SOME REFLECTIONS ON ARGUMENTATION (1)

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When we wish to control the action or belief of another person, but either lack an effective means of control or have an effective means that we nevertheless do not wish to use, we argue with the person. Argument is therefore not effective control. To argue with another is to regard him as beyond the scope of effective control, and hence is precisely to *place* him beyond the scope of effective control, provided he is capable of listening to argument and knows how it is that we are regarding him. We give him the option of resisting us, and as soon as we withdraw that option we are no longer arguing. To argue is inherently to risk failure, just as to play a game is inherently to risk defeat. An argument that we are guaranteed to win is no more a real argument than a game that we are guaranteed to win is a real game. An adept arguer can feel certain that he is going to win an argument against someone, but if the certainty is an objective consequence of the very procedure he is using, then this procedure is not an argument.

I do not mean to suggest that the non-argumentative control of action or belief is necessarily infallible. We can command the obedient child but not the disobedient one. But our failure to command the disobedient child is not the result of our regarding him as beyond the scope of effective control. His resistance does not arise from our having given him the option of resisting. It arises from a technical shortcoming on our part. Perhaps with further research we can find the procedure that will guarantee the child's compliance. If we cannot, we may even have to turn to argument.

Argument is a pervasive feature of human life. This is not to deny that there are occasions on which man can appropriately respond to

(1) The view of argumentation to be presented in this paper is in many respects indebted to that of Professor Perelman; but there are important differences in emphasis which make it difficult to compare the two views. For example, it will be seen that I emphasize the element of risk in argumentation. Perelman does not. But I do not know whether this difference amounts to a disagreement between us. In this paper I have thought it best just to present my own view with its peculiar emphases, and to let the reader decide to what extent Perelman and I disagree.

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hypnotism, subliminal stimulation, drugs, brainwashing, and physical force, and occasions on which he can appropriately control the action and belief of his fellow-man by means other than argument. But only the sort of person whom we would characterize as inhuman would take pleasure in a life spent controlling the behavior of others through non-argumentative means, and only an idiot would willingly obey him. We do not even exercise power over people when we merely manipulate them — except in the extended sense in which we can be said to exercise power over robots. We normally say that we have power over people only when we are treating them as people.

One typical way of exercising power is by means of threats. A threat is a form of argument because whoever uses a threat in the attempt to obtain action of a specific sort runs the risk that the other will choose to accept the threatened reprisal rather than to act as desired. It is only a person who can respond to a threat, and when we threaten a person we at least treat him as a person. We treat him as capable of envisaging the consequences of noncompliance. Perhaps some animals are capable of responding to threats. This would imply the capacity to comprehend a conditional proposition. To the extent that we actually can deal with animals in this way, we are certainly treating them as persons.

A threat is, however, a degenerate form of argument. It is degenerate because its appeal to the person is only momentary. Once the threat has been uttered, there remains only to carry it out, or, if it has succeeded in bringing about the desired action, to break off contact. The one who is threatened has no opportunity to treat the propounder of the threat as a person at all unless he can utter a counter-threat.

Commands are sometimes of a mixed status. They are usually efforts to control behavior and sometimes belief by non-argumentative means. Sometimes a command carries an additional implicit threat, however, and so is partly an argument. This is much more likely to be the case when the command is addressed to a human than when it is addressed to an animal. The automatic, unquestioning compliance that we expect of an animal is the response to a more purely non-argumentative technique than any we would ordinarily use when dealing with a human being.

I have said that the arguer takes a risk. But he is not the only one who does. The person to whom the argument is addressed may or may not elect to run the risk of having his behavior or beliefs altered by the argument. By closing his mind to the argument, he can avoid the risk altogether. Then anyone wishing to control his

behavior or beliefs must resort to non-argumentative modes of control if he is to have control at all. There are issues to which all of us must, to some extent close our minds. We cannot argue everything out, or always be available to arguments addressed to us. But we cannot always have closed minds, either, for the person with the totally closed mind cuts himself off from the human race. Such a person is inhuman, although he is not beastly, for we do not accuse animals of having closed minds, any more than we say that their minds are open.

