

# Argumentation and Reasoned Action

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# How to Be a Better Functionalist. Commentary on Mohammed's Not Just Rational, But Also Reasonable

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

"Argument has no function" (Goodwin, 2007) remains a thesis I stand ready to defend. My aim in nailing it to argumentation theory's front door was in part to encourage increased sophistication in functionalist theorizing. It is easy to say that "an argument is good if it fulfils its purpose," but a cloud of vagueness hovers around that little 'it.' In the paper I here respond to, and in other work within the same project (2015), Dima Mohammed makes significant advances in dispelling that vagueness, through (a) thinking systematically about the kinds of telos-stuff that can be associated with kinds of argument-stuff, and (b) thinking through how to integrate the normative standards that can be derived from them.

## 2. SORTING THINGS OUT

Function theorists have not infrequently been guilty of loose talk about the aim, goal, end, purpose, function, etc. (in general, "telos-stuff") of argumentation, arguments, arguing, various kinds of argumentative transactions, etc. (in general, "argument-stuff"). Mohammed does the field the great service of clearing the way towards much greater precision. I'm not sure that all her terminology will catch on, since the ordinary meanings of words like "use" and "purpose" will likely win out. Nevertheless, the chart she has developed deserves our attention. She identifies two distinct dimensions to any function claim. First, telos-stuff must be distinguished as intrinsic or extrinsic. Second, argument-stuff must be identified, as either the individual act of arguing or as the collective argumentative interaction.

Every function theorist should have to assign their claims to the boxes Mohammed has devised. In the meantime, while we wait for their

responses, the chart enables us to start asking useful questions. For example:

(a) Regarding intrinsic v. extrinsic. Mohammed identifies the goals of Waltonian dialogue types as *extrinsic* purposes of argumentative interactions. That's interesting; my impression is that Walton puts forward these goals as *intrinsic* functions. As Mohammed notes (n. 2), ambiguity on this point is one of the theory's weaknesses. Our differing interpretations of Waltonian theory raise a more interesting question, however. That is: *how do we tell whether some particular telos-stuff (aim, end, purpose, and so on) is indeed intrinsic, i.e. a function?*—as opposed to being merely extrinsic, one among likely many uses or goals? I raised this question in §3 of my original article; Mohammed's chart makes the question all the more pressing.

Mohammed's own discussion suggests that a piece of telos-stuff is intrinsic if it is a "goal [...] of argumentation in and of itself and in any context" (2015). This appears in part to be an empirical test: we need to examine argument-stuff as it appears across a variety of contexts; if we observe telos-stuff T throughout, then we have evidence that that T is indeed *intrinsic*. The problem is that when we look at argument-stuff, we observe lots of variety and little uniformity. I suspect that for any asserted T, an example of actual usage can be found that doesn't contain it. The paper Innocenti and I have submitted to this volume puts forward one such example against a large range of asserted functions. Of course, any example of argument-stuff can probably be *reconstructed* to exhibit T. But what drives the reconstruction is a foundational assumption that that T is indeed intrinsic. That reasoning is circular.

Mohammed's chart shows that a wide range of telos-stuff has been asserted to be intrinsic. Figuring out how to justify any of these assertions is a key task facing function theorists.

(b) Regarding individual v. collective. Being precise about what argument-stuff is being talked about is the single most important thing we could do to reduce confusion and talk-at-cross-purposes among argumentation theorists. I admit I might quibble with Mohammed's two categories; in particular, the "act of arguing" seems to me to be better described as the "activity of making arguments." However, the general thrust of Mohammed's proposal is invaluable. Each of us should take responsibility for being explicit at all times about exactly what aspect of argument-stuff we are discussing.

