one hopes, will be fleshed out in Willard's next book.

This book is difficult reading, partly because Willard's writing style makes his ideas needlessly inaccessible and partly because he often refers to entire systems of thought in an overly shorthanded way. The often informal, conversational writing style may seem discordant but is especially appropriate for a work emphasizing that arguments are interactions; Willard is explicitly engaging the reader in a conversation. A more serious difficulty is Willard's straw-person argument against studies of argument products. Simply put, it is not necessary to denigrate textual studies in order to emphasize the importance of studying interactions. Willard recognizes as much in the final section of the book, when he describes a discipline's ability to accommodate competing theories. This ecumenical spirit should have informed the earlier chapters as well. It would remove a false issue and deny Willard's critics a cheap shot.

A Theory of Argumentation appears as a volume in the *Studies in Rhetoric and*

Communication published by the University of Alabama Press. (Although I am one of the General Editors of this series, I did not review Willard's manuscript or participate in its acceptance by the Press.) A general aim of the series is to illuminate the complex nature of specific communication practices. Willard's volume achieves this aim admirably. It merits the attention of serious students of informal logic. They will not agree with all of its contents but it should stimulate them—and others—to reexamine their own assumptions. Beyond

that, scholars should undertake the research on argument practices which ultimately will determine whether Willard's interactional perspective has the utility and explanatory power that will justify his desire to reconstruct the discipline from the ground up.

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