On the other hand, the person willing to run the risks involved in listening to the arguments of others is open-minded and, to that extent, human. The differences between man and the animals are typified in man's open-mindedness. Open-mindedness is not merely an added means of accomplishing what the animal can to some extent already accomplish by other means. It is an entirely new possiblility. In making himself available to arguments, man transcends the horizons of his own perceptions, emotions, and instincts. Within these horizons the risks of argument do not occur; there is no arguing over what I immediately see, feel, or do. No arguer can take away from me what I immediately experience or feel, because this bears no relation to the conclusions for which he is arguing. These conclusions consist of argued beliefs, evaluations, and lines of conduct, and they can come into conflict with my views only to the extent that these are themselves argued rather than immediate. I do not mean to suggest that the solitary individual, out of the range of other arguers, could not rise above immediacy. As I shall shortly point out, in deliberating about the meaning of his experience, and thus transcending it, he is arguing with himself.

It is only to the open-minded person who has transcended the horizons of immediate experience by taking the risks implicit in argument that knowledge and morality are possible. The animal perceives and expects, but has no knowledge, because it cannot expose to argument its interpretation of what it perceives or its reasons for expecting. The animal cannot behave morally because it cannot argue for its conduct. The animal, in short, has no world. The world is revealed only to an open-minded person.

I have spoken of open-mindedness as involving a risk. The risk that the open-minded person takes is that of having his belief or conduct altered. This risk, of course, is strictly correlative to the risk the arguer takes that his arguments might fail. The question arises whether it is necessary to characterize the possibility that the arguer might fail or that his interlocutor might fail or that his in-

terlocutor might be persuaded, as a *risk*. Is it not sufficient to characterize it as a *possibility*, and say simply that the open-minded person faces the *possiblility* that argument might alter his belief or conduct ?

The difference between a risk that a person takes and a possibility that he faces is that he has an interest or stake in the outcome of activity in which he is taking a risk, whereas he is unconcerned with the outcome of activity that he merely supposes to present various possibilities. To say that it is merely a *possibility* that argument might alter his belief or conduct is to suggest that the person plays a wholly passive role in the transaction — that «he couldn't care less.» It is to suggest that he has resigned from the control of his own action and belief — that he has transferred this control to the hands of the arguer, saying, in effect, «You must decide for me». But what such a person has done is simply to withdraw from the argument. And having withdrawn from it, he brings the argument itself into question. For it now appears that the arguer possesses direct control over the belief and conduct of the person with whom he is arguing. The former takes no more of a risk than the latter. Thus the argument itself collapses into a non-argumentative type of control.

Thus genuine argument can occur only where the respondent is neither impassive to the utterances of the arguer nor passive to them. It can occur only when the respondent is himself interested in the outcome of the argument; that is, where the respondent takes a risk, and thus forces a risk upon the arguer. What, then, is the interest that the respondent has in the argument ? We might be tempted to say that it is an interest in maintaining his own belief and conduct. To some extent such an interest does account for the risk a person takes in allowing himself to become involved in an argument. He takes the palpable chance that his belief or conduct may be exposed as questionable and overthrown. But this cannot be the whole story. For one thing, it is not clear why anyone should feel any resistance to the abandonment of his position once its defects have been revealed. Why does he not cheerfully say «good riddance» and adopt the recommendations of the arguer ? For another thing, there can be risk in arguments over issues concerning which a person has no prior opinion. In this situation there is no present belief or conduct to be maintained. What, then is the risk ? It is that the respondent, in his belief or conduct, may have to take account of something that he has not had to take account of before. What he would like to maintain is the relative simplicity of his own position. And in general the risk a person takes by listening to an argument is that he may have to change himself. It is the self, not any specific belief or mode

of conduct, that the arguer's respondent wishes to maintain. But his interest in maintaining it cannot be absolute, for if it were he would be presenting a closed mind to the argument.

The open-minded person, then, is one in whom there is tension. On the one hand, he wishes to maintain himself. On the other hand, he must expose himself to the risk of change implicit in argument. Such tension is necessary to any human being who wishes to transcend the horizons of his immediate experience and inhabit a world.

The person who listens to argument is not the only one to take a risk. I have already suggested what risk is taken by the arguer. The arguer risks failure to control the belief or conduct of another. This risk, too implies a tension. The arguer wants control over another but is willing to see that control limited by the negative responses of the other. That this is a genuine and precarious tension becomes obvious when we consider each of its terms to the exclusion of the other. An arguer who wants control pure and simple does not argue; he controls by non-argumentative means and avoids risk. An arguer purely and simply willing to be limited by the responses of the other does not argue, either; in his subservient passivity he abdicates from argument. To argue, a person must maintain the tension between control and what limits control. This tension may be characterized as tolerance, intellectual generosity, or respect. It is isomorphic with the tension I have already characterized as open-mindedness, the terms of which are self-maintenance and change. The tolerant person must find the limits to control in the act of controlling, and he must control in terms of these limits. The open-minded person must maintain himself through change, and change by maintaining himself.