Mohammed's chart does have one conspicuously odd feature, however. In addition to separate categories for argument-acts and argumentative-interactions, the "intrinsic" side has a third column, the "constitutive aim of argumentation." This strikes me as problematic. The word "argumentation" in English is rare in ordinary usage. To me, it

conveys nothing more than a vague sense of what I've here been calling "argument-stuff": anything relevant to the making and exchanging of arguments, including the arguments themselves, activities and inter-activities involving arguments, the arguers (their virtues, traits, cognitive processing and planning), institutions hosting argumentative activities and inter-activities, language registers associated with arguments, and on and on. The only place I'm really comfortable using the term "argumentation" is in referring to argumentation theory or studies, which is a theory about or study of any or all of this argument-stuff. In these two usages, the vagueness is strategic: it helps bring all of us to the same wonderful conference. Everywhere else, it is a disaster.<sup>1</sup>

The vagueness of the column about the "constituent aim of argumentation" stands in contrast with the determinacy of the individual and collective activities Mohammed distinguishes. Some theorists undoubtedly embrace that vagueness. I feel relatively confident, for example, that Ralph Johnson really did mean to include all argument-stuff in his claim that the practice of argumentation had the constituent aim of making rationality manifest in the world. I am less confident, however, about what it would mean for all this argument-stuff to be aimed at justification. This raises the question: Function theorists who assert what Mohammed has designated a "constituent aim of argumentation," *what do you mean?*

### 3. PUTTING THINGS BACK TOGETHER

Argument-stuff in important contexts is complex. Mohammed shares the interest traditional to rhetorical approaches in "public political arguments," and recognizes that they inevitably "arise in response to competing demands." Citizens' responsibilities have a "multi-dimensional nature," she points out; citizens also have multiple needs, desires and interests, and are acting within civic institutions that are themselves subject to multiple expectations. Any halfway respectable function theory is going to have to respect this complexity while at the same time producing *integrated* or "synchronous" accounts of civic argument-stuff.

Mohammed is confident that the normative standards derived from the extrinsic purposes of argumentative interactions can be

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that the word "argumentation" (or similar) in other languages has a more determinate meaning—often, an extended sequence of arguments on one topic, something like what in English would be called a "case." It does not look to me, however, like theorists who speak of the "function of argumentation" are using the word in that sense; I await correction.

reconciled with those derived from their intrinsic function. For example, an argument that makes a good contribution to critically testing a standpoint should, by that very goodness, also make a good contribution to making a decision or holding an official accountable. Mohammed considers that the more serious challenge is integrating the normative standards derived from different and sometimes competing extrinsic purposes—e.g., somehow fitting together the potentially dilemmatic purposes of decision-making and accountability.

Mohammed proposes calling the intrinsic/functional goodness of arguments "rationality," and the extrinsic/purposive goodness of arguments, "reasonableness." Will this proposed vocabulary stick? It has some plausibility: a charge of irrationality seems harsher than a charge of being unreasonable—more connected with the person's basic orientation to reason, more "intrinsic." On the other hand, there also seem to be some drawbacks to the proposal. For one thing, rationality seems to be a binary: an argument is rational or it isn't. But as Ralph Johnson long ago pointed out, arguments are assessed on a scale: they are generally more or less good. Reasonableness does allow degrees, so it doesn't share that problem. But to say a person's conduct is reasonable is, as Rawls points out, to make a specific kind of assessment: it's saying it is making a *fair* contribution to common life. In functionalist theorizing, an argument is good if it makes a contribution to achieving an extrinsic purpose; *fairness* would seem to be an additional requirement. And it's not clear that fairness even makes sense for all extrinsic purposes; what, for example, would be a fair contribution to an eristic dialogue? Whether or not the proposed terms stick, however, at least Mohammed's analysis has made clear the different yet integrated roles different telos-stuff can play in argument assessment.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I remain opposed to functional approaches to constructing normative theories of argument-stuff; I think there are better ways forward. With that understood, I recommend: function theorists need to respond to the challenges Mohammed advances in this project, continuing to develop function theories that are more precise, better defended, and more responsive to real-world complexities.

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