The give-and-take of argument sheds light on the function of logic and the meaning of validity. When sophistries and fallacies are used by one disputant or all, the discussion soon degenerates into a form in which open-mindedness and tolerance are no longer possible. The fallacious argument is disrespectful; it does not treat its listeners as people but either deliberately or unwittingly aims to extort their assent. Logic is the discipline that prevents the discussion from degenerating. The valid argument is the one that maintains the possibility of arguing.

I have written so far as if one could make a final distinction between the arguer and his respondent. Of course one cannot. For the respondent can also be an arguer. When this is the case, the negative responses that limit the control of the arguer will themselves be arguments, and he will submit to this limit in the role of a respondent. In other words, open-mindedness will have become a condition for

tolerance. In the dialogue between two or more arguers tolerance and open-mindednss simply become different ways of characterizing the same basic willingness to maintain the argument and follow it wherever it leads.

The arguer and the respondent may also be the same person, as in deliberation. In this situation it is the same person who seeks control and submits to control, who imposes limits and accepts limits. The tension that must be maintained here is extremely precarious, and readily collapses into habit, impulse, or panic. Deliberation eventuating in a change or reaffirmation of belief is probably capable of existing in a purer form than is deliberation eventuating in conduct because our habits and impulses constitute unargued lures to possible action in a way in which they do not necessarily constitute lures to possible belief. What I am constitutionally capable of doing will cast a stronger spell over my arguments to action than it will over my arguments to belief.

A common view of argument is that it is a transaction that has no essential bearing on the characters of those who engage in it. The arguer attempts to persuade the listener. If he succeeds, well and good; if he fails, he may either resort to non-argumentative techniques or else give up the effort. But the argument is in no way definitive of either the arguer or the listener. It is simply a kind of communication among minds that already exist and already inhabit the world — a device that they may or may not choose to employ. And one can always choose argument without simultaneously choosing himself.

My own position is that argument is in fact essential to those who engage in it — a person who chooses argument does in fact choose himself. For the tension between conservation and change which is felt by the interlocutors is precisely what enables them to inhabit the world. Immediate experience makes no claims and raises no questions; it is transparent. It is only when action and belief become subject to argument that an opacity is introduced into experience — the opacity which is the self. There is no self for immediate experience. There is a self only when there is risk. I do not want to claim that argument provides the *only* sort of relevant risk. But when people argue, they take risks that raise them above the level of immediate experience and put them on the map. And unless they take risks of one kind or another they are not people. So argument does seem to me to be constitutive of those who participate in it.

Non-argumentative forms of control do not establish the self. Instead, they bipass it. They proceed on the assumption that the self

is not present to interfere with their effective administration. The command, the subliminal suggestion, the hypnotic pass, avoid the risk of dealing with the self. The cajoler, the advertiser, and the hypnotist not only operate on the basis that «nobody is at home» in the body of the interlocutor, but are not even «at home» themselves. One who wheedles instead of arguing does not himself quite deserve to be treated as a person, and neither does one who secures the assent of another when the latter has his guard down or is looking the other way. When a man is given to using non-argumentative means of control we have no compunctions about using non-argumentative means against *him,* on the grounds that he has not shown himself to be a person.

Shall we say, then, that argumentation is a device for avoiding the need to resort to violence ? That when we assume that another is «at home» and argue with him, our conduct is a *substitute* for non-argumentative forms of control including the use of force ? This is a common account of argument. According to it, men argue only by virtue of a prior agreement, either explicit or implicit, to substitute the conference table for the battlefield. But this fragile agreement may collapse at any time, and when it does, the first man to return to the battlefield will have the advantage. This is a cynical view of human nature, since it regards man's capacity for argument as no more than the product of a transient enlightenment — an unstable victory over the irrational forces that define him — and it regards argument itself as no more than an expedient. If argument is in fact a mere expedient to avoid violence, then we ought to consider as most successful that argument which has the greatest soporific effect. More fundamentally, this view is in direct contradiction to the history of human hostility. Throughout recorded time, men have always based their conflicts upon arguments. Every war has been preceded by the search for an excuse for fighting. To find examples of violence not based upon argument we must look to the annals of psychopathology. This shows that normal human violence already presupposes argument. Indeed, if the capacity to argue is not present from the outset, how is it possible to reach any agreement, whether explicit or implicit, to suspend hostilities in favor of argument ?

A similar common account of argument hardly does justice to the human need for rhetoric, advertising, and propaganda. It presents rhetorical technique as mere poses or postures that can be taken by the arguer. For every rhetorical posture, there is another that can be used to counteract it, so that human controversy appear as sequences of meaningless gestures. They are meaningless because the arguer

himself can stand altogether outside them. As devices at his command, they express no feature of his ego. The arguer's ego can remain inscrutable throughout his argumentation, according to this traditional view of the role of argument in human life. It is only necessary for the arguer to *appear* to be committed to his own argument. Indeed, only a fool would really be committed to his own arguments, because for every argument there is in fact an equally effective counter-argument. This, too, is a cynical interpretation of human nature.

My own interpretation does not require me to deny that for every argument there is an equally effective counter-argument. It merely derives a new conclusion from this premise. Instead of concluding that no one should be so foolish as to become committed to his own argument, I conclude that argument is a defining feature of the human situation. A being not capable of arguing or of listening to argument would simply not be human. Such a being would, as we have seen, lack a self. Any reflective arguer knows, of course, that all of his arguments can be met by counter-arguments. But to condemn all argument on the basis of this reflection is completely to miss the point of argument. The point of argument is not to provide effective control over others, as might be the case if there were some arguments that could not be met by counter-arguments. It is rather to introduce the arguer into a situation of risk in which open-mindedness and tolerance are possible. This is the human milieu which the arguer supports through his fervent commitment to his own arguments. If he were not committed, his arguments could have no more than a strategic function, and the milieu would collapse into a game in which open-mindedness and tolerance would no longer be possibilities.

An arguer can both be fervently committed to his arguments and know that all of them can be met by counter-arguments. This is possible because the reflection with regard to the counter-arguments represents a momentary disengagement from the milieu in which the arguer lives. Similarily, a thinker can disengage himself from manners and mores and pronounce that manners and mores are all equally arbitrary. This pronouncement would have a point if it had ever been claimed that they were *not* equally arbitrary. But in the absence of this claim, it misses the point that a human milieu is sustained by manners and mores in much the same way as it is sustained by argument.

I have just been considering how according to a common view the existence of a counter-argument for evey argument is evidence of the

futility of argument. Sometimes it is the alleged datum of futility that makes those who share this view feel that for every argument there must be a counter-argument. The history of philosophy is an alleged datum of this kind: because no philosopher has ever been known to have secured general agreement to his position by means of arguments, it follows that for every philosophical argument there is a counter-argument. Now if general agreement were in fact a desideratum or alleged achievement of the philosophical enterprise, there would be some point in being concerned with the possibility of a philosophical argument admitting no counter-argument. The layman attributes this goal to philosophy, and there are some philosophers who join him in doing so. But most philosophers are not interested in securing general agreement to their views. To them the observation that general assent has never been attained would simply seem to miss the point of the philosophical enterprise. To point of it is not to get everyone to agree but to argue for conclusions to which general agreement would be irrelevant. What could such conclusions be? Evidently they cannot be concerned with facts. In a broad sense they are indeed concerned with values. A philosophical argument may deal with such values as knowledge and morality. There are values because they enable man to transcend the horizons of immediate experience and hence to inhabit a world. Other philosophical arguments deal with other ways of moving beyond the immediate. If it is argument *sans phrase* in the first place that opens the world to us, philosophical argument deals with the fruits of argument *sans phrase*. Argument *sans phrase* may well aim to secure general agreement. It can do this because general agreement is one of the possibilities of the world it opens up. We can escape from immediate experience into general agreement just as we can escape from it into knowledge or morality. But philosophical argument is not an escape from immediate experience. It is only an attempt to expand and consolidate the world into which the escape has been made. Thus it may examine the concept of general agreement as well as those of knowledge, morality, and so on. But general agreement with regard to the results of the expansion and consolidation achieved by philosophy would be beside the point.

What I am trying to say can be put more positively. I have said that argument reveals the self by confronting it with risk. Philosophy makes clear the structure of the risks faced by a person who argues or listens to argument. It articulates a world of people and of things. It tells the self who it is and where it stands. Thus philosophy may be said to serve the emerging self by contributing to its morale. Philo-

sophical arguments, then, have a morale function rather than an information function. If we expect general agreement regarding their conclusions, we simply do not understand them correctly. Philosophical argumentation will continue with unabated force as long as there are selves confronted with a world in which they must take a stance.

My conclusion is that neither the existence of a counter-argument for every argument nor the alleged futility of philosophical arguments is, if rightly interpreted, a reason for adopting a cynical view of man's argumentative nature. Indeed, without that nature he could not be man.

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